A New Chinese Equation

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The wheel turns. For forty years, the Chinese Communist leaders have benefited from almost total impunity. In 1959, while the People's Republic of China celebrated its tenth anniversary, millions of peasants were dying of starvation, victims of the lunacy of the "Great Leap Forward". In 1969, the festivities for Communist China's twentieth anniversary drowned out the complaints of an entire exiled youth.

In 1979, the spectacular opening up of the country eclipsed the smothering of democratic dissent. But this time around, everything changed in an instant: the gripping images of the Beijing massacre quickly pushed China to within the small group of scorned countries. From now on, international tourism is avoiding the Forbidden City, and Chinese diplomats are chastised at the UN. The PRC's fortieth anniversary inspires harsh judgements as much today, as they were not long ago in praise.

And yet, one must be cautious. Since 1949, Chinese political history has often developed in the opposite direction of the one designated it by Western trend. When everyone admired the triumph of the Soviet model, Maoism was blooming in Beijing. While all were enraptured with the Cutural Revolution, it was already collapsing.

Deng Xiaoping has just reminded the world of the power base upon which his policy since 1979 was built. China on its fortieth anniversary actually brings up a simple question which must be examined as objectively as possible: does the Tiananmen Square massacre signal an insuperable historical limit, or is it merely an accident on the path to the inevitable erosion of the system?

The insuperable limit

Today, the dominant theory in the French media is that an insuperable limit has been reached, or even the "Great Leap Backwards". Put in a position by the democratic movement where they face a radical choice and frightened of losing their political monopoly, according to this hypothesis, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party went back to their founding convictions, and in order to reaffirm their power, accepted to debilitate their policy of modernisation and openness. Arguments in favour of this theory are not lacking, but they speak more from the heart than from the mind, and not one of them seems conclusive.

The first supporing argument concerns the vicious nature of the repression which followed the revolt of the urban populations last spring. It is true that the shameless barbarism and killing in Beijing has no equivalent in recent world history. According to many analysts, this is a case of the murderous delirium of defeated leaders in their final moments. Yet it is must be recognised that the instances of violence were limited in both time and space. They lasted only a few days in Beijing and barely extended at all into the rest of the country. The massacre had a purpose and a target: as Simon Leys has written, it aimed to "lobotomise" the revolt.[1] Once this surgical operation was completed, Deng could organise less blood-soaked repression throughout the entire country, intended more to terrorise than to kill. Hundreds of executions, tens of thousands of arrests and hundreds of thousands of exiles or demotions: these figures, which the Chinese Government refuses to acknowledge, constitute a scandal in the eyes of international and Chinese opinion. But on the other hand, in a country with more than a billion inhabitants, this does not add up to mass terror. From all indications, the repression has remained controlled, and it is not, as at the time of the Cultural Revolution, the erratic result of a tyrant's delirium or of factional warfare.

More solid is a second set of reasoning: propaganda has rapidly taken the place of repression. Not content with denaturing the events of May and June, propaganda has restored the rhetoric which filled the air of the 1950's: rehabilitation of the ideology, glorification of the Party (and also of the valiant soldiers of Tiananmen...), a reaffirmation of objectives of socialism as the number one priority and even persistent references to the "international conspiracy..." This semantic change of course is unnerving above all because it could pave the way for the formation of a new line that would modify

the basic principles of the policy adopted in 1978: priority to modernisation, rural decollectivisation, workers' incentives programmes and opening up to the outside world.

Fortunately, this change in direction is still far away: anyone who was in China during the summer of 1989 knows very well that economic policy has not met with any major stumbling blocks, and that the social climate has deteriorated only in the largest metropolitan areas. Barring an unforeseen catastrophe, an evolution towards the worst is at the current moment improbable. For such a shift, several conditions would have to exist. In order to relaunch political mobilisation, there would have to be revolutionary symbols with leaders ready to promote them: the likelihood of such a development has appeared unfeasible ever since the Maoist legacy was eliminated. There would have to be activists or at least part of the apparatus with a minimum of political motivation: this

Chinese punishment

would take nothing short of rebuilding the entire Party, for there are no more of these militants left—the Communist apparatus is disoriented, corrupted, decomposed. Finally, there would have to be a mass movement, individuals willing to come forward: at the moment, the Chinese population has been frightened enough to withdraw from the political scene, although not sufficiently as to accept a return to productive mobilisation.

