

The New York Times

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June 4, 1989

CHINA ERUPTS . . . THE REASONS WHY

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EMPERORS AND EUNUCHS, WARLORDS and revolutionaries - all have presided over Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Last month was the turn of the hunger strikers.

Beginning in late April, 3,000 young people lay nearly comatose on the ground, feeble and sunburned, but galvanizing all of China with their threat to kill themselves rather than live without democracy.

Oceans of protesters, more than a million bobbing heads, jostled in and around the vast square, fighting their way forward to read more of the angry red banners calling for the resignation of the senior leader, Deng Xiaoping, and the Prime Minister, Li Peng.

When Mr. Deng and Mr. Li responded by imposing martial law, citizens flung themselves in front of army trucks and tanks, stopping and often reversing the long convoys. The soldiers retreated, some of them sobbing as they abandoned their orders to quell the uprising. "Our Government is too harsh to the students," snarled Sun Yong, an army engineer who marched against the Government. "The People's Liberation Army belongs to the people, and it is time for every Chinese to speak out."

The outlook for China's immediate future is murky, but most Chinese seem to expect that whatever the near-term setbacks, the nation has been set on the road toward less control by the Communist Party. The uprising of the last six weeks, whether it is renewed or repressed, seems to mark a turning point, and it happened with startling, and seemingly inexplicable swiftness. No one predicted that the convulsions would happen when they did, and not even China's most famous savants can safely predict what will happen next.

But if the timing and scale of earthquakes is uncertain, at least the fault lines can be mapped. In China, for most of the population, these fault lines - the immediate causes of public dissatisfaction - relate not only to vague yearnings for democracy but, more importantly, to profound economic frustrations and disgust over social inequities and corruption.

Before the turbulence, experts looked at China and saw an economic miracle - a society that in little more than a decade has managed to propel itself from the bland egalitarian poverty of Maoism to the new-found consumerism of color television sets, earrings and disco dancing. During the last 10 years, the average income in China has more than doubled.

But the expectations of the Chinese have risen even more. Foreign analysts see double-digit growth, but the Chinese tend to focus on the washing machine that they can now dream of but still can't afford, the rising prices that seem to cheat them out of their higher salaries, the bribes that they must pay in order to

change apartments or, in defiance of official policy, to have a second child. The result is dissatisfaction and anger, mixed with bitterness at the advantages that high officials enjoy. In April and May, these subterranean pressures finally erupted in the volcano of protest that, whatever happens, has profoundly changed the way China will be governed.

If the proximate cause of the rebellion was this festering discontent, the underlying reason was that the Communist Party has been losing its grip on the country. This began long before the demonstrations, and it did not happen overnight; the party has suffered a prolonged erosion of its moral authority - and its ability to intimidate.

Throughout the country, the love, fear and awe that the Communist Party once aroused have collapsed into something closer to disdain or even contempt. Young people used to dream of joining the party; now they often speak condescendingly of their peers who join. "Me? A party member?" Cheng Lin, a 22-year-old woman who is one of China's best-known pop singers, responded to a reporter's question. "Nobody joins the party now, among young people," she cheerfully exaggerated.

But it is not only young people who disdain the party. Just as often it is ordinary working Chinese who undermine its authority, sometimes with an extra dash of daring, or even cruelty - people like Lei Xiding. A small-town peddler, Mr. Lei had tax evasion rather than rebellion on his mind when he took on the Government. Four officials went to his village to make him pay taxes on 46 pigs he had purchased, but Mr. Lei and his family tore up the men's legal papers, robbed them of their watches and locked them in cages with the pigs. Then, according to China's official press, Mr. Lei and his relatives beat the tax collectors for five hours, urinated on them, and paraded them blindfolded through the streets.

Eventually, the four men were released, alive - which makes them luckier than some of their colleagues. Since 1985, according to *The People's (Continued on Page 85) Daily*, 13 tax collectors have been murdered, 27 crippled and 6,400 beaten up.

Dissidents and student demonstrators have received most of the attention abroad, but among ordinary Chinese the practice of ignoring or defying the party has become nearly universal. For example, China propounds a "one couple one child" birth-control policy, but in 1987 and 1988, according to Beijing University's Institute of Population Research, Chinese couples could be expected to have an average of 2.45 children. The law also says women must be 20 and men 22 to marry, but as of 1986 (the last year for which the State Family Planning Commission has figures), more than a fifth of all marriages involved at least one partner who was underage; and in some remote areas these illegal marriages account for 90 percent of the total.

