

China Two Years After the Pro-Democracy Demonstrations

By Andrew B. Brick

I am always at a loss when friends or family puzzle how a kid from Louisville, Kentucky, ever got involved with a place like China. To them, two places could not be further away from one another.

But the distance between China and Kentucky is not as great as one might suppose. Almost two decades ago, for instance, my fifth grade teacher at Chenoweth Elementary School, Mrs. Cruce, led us to the school's Resource Room to watch the news about President Nixon's trip to China. It was historic, she told us. Never before had such a thing been seen on television.

What we saw, as I now recall, seemed then so unreal. Through grainy TV screens, the President praised the magnificence of the dinner in The Great Hall of the People while trying not to cough after drinking mau-tai, the potent grain liquor favored among Chinese but harsh to Western palates. Pictures of the Great Wall, ping-pong, and hordes of people moving through the streets of Beijing, beamed into my eleven-year-old head. When Mrs. Cruce went to a globe in the corner of the room to show us where China was, I could hardly believe that those scenes we had been watching came from the other side of the world.

Standing here today, inside this House dedicated to things Chinese, it seems equally improbable that China is so far away.

Still, distance is a measure of time and space. Where the magic of TV and cultural centers like this have helped us bridge the latter, China itself somehow confounds the former.

Nowhere in the world does the ticking of time seem so irrelevant to reality as in China. In population, extent of territory, and diversity of conditions, China has been without parallel for ages. Its immediate economic and political problems, like those of other communist states, might date its theoretical roots to the bombastic speculations of a 19th century German, Karl Marx. But its economic and political breakdowns, frequently made manifest in carnage like Tiananmen Square, are storied in the nation's long history.

Baffling to Westerners. For Western observers of China, these economic and political breakdowns always prove baffling. Indeed, it can be argued that there are few places on earth where it has been as historically difficult to cull order out of chaos as in China. Why is this so? Perhaps it is because when we deal with China we deal with a wholly different world, not only geographically, but also in thought and feeling, and possibly in the nature of political reality as well.

Chinese history itself is instructive in this regard. In China, history is a state of constant flux. To pick up the *Cambridge History of China* is to bear witness to a kaleidoscopic flow of names and faces. Regimes come and go; power coagulates and power dissolves; nothing that appears true one day is quite true the next. What is more, it frequently seems the vocabulary of Western politics and historiography proves inadequate when trying to understand or

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describe the political realities of the so-called Middle Kingdom. The words used to describe events in China often fail to reveal the real conditions. In the end, it is terribly difficult to uncover that which is really significant and permanent, and isolate it from that which is not.

You encounter this phenomenon repeatedly when dealing with the problems of today's China. When I commented recently to a Chinese scholar how sad it is to travel to the area these days, he responded: "Yes, it is distressing. But it isn't as bad as the end of the Han Dynasty, or, for that matter, the Tang; come to think of it, the fall of the Mings was worse."

What in the world was he talking about? Here I make specific reference to the events between 1989 and 1991, and this gentleman cites dynastic history as a parallel. It is as though the allies were to console themselves about the horrors of World War II with the thought that things were worse during the Thirty Years War.

This classic difference of perspective is the single most complicating element in analyzing the behemoth that is China. Where we in the West think in years or decades, the Chinese think in centuries. Things elsewhere forgotten are in China recalled; things elsewhere a memory are in China a fact.

Maybe then it is understandable that the Chinese view of the 1989 pro-democracy movement is a curious mixture of resignation and nostalgia. Two years since those heady spring days of 1989, China today experiences a tranquility by default. As was the case in the final years of Han, Tang, or Mao Zedong dynasties, Deng Xiaoping's legacy is blowing away like so much smoke because China, yet again, refused to be conquered — even by Chinese.



The herculean task of changing China is clearly evident if you peer into the lives of the nation's young people. Indeed, imagine if you will that you are a Chinese college student, twenty years old, and living in one of the country's major cities — say Beijing, Shanghai, or Chengdu.

An uneasiness literally lurks behind the surface of your very drab life. Daily existence is a reality by rote. The campus, with its grey concrete buildings and students living eight to a room, somehow seems oddly empty. Maybe it's because ever since Tiananmen incoming freshman have been shipped off to do a year of mandatory service in the military. Maybe it's because everyone's so sullen these days. You remember the months before the demonstrations when school was alive with ideas. You participated in the so-called "democracy salons" that discussed Einstein and Rousseau, Gandhi and Edmund Burke, the Beatles and America. Today, though, the atmosphere of openness and the fascination with individualism is gone. You simply pursue your degree in chemistry.

