Reporter's Notebook: Turmoil in China; Seeing Shadows Where Once There Were Leaders, Facts and Informants

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES JUNE 9, 1989

Writing about China's leadership these days must be a bit like covering the afterlife: Even if one is convinced it exists, confirming the details can be tough.

Indeed, covering China's leaders may well overlap with writing about the nether world, for there is some dispute about which world Deng Xiaoping now resides in. Mr. Deng, the country's senior leader, is variously said to be dead, dying or in even closer control of China than he has been in years.

In the last few weeks reporting about China has turned upside down, just as interest is exploding in what is going on in China. It used to be that there were leaders, and facts, and sources; now there are only shadows.

Take the simple question of who is in control in China. It should be easy to figure out who a country's leaders are; now, it is a puzzle. Aside from Prime Minister Li Peng, who appeared on television today and before that on May 25, no top leader has been seen in nearly three weeks.

The Communist Party General Secretary, Zhao Ziyang, almost certainly has been stripped of his power, and Prime Minister Li at least has the influence to get on television and to get some of his hard-line policies adopted. But does that really mean that his position is secure, or just that he has control over the television

station?
Is Mr. Deng, assuming he is still alive, simply using Mr. Li as an instrument or does the Prime Minister have an independent power base? Is President Yang Shangkun staging a coup against the Government, or is he working with other officials to reassert hardliner control?

Most Western diplomats and Chinese officials can make educated guesses to answer these questions, and journalists inevitably have to address the questions. But always there is uncertainty, because sources in China are increasingly fallible. Some journalists and diplomats have better sources than others, but probably none is regularly briefed by a Politburo member.

Instead, sources tend to come from a range of people: children of high officials, those who work for high officials and diplomats. The party is very careful about letting documents out of its possession, so most information comes not from leaked documents but simply from what people remember from meetings or from documents they have read previously. Confirming information is extremely difficult or impossible. Witnessing Clashes

Covering the reports of skirmishes between military units has been particularly difficult, because probably no reporter has personally witnessed any of the reported clashes. Instead, reporters have relied on accounts from Chinese witnesses and from foreign diplomats, but almost inevitably there is uncertainty in the stories.

What was known was that army forces took up defensive positions with tanks, in a manner not normally associated with defense against civilians. In addition, artillery shells could be heard in the distance and occasional bursts of machine gun firing. Sometimes soldiers reported that they had been engaged in minor clashes with other troops, although they were usually vague on details.

Convoys of troops could be seen rushing around main roads, but it was often impossible to identify them. License plates of trucks are a clue -V11 plates mean that a military truck is from the northeastern city of Shenyang, for example - but it was then difficult or impossible to distinguish a group of Shenyang soldiers from the 39th Army from the Shenyang soldiers in the 40th Army.

Keeping track of soldiers was doubly difficult because they tended to shoot in all directions from their convoys, and they had a particular distaste for binoculars. Following along behind a convoy, in a car or on a bicycle, was impossible. Thus it became crucial to have a network of friends around the city who could report the

latest troop movements.

Writing about the reports of skirmishes reflects a judgment that the accounts appear correct, and that they signify underlying tensions in the military that could be very significant. Many Chinese and foreigners have indeed feared that a civil war is a possibility, and that is consistent with the evidence. On the other hand, it is plausible that the skirmishes are many fewer than have been reported, and were not so serious as initially believed. Perhaps they were mostly bluffing, and attempts to scare and deter other armies instead of to attack them directly. Friendships at Risk

Confirming information has been particularly difficult lately because sources are drying up in a time of political retrenchment. Many journalists an diplomats had friends and sources in the Zhao camp, and they have suddenly found themselves without information, or else too afraid of arrest to want to see any foreigners.

And even when Chinese friends are willing to maintain friendships with foreigners, there are agonizing questions about whether it is right to put them to risk. Thus the tendency has been to call on them much less, or not at all, for fear of inadvertently sending them to prison.

There are similar worries about quoting people by name. Most Western journalists like to use the names of ordinary people they quote: it adds a ring of authenticity, even when it is unpronouncable. It used to be that most Chinese never wanted to give more than their surname, even when they made the most inoccuous remark. Then, in the last few months, more and more seemed to find the courage to allow their full names to be printed in criticizing Beijing.

A few took an intermediate approach: they agreed to use their surname and initials, because that would make it more difficult to determine their Chinese characters and find them.

Now, since the expectations of a crackdown in the last few weeks, the mood has changed and nobody is willing to have their names used.

"Are you kidding?" one young worker responded when he was asked if a reporter could use his name. "It's easy for you to get on a flight out of here. I'll be in jail for years." Getting Around Town

Even getting around the capital to find out what is happening has been difficult, for reasons of safety and transportation. Earlier this week, citizens erected barricades at many intersections, so that driving cars around Beijing became a

nightmare. The result was that bicycles again became fashionable, and foreign correspondents rushed around town on bicylces.

However, bullets have become a major reason to stay away from some areas. On the first day of the shooting, many reporters were near the front lines, and two - one Japanese, one French - were shot and wounded. Since then, and especially after all the reporters visited the hospitals and wrote second-day stories about those who had been less lucky than themselves, many journalists have been more prudent.

Photographers have been particularly hard-pressed, because the soldiers have made it clear that they do not want their pictures taken. Some of the Chinese who were killed were shot because they were trying to take photos of the carnage.

Journalists have had to deal with the added problem that they are not really supposed to engage in journalism these days. Special martial law regulations ban coverage of what either the democracy movement or the troops are doing, and so there is no way to explain away one's presence as simply that of a journalist.

As a result, foreign correspondents have suddenly proven scarce in the capital, but a large group of foreigners has suddenly appeared who roam around the capital and pass themselves off as tourists. Their claims are belied by their notebooks and questions that few tourists would pose: "So are the soldiers there from the 38th Army, and are they ready to fight with the 27th Army?"

Most ordinary residents seem fiercely supportive of foreign journalists, as well as curious about how foreign newspapers are covering the events in China. Workers or housewives sometimes guide journalists away from trouble, and everyone delights in the opportunity not to speak Chinese but to practice execrable English.

They push a journalist toward the most gruesome scenes, to drum into him what they regard as the Government's brutality. If there is a bloodstain from the attack earlier this week on civilians, the local residents will virtually drag a reporter to inspect it.

"Tell the world about it," a young worker said today as he pointed toward a trickle of blood on the ground from an old man who was shot by mistake near Tiananmen Square. "Make sure the world knows what is happening here."

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