

CHINA'S ORDEAL

Decentralization may be China's last best hope, but in the current repressive atmosphere talking about it is a dangerous occupation.

BY HEPING*

UNABLE TO MAKE THE SPRING 1989 student movement disappear, the Chinese authorities are instead attempting to obscure and trivialize it. As usual, the methods used to minimize the scope of the social unrest hint at what they are actually trying to conceal. Turned into to a simple case of self-defence, the chronology of last June's events has been reduced to caricature; the government's version lacks all credibility. The only persons killed were "some blood-thirsty rioters...., there were no deaths among the students, including those who were forced to withdraw."¹

This is the classic language of propaganda. It reflects a Confucian kind of benevolent paternalism aimed at co-opting the intellectuals – those who were at the head of the popular movement and did not understand that they were being exploited by "a handful of counter-revolutionaries," who were in turn being manipulated from abroad.

ONE COULD DEBATE FOREVER THE COMPETING versions of how the repression was unleashed on the night of 3 June. However, this would simply add more confusion to what is already an unendurable tragedy. Nevertheless, a precise reconstruction of the events will some day assist historians in answering the questions many Chinese are asking themselves. In the first place, to what degree was the pro-democracy movement planned? Who inspired the students of Beida University, back in April, to use the occasion of the death of the former General Secretary Hu Yaobang to take to Tiananmen Square in a noisy expression of their democratic aspirations? Why did the government systematically provoke the students by accusing them of being counter-revolutionaries?

Chen Yizhi, a close collaborator of Zhao Ziyang, the former General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, told *Le Monde*:

At first the students were calm ... but each time they wanted to evacuate Tiananmen Square, Li Peng [the present Premier] provoked them. For example, after Zhao's

speech on 4 May, almost everyone had returned to classes. Li Peng then summoned the university authorities to denounce the attacks on public order and the illegality of the demonstrations. Shortly after this, the students again went into the streets and began their hunger strike.

In China no one believes in the spontaneity of political movements, and the most Machiavellian theories crop up in conversations. This is to be expected in a closed society where "well informed" people get their information from rumors that can seldom be verified. It is hard, nonetheless, not to credit the theory that the government deliberately "planned" things to culminate in an exemplary punishment. Although inured to the supreme penalty, the Chinese people (above all the people of Beijing) did not anticipate this level of repression. Until the last hours, no one really believed it would happen, so when the first shots were fired, some students in the residences of Beida University refused to believe the news they had just received – "We had faith in the uprightness of our army."

"THE CHICKEN IS KILLED TO FRIGHTEN THE MONKEY" is the Chinese expression used most often to explain how deliberate military intervention was designed to serve as an example. Of course, this fear on the part of the government was exacerbated by the international political climate as well as the upheavals in other socialist countries, but its underlying motives were and are essentially Chinese.

The regime felt endangered because it had not anticipated the scope of the movement. Easily persecuted and as well, readily "co-opted," intellectuals have been effectively marginalized since 1949. So in April, once again, the authorities underestimated the influence that might be wielded by a few thousand students in Tiananmen Square. While the strength of the movement surged back and forth, in denouncing the economic hardships, it won the support of the population of Beijing.

Testimony from various sources confirms the disarray of the government – the indecision among its ranks, and the secret political strug-

gles that ended with the rout of the more moderate elements, and the resignation of the communist party General Secretary, Zhao Ziyang. The line that won out is clearly the one that clings to the certainty that all can be reformed without being excessively transformed.

Since 1979 the government has carefully nurtured a host of paradoxes, asserting, for example, that it is possible to open up the country while closing it off, or that China can foster the development of a market economy within a Marxist-Leninist political structure. The maxim "one country, two systems" helps to reassure foreigners and, within China, legitimizes all of the most visible contradictions.

THIS MERGING OF CONTRADICTIONARY IDEAS FOLLOWS a traditionally Chinese logic; a logic that lives on in the minds of leaders who are the overconfident heirs of a successful revolution and a profoundly self-centered nationalism. Political discourse here always reverts to the assertion that China is a large country that has managed to secure for its one billion people a standard of living better than that of other Third World countries. And it is true that in China one does not queue for a bar of soap or a pair of shoes. China long practised a "primitive communism" that many Third World countries have sought to emulate. In Mao's day, the oft-repeated saying was: "Whatever food there is, everyone eats; whatever clothes there are, everyone wears; whatever work there is, everyone does."

To be sure, nationalism, or rather the chauvinism of the Chinese people – the Han majority in particular – is a basic factor relied on by the Party and the government to absolve their errors. It has always been relatively easy to resort to traditional Chinese xenophobia and lay the blame for internal problems on the outside world. There are repeated examples to show that even some of the harshest critics of the present regime remain vulnerable to talk of the external enemy.

All of these certainties the government has banked on have been shaken by the radical

* Pseudonym of a close observer of Chinese politics.