Though Chinese must have permission to move to another city, Shanghai officials acknowledge that fully 2.5 million of the city's 14.5 million residents have no permission to live there. Waves of illegal migrant laborers are sweeping across China, workers who search for new jobs without waiting to get permission. In February and early March, more than 2.5 million laborers flooded into Canton, ignoring sharp warnings from the Government. Suddenly, the city center was packed with sun-weathered peasants, huddled beside sacks of their belongings - mute testimony, two months before the demonstrations, to the diminishing control of the Government over the population.

Of course, during the last six weeks it was the students who were in the vanguard -as they have been so many times in recent Chinese history. But after they showed the way, many others flocked to follow. Workers defied their bosses to walk alongside the students, citizens from all over Beijing came out to help block the soldiers' entry into the city, and thousands of Chinese journalists signed their names to a petition calling for more press freedom.

"The students have shown that the will of the people can't be resisted," said Yan Jiaqi, one of the country's most prominent political scientists. "This is now a dominant idea in Chinese politics."

BUT EVEN AS EXHILARATION swept through the capital in May, among intellectuals and officials especially there was also a lurking tension, a fear that flits in the corners of the mind but takes no obvious shape. To some it is the specter of nationwide anarchy and the disintegration of China as a coherent unit, to others a vision of soaring crime and inflation that might finally shred China's social fabric, transforming the country into an oversized, Oriental Bolivia. It is these fears of spiraling unrest and chaos that seemed to inspire Mr. Deng and Mr. Li to crack down on the protests; even for many ordinary Chinese there is an apprehension of luan, or chaos.

Perhaps it is the pessimism of smart young Chinese, their obvious lack of appreciation for the regime that in the last decade has so palpably increased their opportunities and material comforts, that most strikes foreigners. Many Chinese hold the somewhat surprising perception that China is in the middle of an economic crisis.

True, China's annual inflation rate has passed 25 percent a year, and the country has seen such unfamiliar problems as bank runs and cash shortages. Bribes and abuse of power are no longer peripheral to the economy; they are the fuel that makes it run.

But all countries have graft and economic problems; indeed, some people who have lived on both sides of the Taiwan Strait say that corruption is even more massive on Taiwan. What is more worrying than the economy itself is the perception of crisis. Inflation and corruption have fueled a sense of economic frustration that lets people convince themselves that they are becoming worse and worse off financially. Statistically, this is nonsense; even after inflation, the economy is growing at 11 percent a year, and the overwhelming majority is better off than it used to be. In strict economic terms, China arguably is modernizing more successfully than any other undeveloped or socialist nation in the world today. But it is suffering a crisis of confidence.

The diminishing role of the Communist Party has exacerbated and magnified some of China's economic problems. There is neither a planned economy nor a market economy, but an economy that displays some of the vices of both. Growth is unplanned, so that investment in energy and infrastructure is inadequate; the result is power cuts and long delays in transporting goods.

The lack of planning has led to absurdities. During the last two years, for example, managers at a number of Chinese companies heard that because of the AIDS epidemic, there would be a huge growth in world demand for the disposable rubber gloves used by health-care workers. Though many other countries were already producing such gloves, companies all over China rushed to manufacture them. Today, China alone makes more rubber gloves than the world needs.

If there is no planning, neither is there much of a market. Raw materials do not go to the most efficient operator - the one that presumably would be able to pay the highest price - but to the enterprise with the best connections. Provinces have begun to compete with one another, refusing to allow their raw materials to be processed elsewhere. Xinjiang Province, for example, used to produce fine wool and cashmere for processing in Shanghai's mills, but now Xinjiang refuses to let the wool go, processing it in its own newly-opened, crude factories. Some provinces have stationed armed guards at their borders to prevent raw materials from leaving.

