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DYNASTY DEFIED; China's Leaders Hear the Roar of the Crowd

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ONE can only imagine the expressions on the faces of China's old revolutionary leaders as a cacophonous rendition of the Chinese national anthem wafted into the Zhongnanhai park where they live and work. "The peoples of China are in their critical hour; everybody must roar his defiance; arise! arise! arise!" tens of thousands of voices sang defiantly during a vast illegal march on Thursday. Despite all the old guard's sniping about how the young Chinese today care only about money, it seemed that they had inherited a penchant for revolutionary ideas, after all.

Some Chinese see the demonstration as a turning point, the first time that students and workers truly joined forces to express dissatisfaction, and the first time in the history of the People's Republic of China that the people - lowercase "p" - defeated the People's Armed Police and the People's Liberation Army. The glee was unforgettable, and everybody jostled for a place in history: the ice cream vendor who gave her cart of popsicles to the marchers, the businessmen who bought food and drinks for the students, and the young workers who blocked the army troops sent to stop the marchers.

The last two weeks of demonstrations have been an extraordinary humiliation for the Government, and especially for Deng Xiaoping, China's senior leader, who

personally ordered the repression of the student movement. But more fundamentally, they suggest that the Government may be losing its grasp on what the emperors called "the mandate of heaven."

Mr. Deng may be too good a Communist to believe in such a mandate, but in his lifetime he has already seen the Qing dynasty crumble in 1911 and the Nationalist Government collapse in 1949 because they lost the moral legitimacy to rule. While almost no Chinese expect the Communist regime to fall any time soon, many see in the vast protests a similar process: erosion of the Government's moral authority to rule.

"It has already lost the mandate of heaven," said A. P. Xia, a graduate student in politics who has taken part in the demonstrations. "Experience has proved that Communism is a failure, here and in other socialist countries." Mr. Xia foresees neither violence nor the overthrow of the Government, simply a long process of peaceful change. There is no force now in existence to replace the Communist Party, and the student demonstrators are still only loosely organized in at best a hazy alliance with workers. A crackdown is still a very real possibility.

Many Chinese have noted the parallels with 1949. Nearly four decades after the Republic of China was founded, the Kuomintang had lost popular support because of corruption, inflation, brutality and economic inequalities. Today, nearly four decades after the founding of the People's Republic, the Communist Party has lost a tremendous amount of popular support because of corruption and inflation, as well as brutality and economic inequalities.

Yet even such an outspoken critic of the Government as the dissident Fang Lizhi points out the enormous differences. In 1949, he notes, there was an alternative: the Communist Party. Today, no alternative exists, and that alone is likely to keep the Communist dynasty from crumbling, or at least to keep it from crumbling as quickly as the Kuomintang's. *Losing Authority, Losing Control*

But the sense of discontent, even outrage, hangs in the air. On a bus recently, a woman cursed a man who bumped her. "Why are you cursing me?" he asked loudly. "I'm not a murderer. I'm not a thief. I'm not a Communist." The bus roared with laughter.

As it loses much of its moral authority, the Communist Party is also finding that in some ways it is losing control over the country. The Government can still wield immense power, as it chose to when it crushed rioting in Tibet last month. But such power may be useless to enforce the central Government's will against

more mundane and universal challenges.

Almost everybody seems to be defying Beijing in one way or another. The provinces refuse to halt building projects that the Government ordered stopped, and some have even set up illegal border checkpoints at boundaries to prevent scarce goods from leaving the area. Cities buy condominiums in Canada rather than pass on their foreign exchange earnings to Beijing, as they are supposed to. Farmers refuse to hand over grain to the authorities, as required, and sometimes beat up tax collectors. Chinese couples violate the "one couple, one child" policy so routinely that the average couple can expect to have more than 2.5 children.

The striking achievement of last week's student protests was the outpouring of sympathy from workers, and an important question now is the extent to which that cooperation can be maintained. Students quote from the slogans of the American and French Revolutions, and are inspired by Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death." They tend to want more liberalization, while workers are disgruntled in part because of liberalization - particularly the threats of inflation from decontrolling prices and unemployment from decontrolling jobs.

A test of whether the students can sustain worker support will come when they march next, perhaps tomorrow, the May Day holiday when workers might join in, or more likely on Thursday, the 70th anniversary of nationalist student demonstrations.

Chinese scholars have noted the difficulties that Mikhail S. Gorbachev is facing in the Soviet Union, and they sometimes say with a certain amount of condescension that Mr. Gorbachev's mistake was to open up the political system to complaints before he opened up the economic system to growth. Mr. Deng has taken another road to modernization, and he has been enormously successful over the last 10 years in opening up the economic system.

But Mr. Deng's failure to seize the initiative in political liberalization seems to have had a price: the students in the streets have come to see the leaders, including Mr. Deng, as opponents rather than apostles of change. Now, perhaps, Mr. Deng may be forced to join Mr. Gorbachev in prying off the lid of the political pressure cooker.

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