

Tiananmen Revisited

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When I look at China in the aftermath of Tiananmen and in light of the events in Russia and Eastern Europe, I tend to ask myself the following questions: What actually happened in Tiananmen, what does it represent, and what are the present prospects for Chinese Communism and for the future of China itself?



It is most important to arrive at an accurate diagnosis of any given crisis if we are to pin-point correctly the flaws in the system that gave rise to it and apply practical and proper correctives. It has been five years now since the events of Tiananmen. While images of the violence and bloodshed remain vivid in our memories, the emotional intensity of the after-shock has subsided somewhat with the passage of the years. Perhaps the time has now come for us to take another look, more reflective and objective, at what actually took place there. The issue is, to my way of thinking, very complex, and we still lack sufficient information concerning key events that led up to and away from the incident to formulate a comprehensive view. Nevertheless, it is important that we make every effort to try to understand what Tiananmen has come to signify and represent for China and ourselves.

Ways of Looking at Tiananmen

There are a number of ways to look at Tiananmen. The simplest and most straightforward is to see it as a flagrant example of repression by the Communist regime of the democratic aspirations of its own people. This view sees Tiananmen as part of the on-going struggle between the forces of democracy

and totalitarianism. Given this kind of diagnosis, the remedy is then quite simple. You just have to eliminate Communism and replace it with Democracy. Now this is one way of looking at it, but personally, I tend towards a more historical perspective. The events surrounding Tiananmen reflect a number of contradictions which, I think, have to be put into a broader context before we can more clearly surmise what actually took place there.

Questions about Tiananmen

Why did Tiananmen happen at all? This question is very much to the fore of the pro-democracy movement which sees Tiananmen purely as a movement for democracy and freedom. This view is quite valid in its own right. My own reflections, however, run along more historical lines and have convinced me that it was not simply a desire for freedom and democracy, but the almost inevitable outcome of China's ten year period of reform.

How could Tiananmen have happened during an era of reform? What gave rise to the pro-democracy movement in the first place, and why did the government resort to such harshly repressive measures to crush it at a time when change was official government policy? With the hindsight of history we can see that after ten years of reform, times had indeed changed, and by the year 1989 things had become much better. The economy was opening up; there was more freedom, at least greater economic freedom. Why then did the people in the wake of relaxed controls and a freer economy become even more frustrated than they were during the dark years of repression preceding the changes?

Structural Elements Related to Tiananmen

Contradiction of the One-Party System

I think a number of factors were at play here. First, and this has often been mentioned before, there was the contradiction of a one-party system, which covets and guards its political authority, trying to cope with the demands for more economic

freedom and flexibility brought about by its own decision to reorganize the economy. Economic growth quickly came to symbolize the possibility of growth in other areas of society. Certain forces long dormant in civil society naturally began to emerge. While China certainly was not an open society in our sense of the term, nevertheless, economic reforms did establish a pattern that allowed some individuals to achieve a certain amount of freedom of action within the economic order. This resulted in a weakening, to a certain extent, of the bonds of dependency that tied people to the State and the State economy. It also provided some space for movement within other sectors of civil society. Eventually and inevitably, this led to an increase in the demand that the government establish a more viable economic system which, of necessity, would be in contradiction to and incompatible with an authoritarian system of one-party rule.

The process of economic reform, originally devised as a more effective way to accumulate material wealth in order to satisfy the innate desires of the people for a better livelihood, was soon on a collision course with national politics. The impact of further economic reforms on the life of the nation created a situation of unrest and conflict between political and economic policies, which were seen more and more to be mutually incompatible. Something had to give. All of this provided what well might be called the structural background for the tragic events of Tiananmen.

Contradiction in the Nature of the Economic Reforms

The second contradiction found in the events leading up to Tiananmen was also the direct result of the policy of reform. In this case the problem stemmed from the nature of the economic reforms: whom were they meant to serve and who was to benefit from them? In the beginning, the reforms meant more rice for the masses. They concentrated on improving conditions in the countryside, where their main focus was on more effective means of distribution. During the first few years, the reforms offered something for everyone and they worked relatively smoothly. By 1984-85, however, the government began to implement the reforms in the large cities. Here existing patterns and structures for the distribution of goods were more complex

and resistance was greater. As problems mounted, so did public feeling that some people were benefiting from the reforms more than others, or even worse, at the expense of others.