Even before the demonstrations, the party's decline had led to a marked expansion in what Chinese could openly say. People were still afraid, but far less so than before. "In China today, if you don't directly challenge the party authorities, you are basically left alone," said Joseph Y. S. Cheng, a senior lecturer at the Chinese University in Hong Kong. "You can condemn the party after a couple of glasses of wine and it's all right. As long as you don't take active steps, as long as you're not a threat to the Government, you're left alone."

Now, after the demonstrations have shown that massive numbers of people are willing to take on the Government, the difficulty in intimidating the masses may become more acute. "There will be a less-totalitarian society," Mr. Cheng predicts. "People will have more freedom."

As the party's power declines, some Chinese find historic parallels in the disintegrating dynasties of imperial China, such as the corrupt Qing Dynasty early in this century, which stubbornly refused to modernize until it was too late. Perhaps there is something to those parallels, but there are other scenarios: the rise of Taiwan just when its leadership was most discredited; the rise of Hong Kong just as the Korean War embargo of China seemed about to extinguish the colony's economy.

It is clear, in short, that, whatever the result of struggles at the top, the party is losing control, and many Chinese intellectuals despair that the worst is yet to come. But though such despair may well have its own consequences, it is not yet clear if it is warranted.

THE WITHERING OF the party can be seen most poignantly in the generation gap that has emerged in China today. Many successful young Chinese business executives and Government officials are children of "old revolutionaries," men and women who joined the Communist Party in the 1930's or 40's and fought their way to power. The parents devoted their lives to the party, but the children are ideological atheists. Over dinner recently, in the company of an old revolutionary and his American-educated son, the son was asked if he was a party member. The son laughed, his expression a mixture of horror and astonishment. "Which party?" he asked. His father laughed too, but there was pain in his eyes.

It is not just the younger for hiliary 0 ,0,26,26,26,0,0,6,6>generation that sees things differently. Consider Zhang Hanzhi, a former English teacher and interpreter for Mao Zedong and the widow of former Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua. In 1976, in a speech to the United Nations, Mr. Qiao earned fame for his stinging attack on the United States.

But Ms. Zhang surprises anyone expecting to meet a genuine fire-breathing Maoist. Behind the charming conversationalist is a thoughtful woman profoundly aware of the quandaries of Chinese Communism.

"My generation was very inspired by the revolution," Ms. Zhang recalled. "When my friends and I get together, we miss the good old days. Life then wasn't so comfortable, but there was a tremendous sense of

honesty and pitching in for the common good."

Yet if Ms. Zhang can wax nostalgic for the exhilarating days in the early 1950's, when Communism really did seem to be the answer, not the problem, she also acknowledges that those days are past. Many Chinese, she says, now dream of a future that is not necessarily socialist, and they want a more democratic atmosphere. Looking at the state of Communism in China today, she has misgivings.

"I'm worried about whether all this corruption will lead to a rottenness that will be difficult to correct without big change," she said. And then she spoke most poignantly about the drift to America of many of China's young people. Her own daughter, sent to the United States in the mid-1970's by Mao Zedong to learn English and help the motherland, now lives in New York.

"To see them all settling down over there and not coming back is somewhat depressing," Ms. Zhang said. "My daughter, my niece, and the children of almost all my friends. Almost every time a young person comes by my house to say goodbye, I have the feeling they're not coming back."

THROUGHOUT CHINESE history there has been an ebb and flow of central control. Typically, a vigorous leader proclaimed himself emperor and established a dynasty. He pulled the country together, strengthened central authority, eliminated rivals for power; but, just as typically, his descendants proved less adept at maintaining it and the nation gradually disintegrated again until - perhaps hundreds of years later - a new strongman emerged as emperor and founded another dynasty.

Some see the same process happening now. They liken Mao Zedong -who founded the People's Republic in 1949 and changed more people's lives in more ways than perhaps anyone else in this century - to the first man to rule unified China, the first Qin emperor.

Known as Qin Shi Huang Di, he was one of the greatest and fiercest of them all. He unified China in 221 B.C., protecting it by linking various short segments of a wall into the Great Wall that still stands. He standardized China's system of laws and of weights and measures, burned books, and buried Confucian scholars alive. According to legend, he defied his advisers and tried to build a bridge across the Pacific Ocean. The first Qin emperor predicted that his dynasty would last 10,000 generations; instead, less than four years after his death, his dynasty collapsed.

