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A CHINESE LESSON IN POLITE PROTEST

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES MAY 7, 1989

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For anyone tempted to think that rebellious Chinese students must be fighting for capitalism and multi-party democracy, a banner fluttering over People's University marchers on Thursday was a rude shock. It read, "We firmly support the correct leadership of the Communist Party."

If South Korean university students are at the militant extreme, totally rejecting the Government and battering lines of police with firebombs and wooden staves, then Chinese demonstrators are at the peaceful extreme.

They sometimes go out of their way to say nice things about the Communist Party, even when it is clear they do not believe them, and they overwhelm the police as much with courtesy as with force. Charging Police Lines, With Love

When approaching lines of the police, the students try to ingratiate themselves by chanting, "The people love the people's police; the people's police love the people." After some hard pushing, but never any blows, the police usually give way to the students.

That is when the demonstrators pause to bellow, "Thank you, police." A few students are even assigned to pick up any shoes lost in the shoving and return them to their owners, be they police or protesters.

Such tactics, which resemble those employed in the Philippine uprising rather than

those in South Korea, have been enormously successful so far. It has been difficult for the Communist Party to crack down on those who politely call on the party to uphold its own ideals of honesty and democracy. And the students' charm has won grins and support from many ordinary workers. Tactics and Sincerity

Student comments in favor of Communist rule are perhaps more difficult to decipher, but interviews with dozens of students in the last two weeks suggest that they are partly tactical and partly sincere. Early last week, when the Government seemed about to proclaim a crackdown against students who it said wanted to overthrow the socialist system and Communist rule, many student leaders seemed to feel that their best defense was to deny the charges and wage their struggle for more democracy in the guise of a devoted attempt to cleanse the party of its faults.

The fiercest slogans - like "Overthrow the dictatorship!" - were mostly replaced by slogans like "Down with graft!" Students also began to wave pro-Communist banners, rather like amulets intended to ward off the police.

Yet the slogans are not only a form of protection, for many students genuinely believe in Communist Party rule. Or, perhaps more accurately, they genuinely believe that there is no alternative any time soon to Communist Party rule. 'We Want What Is Practical'

"In an ideal world, a multi-party system would be better," said Xia A. P., a graduate student in politics who has taken part in the demonstrations. "But it's not feasible now. We want what is practical."

"It would be difficult for the Communist Party to move forward without a push," Mr. Xia added. "The aim of the student movement is to give the Communist Party an outside push so that it can reform itself."

Several of the student movement's leaders have said that they would consider joining the Communist Party at some point in their careers. Even Wang Dan, the Beijing University student leader who is regarded as among the most aggressive in the movement, scarcely paused when he was asked if he supported the leading role of the Communist Party in China.

"You can say I support correct leadership by the Communist Party," Mr. Wang said, putting emphasis on the word "correct." He seemed to mean that he was willing to tolerate the leading role of the party, so long as it was upright and permitted greater democracy. Suppressing Thoughts

When a group of students at Qinghua University was asked if they opposed the Communist Party, they mustered as much indignation as possible.

"The reason we demonstrate is that we still have some faith in the Communist Party," one said.

Another added: "We're not against the Government, just against the way it is run. It's a question of the party atmosphere, of corruption and of the bureaucracy."

Then the students looked a bit uneasy, as if they might be giving a foreign reporter the wrong idea about their goals. One ventured: "Remember, though, we can't always say what we think."

In private, students express almost no interest in socialism or communism as an ideology, and say instead that they favor whatever will make China strong and rich. But in the absence of any realistic alternative, and to avoid being labeled as counterrevolutionaries, they are willing to say they support the Communist Party.

Economy Concerns

Even this degree of consensus seems to break down when students contemplate the economy. When they are asked if they favor capitalism or socialism, the overwhelming majority of students reply that they do not know.

"I haven't thought about that," said Xiong Wei, a 22-year-old electrical engineer and student leader.

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