Conflicts arose on several levels. City people felt the peasants were getting richer faster; cadres and government administrators said they were losing out to the entrepreneurs of private enterprise, which the new system seemed to turn out in abundance; the inland and northern provinces felt the coastal areas, such as Fujian and Guangdong, were becoming wealthy at their expense because while their raw materials were subject to government price controls, the coastal provinces could export their goods manufactured in tax free economic zones and use the profits gained to build up their own areas. In short, the redistribution of wealth initiated by the reforms came to be seen as unequal and unfair.

The economic reforms that set out to decentralize financial controls in fact brought about a growing disparity between central administration and local government. A great deal of fiscal authority was being passed down to the lower levels. Control over resources was also to some degree decentralized. The division between central and local government over control of the economy continued to widen, and after a decade of reform, conflicts became more frequent and explicit. In 1987, wage reform was a subject of heated debates within the Party. As the wrangling reached crisis proportions, the focus shifted away from wages to the larger issue of what direction economic reforms should take in China. Some reformers argued that the country should move rapidly to establish a market economy. They felt it was the only solution to China's problems. Opposition came from those who argued that, while adopting some features of a market economy, the government must maintain a commodity economy within the framework of the socialist system. There were also some die-hard conservatives who demanded the government resist all efforts to compromise centralized state control over economic planning. As the decade of reform drew to a close, the arguments became more focused and positions hardened.

By the close of the 1980's, increased expectations brought about by the reforms were linked to the growing awareness that structural limitations were preventing the reforms from moving forward. The gap between what the reforms promised and what

they in fact were able to deliver continued to widen. China was faced with a dilemma: further reforms would lead to an increase in problems, but not to continue in this direction would raise even more problems. It was generally accepted by both the Party and the government that having come this far, there could be no turning back. (This was true even after Tiananmen, as the government itself freely admitted. Sources quote Deng Xiaoping as saying that while the students seemed to attack everything in the system including its leaders, the one thing they did not attack was the reform.)

The present regime is well aware that there can be no return to the past. Over the past few years, even the more conservative leaders have benefited from the reform policy. They now have a vested interest in seeing it continue, even though they might not be too keen on some of the directions it takes. They too, are part of the second contradiction I mentioned earlier, i.e. who is served by and who benefits from the reforms?

Contradiction Derived from Meeting Expectations

A third contradiction and source of conflict surrounding Tiananmen is endemic to any reform process, but especially applicable to the Chinese situation. Any reform process begins with the task of convincing people that the *status quo* must be changed, but also you have something better to put in its place. You start by pointing out the gross inadequacies of the present system, how they are restricting development and preventing future growth and what vast improvements will come from the change. The problem here, of course, is that after you have raised people's expectations, if you fail to deliver on your promises, they will become disappointed and angry, and begin to raise questions about why you have failed. This is what happened to the reformers in China at the close of the 1980's.

Some reformers had overestimated what the reforms could achieve, exaggerating the benefits that would naturally accrue once they were set in motion. I remember at the time many of those who had returned from visits to China criticising the way the reform policy was being handled, not by the regime but by the reformers themselves. They gave the impression that all it would take was one magic word for everything to be accomplished. The reformers were not saying to the people: "Look,

we want to go in this direction, but we have to expect difficulties along the way." If you don't prepare people psychologically to face the problems that lie ahead, especially when you yourself have been guilty of underestimating them, then you're going to find that when the problems do arise, your appeals to them for further changes and more sacrifices will be met with a great deal of uncertainty, doubt and resistance.

It is important for us to remember that the reformers were talking about reform and not revolution. They were working to change the system not to undermine or overthrow it. Nor were they outsiders. The reformers were in fact not only working within the existing system but in positions of authority that empowered them to effect necessary changes in its structures. There is always the need and desire, even among reformers, to work to preserve the integrity of the existing system--in China's case to safeguard the socialist order. This places certain limitations on what people can actually accomplish, or on what they are really prepared to do. Here compromise is not an option but the rule. Concessions must be made, even by those most keen on reform, so as not to upset the apple cart or to unravel the threads of the complicated tapestry which the existing system represents. The four cardinal principles of reform introduced in 1978 at the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Party Central Committee and revived again during the Campaign against Spiritual Pollution were meant to set limits beyond which reforms must not go. Reform activity was confined to within the existing system. The need for reform was recognized, but it was to be used as an

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instrument to improve, not overthrow, the system, to insure its better functioning and performance. Whether or not the leaders of the reform movement still believe in the Socialist or Communist system is subject to debate; however, if the reformers want to stay in power, they must continue to assert that it is basically sound, and what they intend to do is make it better.

