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TO THE STREETS; Armed Only With Optimism, China's People Rise Again

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF MAY 21, 1989

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ONE of the greatest living Chinese writers, Bo Yang, a 69-year-old social critic now living in Taiwan, was deeply depressed when he visited Beijing late last year after a 40-year absence. "I went to Beijing University and spoke to some students," he recalled in an interview earlier this year, "and they gathered round and asked me: 'How can we save China? How can we make China strong and democratic.' And I thought, nothing has changed. These are exactly the questions that I asked when I was a student, and that my parents asked a generation earlier. We have come nowhere."

This gloomy perception that China is doomed to stagnate amid poverty and autocracy has engulfed the nation for much of this century, but lately it suddenly seems to have been replaced by a giddy optimism that democracy may finally be at hand. Similar exuberance has appeared periodically in Chinese history and has almost always proven unwarranted, but this time many Chinese again seem to think that democracy is almost within grasp. Such optimism was easy to understand in the middle of the week, when a million workers and students were taking to the streets to demand more democracy and the Government was sounding steadily more conciliatory. It is less easy to understand after yesterday's

announcement that martial law has been imposed in parts of the capital and that army troops have been called in to restore order - and, presumably, crush the democracy movement.

Even the movement's principal exponent in the leadership, the Communist Party leader Zhao Ziyang, has been relieved of his duties, according to Chinese with high party connections. The new man in charge of both the Government and the Party - aside, of course, from the senior leader, Deng Xiaoping, whose voice still counts the most - is Prime Minister Li Peng, a cautious man who seems to regard democracy with mild distaste.

Yet somehow optimism prevails in the streets. The Government has power, as it always has, but now, for the first time, people have shown that they too have power. Last week's protests, including the immense demonstration of more than a million people yesterday after martial law was declared in parts of the city, have mobilized ordinary Chinese in a political cause and put democracy on the agenda.

It was noteworthy that even Prime Minister Li, in announcing the crackdown, felt obliged to institute it in the name of "strengthening democracy and the legal system" and to promise to continue talks with student dissidents. There appears to be a growing consensus that China's political structure must be liberalized. "Now, in 1989, the democratic process in China has really begun," said Xu Liangying, a prominent 69-year-old scientist and Communist Party member. "My eyes have been opened and I think that China still has hope." Even a period of repression, Mr. Xu said, will only be temporary, and the next stage of expansion will be bolder than before.

"Maybe we'll take a step back for a while," said a Beijing University graduate student who has helped to organize protests, "but now democracy is inevitable. The process has begun, and the fruit of this week's work eventually will be democracy. I don't know whether we'll taste it next week or next year, but it will come."

China has been through cycles of hope and repression before, of course. So the outcome may be far less certain than the student believes, even if the extent of public participation is something new.

Still, it was the extraordinary outpouring of support for students yesterday, in defiance of the Government, that offered people here the most encouragement. Shortly after the announcement of the crackdown was broadcast on television in the early hours, people began emerging from their homes to discuss the political crisis. Many blockaded nearby main roads, with bicycles, concrete blocks, logs or

anything else they could find, in the hope that this would keep the army from the center of the city. In the predawn hours, some workers rushed out of their factory dormitories and commandeered company trucks to rush to Tiananmen Square to protect the students.

Much of the initial enthusiasm last week had come while the Soviet leader, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, was in Beijing for the first Chinese-Soviet summit meeting in 30 years. Nevertheless, the timing seemed largely coincidental. What incited people to march was less the vision of Soviet liberalization than the plight of 3,000 Chinese students engaged in a hunger strike in the center of the capital. Students have always occupied a hallowed place in Chinese culture, and millions of ordinary people seemed deeply moved by the students' self-proclaimed willingness to die for democracy.

Yet if Mr. Gorbachev did not directly inspire the students, he did seem to weigh in on the side of the democrats in China's internal political struggle. He called for greater political change as well as economic change, and he seemed to want to reassure the Government that it should not be frightened of the student demonstrations. In this respect, Mr. Gorbachev's efforts were widely viewed here as having more of an impact on the democratic movement than President Bush's visit earlier in the year. It was Mr. Gorbachev's photos and not Mr. Bush's portraits that enlivened the demonstrators' posters. In part, this seems simply to have been a reflection of the fact that China sees the Soviet experience as closer and thereby far more relevant than the more advanced American experience with democracy.

Troubled Leadership

One of the most obvious contrasts during the summit meeting was that China simply has no Mikhail S. Gorbachev. There is a broad dissatisfaction with China's leaders, particularly with those who have prevailed in the present conflict, Mr. Deng and Mr. Li.

Perhaps because of the lack of a Chinese Gorbachev, there seems to be a growing view here that China will not see "glasnost" decreed from above, but must see it bubble up from below. The Chinese suddenly seem to have decided that democracy must come from themselves and that the Chinese Communist Party will be less willing than its Soviet counterpart to introduce competitive elections, so people must themselves claim their rights. Whether that is possible - whether the people can resist martial law and claim the democratic framework that for so many decades has eluded them - will now be put to the test.

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