Mao Zedong was not opposed to comparisons with the first Qin emperor, and the similarities are indeed striking. Both were great, impetuous and brutal leaders, and the work of both men's lives began to be rapidly undone soon after their deaths. The question now is whether the Communist dynasty will crumble like the Qin or whether it will evolve into something more humane and practical.

MAO SAID THAT "POLITICAL power grows from the barrel of a gun," but in Chinese history it has also grown out of the "mandate of heaven" - a kind of moral authority to rule. In the long run, the Communist Party relies not only on guns but also on some consensus that it provides a legitimate government.

In recent years this moral legitimacy dissipated, not only because ordinary people became embittered by the inflation, corruption and injustice around them, but because fewer and fewer people believed in Marxism. The Cultural Revolution of the late 1960's and early 70's turned much of the nation away from Communism, and though many were willing to give it a second chance when Mr. Deng took the helm in 1978, in China today there is remarkably little faith in Communism. Even party members do not usually

believe in it in any traditional or meaningful way; rather, the believers talk about the need for social justice and equal opportunity and populist rule. They sound more like American democrats than communists. The result is an ideological vacuum.

Ironically, these are the same factors that led to the collapse of the Nationalist regime in 1949, when the Communists emerged victorious in China's civil war. It was also corruption and inability to modernize that doomed the Qing Dynasty, forcing the last emperor to abdicate early in 1912.

Many intellectuals see a common thread in the disintegration of the three regimes: "Absolute power corrupts absolutely," as a poster in a demonstration last month noted, quoting Lord Acton. China has never had any independent institution, such as a strong parliament or a free press, or even an organized church, that could dilute this absolute power, that could supervise the country's leaders and check their hubris. That is one reason intellectuals are so enthusiastic about freedom of the press: they see it as an independent mechanism that can restore some balance and control to the exercise of power in China.

The party's decline has been hastened by structural changes in the economy and society that have given people more room to maneuver. Before, every Chinese was under the strict supervision of the "work units" and "neighborhood committees" that regulated every aspect of life, to the point of charting women's menstrual cycles to get early warning of a pregnancy. Now, independent business (Continued on Page 90) people have no "work unit" to control them, and in the countryside the communes have been disbanded, so there is less authority over peasants as well. All this has fostered a new sense of freedom, a giddy sense of liberty; Big Brother is no longer peering over one's shoulder.

THIS BREAK DOWN of authority could worsen as a new generation takes power. Mr. Deng, the senior leader, was no longer regarded by most Chinese as a hero or savior, even before the declaration of martial law. But to many people that hardline step rendered him a tragic figure whose enormous achievements have now been undermined by his inclination to whim and hubris and repression. Even so, this 5-foot, 84-year-old bridge player, probably the only world statesman in recent years with a taste for dog meat, remains a giant, the last Chinese leader of the revolutionary generation, and the last civilian to have enjoyed unequivocal military support, although now he may have lost even that.

As events unfold, more and more young Chinese fear a return of the chaos and weakness that plagued China from the First Opium War in 1840 to the collapse of the Nationalist regime in 1949. Wu Jiexiang, a prominent Communist Party theorist, is blunt about the risks:

"I think China is falling into chaos," he said during a recent interview. Mr. Wu's prescription to avoid the plunge is "neo-authoritarianism," a theory that many Chinese officials, including Mr. Deng, endorsed. Supporters of neo-authoritarianism emphasize the need for order and stability, and point to the economic miracles achieved by the authoritarian regimes in Taiwan and South Korea. Mr. Wu's version also emphasizes the need for the Government to respect individual human rights, but the style of government would amount to enlightened and benevolent despotism.

Mr. Wu and others prescribe such a system partly because they see a growing risk of urban unrest. As China's labor unions become more independent and workers more indignant, their discontent could boil over. One immediate challenge is the desperate shortage of cash in the hands of the central Government and state-owned companies. The official press has already acknowledged that some large state companies

are unable to pay workers more than 40 percent of their wages. According to a People's Daily report in April, workers in a large Sichuan Province factory responded by beating their bowls in the factory cafeteria and singing the "Internationale," the song of revolution. During the May demonstrations, many workers went on strike to support the students, and it may be only a matter of time before workers stage walkouts to back their economic demands as well.