In the rise of the pro-democracy movement and the events of Tiananmen, we can easily detect growing frustration with the

system itself among intellectuals and students. The Tiananmen movement was composed mostly of those from these two groups, with relatively few workers and peasants involved. These were also the two groups that had not benefited much materially from the reforms, and their particular form of dissent had a decidedly intellectual cast. They were more aware of and could articulate better the darker side of reform politics: the corruption, the hypocrisy and venality that were part of it.

A major source of dissatisfaction for students and intellectuals was the failure of the reform to provide any clear ideological direction. The reforms had been framed entirely within a materialistic context. It has always been part of Chinese tradition for the intellectuals to seek out the more spiritual values of society. What they have to offer as a class is something more than an increase in material wealth. The questions the intellectuals posed were directed not at the reforms but at the regime itself.

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While the above-mentioned structural factors, with their conflicts and inner contradictions, had been around for a long time, their presence became much more pronounced during the reform years. The reforms served to bring them forward, and what had hitherto been contained below the surface now began to break out into the open. But such structural problems and contradictions in themselves are not enough to explain what happened at Tiananmen. We must also consider the procedural mistakes made by the government in handling the pro-democracy movement, which resulted finally in violence and bloodshed.

The regime first attempted to use ideological and moral persuasion, claiming dark forces and anti-revolutionary elements were behind it all and warning people to keep away. When that approach failed, it turned to more forceful means, declaring martial law in Beijing. This was meant to discourage the students further and pressure them into leaving. Thus it was hoped

that the protests would die down and the movement would evaporate into thin air. Finally, there came the crackdown.

There are two ways of looking at the motivation behind the crackdown. One view is to assume that originally the government did not want to use military force to repress the movement, but resorted to it only as a final step when everything else failed. The alternative view is to see it as premeditated, that the government was acting according to a pre-existing plan to suppress the pro-democracy movement. It is difficult for us at this stage to ascertain which of the two versions is closer to the truth. To date we have not been given the inside story. But the fact remains that the regime by resorting to violent military force to resolve the situation offered objective evidence that it felt itself threatened by its gravity and was in serious trouble. It is the way of governments, at least those acting rationally, to use the minimal amount of force necessary when confronting civil disturbances. You first try moral persuasion and reason. But when you find that your moral authority is brought into question and your credibility is slipping away, then you will bring in organized force to impose your will. That the regime failed in all its efforts to impose its moral authority on the situation and had to resort to physical force, raises certain questions about credibility and legitimacy. At the very least, the use of armed force has brought about a heightening of tension in the relationship of the governing with those who are governed.

Power Struggle within the Party

The fourth and final structural factor at work in Tiananmen was the power struggle taking place within the Party. My own assessment of the situation is that had there been no power struggle between Zhao Ziyang and Li Peng and their allies, the pro-democracy movement would have been nipped in the bud. The government would have been able to bring a more flexible and conciliatory attitude to bear on the situation. Certainly you would not have seen members of different government ministries, even the police, out on the streets demonstrating with the students in May. The movement escalated as the hopes for gaining more concessions from a divided leadership mounted. Both the Li and Zhao factions were actively using the students for their personal advantage in the power struggle for control.

Tiananmen: the Product of Reform

Taking all of the above structural elements together and relating them to Tiananmen has led me to draw the following conclusions. The 1989 pro-democracy movement in China was not a movement intent on overthrowing one social system and replacing it with another. Certainly the students were very unhappy with a lot of what was going on, but what they were agitating for was a more representative government and a government that would be more accountable to the people. I don't think the students, nor the intellectuals, were saying: "Well, so much for Communism; let's try something else; how about democracy?" Nor were the people of China prepared for such an immediate eventuality. The movement itself came about quite suddenly. And while it could trace its origins back to a number of problematic structural factors, these alone are not enough to explain why it happened at this particular moment in time. So what, then, did trigger off the Tiananmen crackdown? I think it was the result of serious miscalculations on all sides. Miscalculations by students and intellectuals but also by the reformists and Party conservatives as well. I would even go one step further and say that Tiananmen was not the product of repression, but of the reform. The problems of the reform triggered the pro-democracy movement and the problems of reform led to the measures used to suppress it. Of course, it can be argued that reform movements themselves indicate the existence of an unsatisfactory state of affairs which, when left uncorrected, can cause a spontaneous explosion. But this one incident, be it ever so serious, cannot bear the weight of meaning that the Communist system was bankrupt, at least according to my way of thinking.