Droning Cadre. Though an important exam looms in a few days you find yourself in a government-mandated study session that weekly meets to extol the virtues of China's socialist road. An old cadre lectures the room about the evils of the West, attacking the so-called "Big Hegemon" — the United States — for plundering a "Little Hegemon," Iraq.

Your mind wanders as the cadre drones on. Generally, you use the study sessions as a chance to catch up on sleep or talk about your favorite TV shows. Some people behind you, in fact, presently discuss last night's television fare: a Marilyn Monroe film and a ball room dance contest. You fell asleep during the dance contest and are surprised to learn that a couple from Xinjiang Province, way out in Western China, won the thing. They did a rendi-

tion of a Michael Jackson dance called a "moonwalk," someone says. Where did those hayseeds from Xinjiang learn to moonwalk, you think?

The study groups also are a good place to catch up on the latest political rumors. Things are not as tense as they were right after "Liu-Si," or June 4. The government's punishment policies have been for the most part abandoned. You still laugh at the bankruptcy of the measures: the propaganda campaigns to discredit the demonstrations; the massive arrests and prosecutions of political dissidents; the heavily armed soldiers and their checkpoints throughout town; the nineteen categories of compulsory self-criticism; the endless invocations to "Love the Party."

Love the Party? You joke with your friends how the Great Helmsman has permanently lost his bearings. The government is neutered, you think, a dying eunuch powerful enough to swat down a few college students but dying nonetheless. So you — like everyone else — bide your time, mimicking the party lines while disclaiming any involvement in the demonstrations and refusing to report on your colleagues.

Conspiracy of Silence. Your official excuse: "the demonstrations were a curiosity." One old lady told you that 1,800 people in the Ministry of Broadcasting and Television used the same explanation, with only 190 admitting to have actually participated. Only 50,000 in all of Beijing, it is said, acknowledged they had joined the demonstrations at all! You are just part of a conspiracy of silence. The nation waits for a gang of elders to die.

When the study session ends three hours later, you're thirsty and tired so you decide to catch a bus to the western side of town. There, you frequent a tea house. Friends are scattered about, smoking Kent cigarettes, talking fashion. Bell-bottomed jeans and long sideburns are in; a style dictated by all the early 1970 American TV shows that are popular right now. Familiar names: Starsky and Hutch, Hawaii Five-O, Kojack sprinkle your conversation. There is talk of Madonna and U2 as well: the cultural time lag does not extend to music. All agree that Joan Baez's song "Tiananmen Square" is an anthem. Maybe the Chinese rocker, Cui Jian, and his group "A-Do" will do a cover of it in their concert in town next weekend.

You're amazed how everything in China seems political these days. Some guys toss darts at a poster of Lei Feng, a communist model soldier from the 1950s, whose philanthropic behavior the elderly leadership feels worthy of emulation. An acquaintance, just turned 22 and drunk, plays pool with some friends. Pool is the sport of choice in China right now. As he lines up a shot, his pool cue knocks over a beer bottle. "Poor little 'xiao ping,'" he jokes and his friends all laugh. "Xiao ping" means little bottle but the kid clearly refers to China's paramount leader, Mr. Deng, as well. Another bottle crashes on the floor. Glass shards fly. For some young people, you think, the hootenanny in Tiananmen Square was liberating and fun. And the lessons of disrespect for authority clearly have not been forgotten.



Unmistakable about such a scene is the sense that China's totalitarian pretense is dead. The repression of 1989 has left in its wake a regime that is the weakest in the history of the People's Republic. The country's most powerful leaders are old, feeble, and intellectually inflexible. There is no clear successor to Deng Xiaoping. And the populace, including large segments of the political elite itself, seems demonstrably unimpressed by the Party-designated leadership "core" — principally Communist Party chief Jiang Zemin and Premier Li Peng —

that has been formed to nominally conduct affairs of state. Political stability in China is a brittle and dispirited affair.

That it should be so brittle and dispirited is one of the great ironies of the modern age. In their irreconcilable desire to have their communist cake but eat a capitalist one, China's old-guard leadership let loose the very forces of their own nightmare. After a decade of massive liberalization, which saw not only a radical freeing of the economy but a dramatic opening to the West through travel, tourism, modern communication, and student exchanges, Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues initiated and brought to bear Communist China's Second Cultural Revolution.

To be sure, Deng's Cultural Revolution has been distinct from Mao Zedong's deliberate program of anarchy and chaos. But its impact has been no less profound.