Further urban unrest might also be triggered by young workers and the unemployed who congregate in many cities, looking for trouble. On April 22, in the cities of Changsha and Xian, they took advantage of student protests to riot, burning and looting whatever they could find. A Shanghai diplomat said that city, too, was combustible, and noted that the authorities had recently moved hundreds of thousands of young migrant laborers away from the city to reduce the danger of clashes.

The risks of rural unrest are probably lower, but in a country with a tradition of peasant revolts, they cannot be ignored. The impoverished Government has recently been unable to pay peasants for their grain, pork and other products, and instead has been giving them white slips of paper as i.o.u.'s. Peasants in several areas have vowed that they will not sell their produce to the Government again, except for cash, and there could be confrontations during the summer harvest.

Some young Chinese expect the country to fragment, sometime during the next century, into competing provinces or military regions. Most foreign China watchers are not so pessimistic; they think it far more likely that China will thrive and become a strong and essential member of the international community.

"My problem is that I cut my teeth on China during the Cultural Revolution," says Harry Harding, a China scholar at the Brookings Institution in Washington. "There was tremendous social and political unrest in society, you had even stronger regional fragmentation, and yet it held together." Mr. Harding argues that many Chinese tend to overdramatize the risks, noting that the inflation rate of about 27 percent would inspire jealousy in Brazil, and that the student protesters are apple-polishing schoolchildren, compared to the South Korean militants.

NOT EVERYTHING IS known about what Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev discussed with Mr. Deng during their summit meeting in mid-May, but they could have commiserated with each other over the difficulties of opening up socialist systems. By any normal standard, Mr. Gorbachev's problems are greater: Russians number only half the Soviet population, several republics probably would like to go their own way, and the economy has been so numbed by state controls that it is scarcely responding to restructuring. In China, on the other hand, the economic problems are not those of stagnation, but of dynamism - overheated growth, to be more precise - and separatist tendencies are confined to peripheral regions, such as Tibet and Xinjiang.

Perhaps the most startling difference, however, is that the glasnost and perestroika in the Soviet Union seemed to trickle down mostly from above, but in China they bubbled up mostly from the grass roots. Beginning in the late 1970's, for example, peasants themselves divided up the vast communes before the Government could get around to the task. In recent years, entrepreneurs started up tens of thousands of small businesses even before it was clear that they were legal. In the Soviet Union, political change came at the initiative of Mr. Gorbachev; in China, such changes came at the initiative of intellectuals inside and outside of the party who forced the leadership grudgingly to retreat. This process will be extremely difficult to reverse.

It would be difficult for the party to get a grip even on its own scattered units. Today, the party central committee makes pronouncements in Beijing, and local party organizations look the other way. When people talk about the party losing power, in part what they mean is that the Communist Party as a coherent, centralized organ has lost power. Indeed, the local units have in some cases increased their power by snapping up the decision-making authority that Beijing was trying vainly to pass on to individual industrial companies.

China's leaders may try to recover a measure of their economic and political authority, but it will be extremely difficult. Wang Dan, a student leader at Beijing University, says that even if he is eventually arrested, others will take his place.

Perhaps he is right, for the student protests have exacerbated the sense of weakness in the party, while emboldening people throughout China who are embittered by corruption and lack of control over their own lives. During one recent demonstration, a young Government official emerged from his office to stand with the students and support them. He gazed at the endless river of young men and women, as mighty as the Yangtze and as central to the nation's future. "Now," he murmured, "the Chinese have minds of their own."

Cover photo of man speaking for his democracy; Photos of people filling Tiananmen Square in Beijing (Peter Turnley/Black Star) (pg. 26-27); replica of the Statue of Liberty is paraded through Shanghai (Carl Ho/Reuters) (pg. 28); Chinese buying gold (Alon Reininger/Contact) (pg. 29); Beijing maternity hospital (Peter Turnley/Black Star) (pg. 29); a memorial for Communist Party head Hu Yoobang, attended was Wan Li, Yang Shangkun, Zhao Ziyang, Deng Xiaoping, Li Peng (Xinhua Via Associated Press) (pg. 86); demonstrator readings words of Mikhail S. Gorbachev (Baldev/Sygma) (pg. 90)