I think what Tiananmen represented was a movement to change a system that had turned in on itself and was no longer functioning adequately. Then while in the course of trying to readjust itself, other factors arising from past neglect suddenly emerged. When looking at it from this perspective, even if you were to tell me that Tiananmen represented people rising up to topple the regime just as they did in Eastern Europe, I would answer that this is not revolution by design but revolution by default. No one anticipated the sudden and dramatic changes in

the Soviet Union and its satellites. Events there remained unpredictable until the moment they happened. I think it is important for us to look at Tiananmen from this perspective. If not, then we are left with the simple solution that all China needs to do to solve its problems is to replace Communism with Democracy. This is not a helpful way to look at China or its problems. There is a tendency among Chinese of the present generation, who have known China only as Communist China, to see in Communism the source of all the evils plaguing Chinese society. This is a very simplistic and shortsighted view. China's problems must be seen in a much broader perspective.

The problems of change and resistance to change have a long history in China. During the past hundred years, beginning with the latter part of the Manchu dynasty, the awareness that changes in the system had to be made was on the increase, especially among its intellectuals and political leaders. At first the idea of change found little acceptance among the populace. But with the impact of Western Imperialism and Western ideas, more and more sectors of society began to see that something had to be done. At first, change meant that Western ideas would be used to supplement what was lacking in Chinese traditional society. The system was to remain substantially Chinese, but Western knowledge could be used as an instrument for improving upon it. It was only during the closing decades of the 19th century, when attempts to accommodate Western ideas to a Chinese system were seen to have failed that the idea took root that the system itself had to be changed. There then arose among the intellectuals and the more enlightened members of 19th century Chinese society a search for a suitable replacement. Dr. Sun Yat Sen looked to a republican form of government to provide the solution to China's problems, and he became a key figure in establishing the Republic of China, a Western style Democracy. When that system failed to deliver on its promises, a group of leftist intellectuals began to look to Russia during the early 1920's and Communism as the answer. At the present time, many people seeing how the Communist system is not working all that well either are now looking elsewhere for a solution.

But if we insist in a detached and off-hand manner on dismissing the Socialist system as unworkable and begin looking for another alternative, are we not repeating the same mistakes

made by such notable change agents in the past as Dr. Sun Yat Sen and Mao Zedong? I am afraid that the strong feelings and aspirations of Fang Lizhi and others now advocating for a democratic China have caused them to oversimplify the problems. They seem to think that once respect for human rights and a multi-party system are firmly established in China, all its problems will be solved. I don't think it will be that easy.

Elements of the Super-Stable Social Structure

The major social experiments that have been attempted by the Communists during their regime indicate that the Communist ideology is alien to the Chinese and differs widely from the conventional Chinese ideas about the nature of society. I would like to recommend for your reading *Prosperity and Crisis in China* by Liu Qingfeng and Jin Quantao. It covers the history of China from feudal times to the late 19th century with an approach the authors refer to as a system of analysis. In their reintegration of Chinese history, they point to a super-stable social structure, an underlying social system, which despite dynastic and government changes, periods of war and peace, times of national calm and social upheaval remained stable and unchanged through it all. The super-stable social structure that gave continuity to Chinese history was composed of three main elements. The first was Confucianism, which governed China for over 3,000 years; the second a bureaucracy, which represented the rule of law in maintaining public order; and the third, on which the other two were founded, was a land-economy, whose basic nature remained constant throughout the centuries. It is the contention of the authors that dynastic and government changes, the rise and fall of rulers, civil unrest and rebellions, had one common purpose--to repair and renew this archetypical system. At times when the super-stable social structure was threatened, when Chinese society entered upon a period of difficulties where problems could not be resolved by existing governing authority, patterns of rebellious activity emerged from among the populace. This state of affairs resulted in further confusion and anarchy, until, eventually, an organized military force overthrew the existing authority and restored civil order. While this process wrecked havoc within the social system, it

did not destroy the basic super-stable social structure. In fact, with each new dynasty or government, there came another opportunity to repair the super-stable social structure, whose characteristic feature was its immutability. While the authors' research does not extend beyond the year 1949, I would conjecture that even after the Communist revolution, this basic super-stable social structure remains intact.