Getting Rich. Consider, if you will, China's record over the last ten years: Farmers grew more rice and wheat than at any time in Chinese history; peasants became richer, better educated, and more confident about their future than at any point in PRC history; consumerism replaced centuries of material drought in China's cities; entrepreneurs throughout the country made money; salaried workers saved for color TV sets; bankers set up stock markets; and philosophers, artists, and writers toiled with the ambiguities of the Chinese condition. It was a decade where everything seemed possible. Calculated Deng Xiaoping himself: "To get rich is glorious."

What Deng did not calculate, however, were the irrepressible demands for a voice in civic life that modernization brings. He did not figure that the scores of students that he had sent abroad would come home with colorful clothes, loud music, and heretical ideas about themselves and their world. He did not figure that ideas about basic human and political rights — rights not recognized by the Chinese Communist Party — would germinate in the fertile soil of improved economic livelihoods.

Deng Xiaoping did not calculate his own Cultural Revolution.

The principal lesson of China's 1989 pro-democracy movement thus is made clear: in an era of openness and the fibre optic cable, political consciousness and totalitarian rule are an inherently unstable combination.

Prophecies that ideological intoxication, combined with modern instruments of social control, might make totalitarianism an unassailable tyranny, immune to all dynamics of change, have been proven unfounded. For seven weeks in 1989, demonstrators in Tiananmen Square flung their unconquered consciousness in the face of the Communist state.



Nothing captures this spirit of Tiananmen better than the brief encounter between the man and the tank. There he stood, implausibly resolute in his thin white shirt, an individual facing down a column of armor. For a moment that will be long remembered, that lone man defined the struggle of China's citizens: the state clanking with menace, swiveling directionless with uncertainty, is halted in its tracks because the people got in its way, and because it got in theirs.

But as epochal as that confrontation might seem to us, it is a moment with profound historical echoes, echoes carried forward by the recurrent determination of Chinese to insist on their obligation — their mandate from heaven — to criticize the shortcomings of their govern-

ment, no matter the risk. Wittingly or not, the Chinese who marched and spoke out in 1989 shared a great deal with similar Chinese protesters in 1986, 1978, and 1976. They shared a great deal with the anti-Guomindang nationalists of the 1930s, the May Fourth experimenters of the 1920s, and the anti-Qing activists of the late 19th century. And they shared a great deal with Donglin partisans and Ming loyalists of the 17th century as well.

There is no reason to believe the 1989 pro-democracy demonstrations will be China's last.

Does this mean China is closer today to freedom and democracy than ever before? That is difficult to say. While the instability of the present system likely prefigures the collapse of Chinese communism, it is impossible to tell whether it will eventuate in democracy.

Indeed, what made Tiananmen Square terrifying to Beijing's leaders was precisely what makes prospects for democracy in China historically so problematic. As was the case at various times in the past, something is rotten in China and there are protesters who want it corrected. But implementing a revolution and removing a corrupt, senile leadership is a distant cry from creating the framework for a new government. Perhaps this is why at no time during the 1989 Beijing insurrection did the demonstrators openly oppose or call for the overthrow of the Chinese Communist Party.

Enormous Pressure. The British historian R.H. Tawney commented on the historical challenges of Chinese dissidence in an essay that first appeared in *The Manchester Guardian* more than six decades ago. His observations are as relevant today. Writing that China's political scene repeatedly has been marked by a confrontation of forces on the side of unity and order and those making for anarchy and disintegration, Tawney observed that China's political problems recalled Chinese rivers. "The pressure on the dam is enormous, but unseen," wrote Tawney, "and it is not till it bursts that the strain is realized. Outsiders commonly miscalculate the violence of the current."

The good professor continued:

The problem [with China's political heritage]...is vast and fundamental. It is not so much who shall govern the State, but whether the State shall be at all. Indeed, it is whether public power shall exist. The idea of a sovereign, of an even pressure of law, of [an] impersonal...authority to which...the individual owes allegiance...is not part of the nation's mental furniture.

What is part of China's mental furniture are vague dreams for a better life, widespread disaffection for the political leadership, and public outrage over abuse of power, rampant corruption, and bureaucratic tyranny. The current leadership, sporting show trials, self-criticisms, and massive propaganda campaigns, can suppress their people's will for change for a very long time. But, as China's history makes clear, there are limits to the indignities the Chinese people will endure.

Remember: Things elsewhere forgotten are in China recalled; things elsewhere a memory are in China a fact.

