

China's Date With Destiny

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Perhaps the most surprising thing about this week's illegal student demonstrations is that the Government permitted them at all: that the nation's authoritarian leaders have allowed their sleep to be interrupted for the last two nights by thousands of students trying to force their way into the Communist Party headquarters and bellowing such slogans as "Overthrow the dictatorship!"

The Government's restraint is not total, for the police and soldiers have been deployed to disperse protesters in front of the party headquarters, and early this morning the police beat several dozen students who lingered. But in general the authorities have allowed illegal gatherings by tens of thousands of people who completely block traffic on Beijing's most important avenue.

The protests continued today in Tiananmen Square in the center of the capital, but attracted only 10,000 people at their peak because of a heavy rain. Gearing Up for Saturday

A student leader said in an interview today that because of the rain the students were focusing on coordinating a rally on Saturday in Tiananmen Square. The demonstration would be the unofficial memorial ceremony for the former Communist Party leader Hu Yaobang, whose death five days ago set off the demonstrations.

The explanation for the Government's relatively restrained response to date is shrouded in history and culture, particularly the notion that scholars help to confer moral legitimacy on a Government. Repeatedly in modern China, student protests have had a decided impact on politics. Thus for the leaders who are the targets of the protests, as well as for the young protesters, the demonstrations here this week have a greater resonance than they might in another capital.

This sense of history, which is vivid in Beijing, is crucial in understanding what might lead the Government to change its mind and crush the latest demonstrations in the same way that it ended the student demonstrations in the winter of 1986-87.

For now the Government may be betting that time is in its favor. Mr. Hu's official funeral ceremony, like the unofficial student-planned one, will be held Saturday, and it is possible that demonstrations will peter out afterward. The Significance of May 4

On the other hand, the risk for the Government is that the students will decide to continue protests at least until May 4, the 70th anniversary of celebrated nationalist demonstrations in 1919 that took "democracy" and "science" as their slogans - the starting point by some reckonings of modern protest politics in China.

For months the Government has been concerned about student demonstrations marking May 4, and if there are indications the protests will continue after Saturday the Government will feel more pressure to intervene.

University students in China make up less than one-fifth of 1 percent of the population, but their influence has always been disproportionately large.

Students may have lost some influence compared to their status in the past, partly because they earn little money in a society that increasingly measures people by income. But in general students are still respected, and the influence of Beijing University - where the latest protests began - is great because that is where China's leaders send their own children. Parallels With Zhou's Funeral

Chinese culture and recent political history also dictate that the authorities must be careful to avoid appearing to dishonor the dead. Curtailing student demonstrations in the memory of Mr. Hu might provoke a harsh reaction, and would be reminiscent of the April 1976 memorials in honor of Zhou Enlai. After police removed wreaths mourners had placed in Tiananmen Square to honor Zhou, rioting began.

Those clashes, now known as the Tiananmen Incident, seem to be in the back of everybody's mind these days as people mourn Mr. Hu. But there is wide

disagreement about whether the current protests will be a turning point as the 1976 rallies were.

"It's exactly the same," said a young teacher who took part in the Tiananmen Incident. "This is just how the Tiananmen Incident began."

But another participant in the 1976 riots, now a Government official, pointed to the differences: far more people were involved in 1976, and they were not just students but also workers. In addition, he said, while there may now be broad discontent with political leaders, people also have a stake in the system and will be unwilling to risk instability.

During Wednesday's demonstrations, which attracted tens of thousands of people to Tiananmen Square, workers joined in and seemed sympathetic to student demands. But so far the principal participants are students and intellectuals. Word of the unrest in Beijing has spread to other cities, by mild reports in the local press as well as foreign radio broadcasts, but protests in other cities have been small.

Yet the demonstrations seem to have marked a milestone in Chinese political protest, simply in the students' daring to openly confront the Government.

The students have learned to march on Zhongnanhai, the compound where Chinese leaders live, and their success in doing so is not something they are likely to forget. Even if the current demonstrations soon peter out, perhaps their legacy will be the boldness of the students to besiege the seat of power and call for the dismissal of those who rule the country. If the demonstrations continue after Saturday, that boldness will be difficult to contain.

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