What Chinese Communism represented was an attack on the social values and ideas commonly held at that time. It began during the 1920's as a movement among a small group of leftist intellectuals and workers. By the 1940's, however, it had formed a pattern of armed dissent, acquired new leaders and a strong base among peasants as well as workers. And yet, even the military success of the Communist revolution in 1949 did not change the Chinese super-stable social structure itself. The traditional bureaucracy gave way to cadre bureaucracy which was more effective than the imperial bureaucracy because it was able to reach down to the lowest levels of society. The Chinese Communists replaced Confucianism with another kind of centralized monolithic ideology, a reinterpretation of orthodox Communism infused with Mao Zedong thought. The economy, however, remained basically unchanged. China is still, by and large, an agricultural country with its economy rooted firmly in the land.

If we place Chinese Communism within this historical spectrum of change and reaction against change, then the present struggle can be seen, in my view, as a struggle between tradition and modernization, between finality and modality.

If you look at Tiananmen as a sign of how uneasily the system adapts to and reacts against the process of change, I would venture to say that this process of adaptation and reaction will not stop at Tiananmen. China will continue in this painful process of adapting to and reacting against change. Sometimes the process will move quite quickly and sometimes slowly, but it will never be easy. Some of the current problems have been brought about by Communism, others are endemic to the system, but none admit to facile solutions.

China and Eastern Europe Are Different

I think we should be cautious about comparing the situation

of China with what has taken place in Russia and Eastern Europe. The situations are quite different. According to my own limited knowledge, two factors that contributed to the rapid changes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990 are missing from the Chinese equation. The first is the presence of an anti-Russian nationalism. In many of the Eastern Bloc nations, from the very beginning there had been repeated attempts to break out from under Soviet rule. During the past forty years there were major uprisings in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and twice in Poland. Such resistance was always met by Soviet military intervention, which was the main constraining element in the effort to effect social change. Then suddenly the Soviets decided against using military means to maintain control, and this triggered off a whole series of rapid changes. At home, the Soviet regime was under a great deal of pressure because of the deteriorating condition of its economy and the government's failure to bring about material progress and satisfy the people's desire for an improved standard of living. Problems accumulated, and the accumulation of unsolved social and economic problems led to the crisis.

In China, I don't think the economy has been as major a problem as it has been in Soviet Russia. In fact, since Tiananmen there has been no slackening in the pace of China's economic progress. Most people would see themselves materially better off now than they were three years ago. I visited Beijing during 1988, but after Tiananmen I had not gone back until last October when I returned to attend a conference. I could see many changes, many new signs of economic progress. I had thought that after the repression of Tiananmen, it would have been just the opposite. The political climate, of course, had also changed from the time of my previous visit. After Tiananmen, things were kept under much tighter control. Where before I had found that people were not afraid to speak their minds, now I noted how the conference lecturers were reluctant to express their real feelings about Tiananmen openly. In private, however, some did speak to me about the events of those days and what they did when the tanks were rolling in. And yet I don't think their public silence indicated they were afraid. They struck me as being very clear about what is happening in China. Tiananmen did, however, teach them an important lesson; namely, that you don't rise up before the time is right. Time, howev-

er, they feel, is on their side, and also on the side of change and reform.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying something about the general sentiment before and after Tiananmen. I think that perhaps some of us were overly optimistic before Tiananmen, particularly during the exhilarating weeks prior to the crackdown. We were so optimistic in Hong Kong that many of us thought democracy, real democracy, would happen overnight, would greet us one morning like the rising sun. As a consequence, after the crackdown a lot of us have, I think, become overly pessimistic. I would only say this: that we should look more deeply into the events of Tiananmen in order to reach a better understanding of the meaning of what happened there as it relates not only to China's past but, more importantly, to her unfolding history.

