

change among a large section of Chinese youth. Some thirty-seven percent of the population is under twenty years old, and in the cities particularly, this generation of “only children” is demanding everything, and demanding it right now. Proud of being Chinese, they flamboyantly proclaim their love for the fatherland – sentiments expressed thousands of times over, in a multitude of ideogrammatic styles, in Tienanmen Square. As far as they are concerned, the Empire is humiliated by the affluence of Taiwan and Hong Kong. These young people want China to be respected for its economic prosperity and they are convinced that the recipe for success is to be found in the West. Faced with this wave of demands, the regime has retreated to the hard line, doing what it can to seal up the cracks.

But China is a more porous country today than it once was. Even the peasants listen to the Chinese-language short-wave broadcasts from abroad. The government has few effective means of parrying this invasion of messages, and by affirming over and over that its policy remains one of openness, the government is now caught in a crisis it can no longer manage.

THE CHINESE ARE WELL BEYOND BELIEVING IN the existence of a genuine socialist programme. Nor is the government promising anything other than gradual development requiring patience, hard work and sacrifice. But here again, the rejection of any substantial political reform condemns China to improvisation. “We are groping our way across the river step by step,” Deng Xiaoping is quoted as saying, an expression which evokes the disorientation and genuine hardship involved in making one’s way toward a shoreline that is not even in sight.

Lacking a convincing programme, and held back by inertia, the government falls back on old practices. The most common of these is the isolation of each social class and group within its own environment, institutions and structures. The greatest danger for the government lies in the cities; an alliance between intellectuals and workers must be avoided at all costs.

Throughout the events of the spring the workers’ sympathy with the students was unflagging. On several occasions the author witnessed workers climbing down from construction scaffolds to applaud processions of students. Everywhere, there were factory slow-downs and absenteeism “on account of demonstrations” was widespread. On the other hand, the workers’ support never had significant impact. Lacking trade unions organized as a genuine political force, the working class of Beijing was unable to translate its sympathy into action. A few days after the tragic night of 4 June, the first counter-revolutionaries to fall under the bullets of the execution squads were

workers in Shanghai – a fact that did not take long to sink in.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR CHINA NOW? In Beijing, as in the other cities, patience is the unspoken watchword. Desperate for news from the outside, the urban population attempts to stave off despair by concocting one scenario after another. The bolder ones await the return of Zhao Ziyang, while the more realistic watch the political maneuvering in the Central Committee and anticipate, for the short term, ever tighter control by the army. All the while, the President of the Republic, Yan Changkun, installs members of his family in key govern-



ment positions, convincing many Chinese observers that the military dictatorship will cease bothering to hide its real intentions once Deng Xiaoping is out of the way.

It is clear that the army has lost the confidence of a good part of the population. The “serve the people” mythology of the People’s Liberation Army has taken some hard knocks. Chinese have regained their traditional fear of soldiers, and many soldiers are likewise having a hard time enduring the contempt with which they are now treated.

Although there are few hard facts known about the divisions that developed within the army in June, there is nevertheless considerable evidence that discontent runs deep. But the Romanian scenario of the army passing over completely to the side of the people does not seem plausible. Too many military units remain faithful to a regime that has granted them many privileges, and they would hold out a long time before throwing in their lot with a potential mass opposition movement. Many dissidents, however, are still convinced that a major part of the ranks would come over fairly rapidly to a movement that had sufficient strength, and the more radical among them hope for change even if it means civil war.

This kind of talk underscores a profound

despair, for of the vexing questions Chinese continually ask themselves about their future, the main one remains: what direction would a radical change in Chinese society take? Apart from a minority of intellectuals imbued with Western culture, no one foresees the establishment of a genuinely democratic system. Forty years of communism have scarcely shaken the profoundly feudal social and political structures. Many people I talked to are convinced that a new regime would have no choice but to resort to force once again in order to impose a more “liberal” design.

Quite apart from other considerations, any analysis of alternatives inevitably runs up against the overwhelming problem of demographics. The sheer weight of population is not just an economic impediment, it defines the nature of the discussion about political and economic options. Chinese analysts search in vain for useful models from outside the country; they are forced to recognize that no regime in history has had to provide political and democratic leadership to a country of a billion people. China’s entire history has been an urge towards centralization, and the notion of reversing course creates rising panic.

THE POSSIBLE BREAK-UP OF THE EMPIRE RANKS very high on the list of forbidden topics. However, occasionally in conversation someone will admit that decentralization is the only solution. Only regional devolution of authority coupled with some form of confederal or federal system would create smaller areas of manageable size and facilitate the gradual acquisition of experience with civil liberties and civil society. But this vision of a dismembered China still seems largely irrelevant, and at any rate, is conceivable only as the end result of a slow and certainly painful process.

When he ended martial law, a symbolic action that carried more weight in the West than in China, Premier Li Peng accurately described the repressive order that has been reestablished: “Life and production are functioning in an orderly fashion, supplies are sufficient, the people are living and working in peace and contentment.”<sup>2</sup>

This government-directed “people’s happiness” conforms at one and the same time to the logic of dictatorship, and to a sort of self-proclaimed “enlightened” Confucian despotism. Western nations would, at any rate, be ill-advised to fall for it by continuing to over-indulge the current regime. It is necessary, on the other hand, to resist measures that would isolate China. Any such steps would inevitably end up penalizing the people of China and permit the government to carry on its brutal activities behind even thicker walls. □

1. *Beijing Information*, 31 July 1989.

2. *Le Devoir*, 11 January 1990.