A third argument still remains which concerns the leaders themselves. It is an exaggeration to depict Deng Xiaoping, Yang Shangkun, Peng Zhen, Chen Yun and Li Xiannians as a gang of old men ravaged by the fear of their own people and thirsting for vengeance. The massacre—it is true—was proportionate to the gravity of the danger they believed to be facing and the problems encountered in reimposing order. But the choice for repression itself posed no major ideological problem, and the month of June does not mark a significant step in the regime's political progression. Afterall, since 1978 the objectives of the present leadership have not varied: it has been a question of maintaining China under the tutelage of the Communist Party, and at the same time giving priority to its modernisation. After having stamped out the revolt, they have hastened to reaffirm the continuity of their policy of reforms with a candour that—be it hypocritical—expresses to no lesser degree their real intentions.

The real cause for worry is not therefore a supposed political regression towards barbarism. Barbarian or civilised, these notions have hardly any meaning in political matters. What is important, however, is that those in power in Beijing have been discredited with the intellectual and technical elite that are indispensable actors for the development of the country. Today, many Chinese—and among them the best—aspire to leave and there is barely any attempt to hold them back. Trust has been breached and it will take many long years—and new leaders—to reestablish it.

New leaders? The fact is that, like Mao himself, Deng Xiaoping was incapable of organising his succession in a credible manner. By dissociating himself from his master, Zhao Ziyang placed himself, just as Deng did in 1976, in reserve for the republic's future: undoubtedly he represents the best chance for the survival of communism in China. While he waits, Zhao finds himself under surveillance, and nothing guarantees that history will repeat itself once again. It is certainly grossly inaccurate to depict Li Peng as a Nazi or to compare Qiao Shi to Béria. The former is only a Soviet-style technocrat; the latter, who has never held any major responsibility, accepted the weakening of the police

system that took place in the middle of the 80's. Neither one, however, possesses the eminent qualities of leadership, and both have lost their credibility for a long time as far as public opinion is concerned. By and large, the generation of sextarians seems incredibly mediocre as compared to that of the "masters".

Hypothesis of continuity

The theory of an insuperable limit cannot be dismissed with the waive of a hand, no more so than the possibility that Deng Xiaoping's physical weakness, as in the past with Mao Zedong, may have ushered in another period of aimless drifitng. Nevertheless, it does not eliminate all the reasons that, over the course of ten years, have led so many personalities to sing praise of Deng Xiaoping. This praise stems from very strong and simple reasoning. Since the Chinese Communist leaders are nationalists, they must worry about the economic growth of their country. If they are also realists, they can only hope to succeed by abandoning the logic of mobilisation and the closed door for that of individual interest and opening up to the external world. In short, for China no all-encompassing alternative can be imagined to the policy initiated in 1978: only minor adaptations concerning its limits, its pace or its strategic priorities.

Although it is sometimes derided, the first argument in favour of continuity seems fairly strong, and it is thinkable that it will easily be passed on to the lower level officials called upon to replace the group of octogenarians. The pursuit of a policy of modernisation and opening up actually seems to be the only available means with which China could possibly respond to the economic, international and political challenges awaiting it. It is not enough to say that economic development is the main concern of the country. Its conjunctural hazards must also be addressed in that they weigh permanently on internal policy as again recognised during the summer of 1988, when Zhao Ziyang and Li Peng confronted each other on the subject of the most appropriate way to correct the disorders of the economy. In the short term, these disorders fill the cup of partisans of "severity as a response to everything". But in the medium term, the Chinese economy lays claim to other remedies. In an incredibly complex manner, it in effect combines the most wide-ranging problems of underdevelopment, development and mis-development, the advantages and pathologies of all variants of communism and capitalism. Ideological solutions to such a situation could only come from blinded minds.

Boxers' Rebellion

The crisis in China requires action at all levels: grand designs and pragmatic adjustments, internal impulses and an appeal abroad. In any hypothesis, the leadership must form a compromise with the strengths and methods typical of the capitalist world. To be truthful, this compromise has already been undertaken, to such an extent that a step backwards could spell disaster. New rural collectivisation would inevitably bring about famine. In the urban economy—at least in its corruption-deteriorated form—profit already plays an important role. No doubt the authorities were making an effort to bridle the special economic zones and the private sector. But the former are no longer

indispensable to the Chinese economy, and the latter will spring up rapidly under altered forms.

The second case for the continuity argument is that the international environment limits the margin of the Chinese leaders' internal maneuvres, as much in the economic arena as in the political one. No matter how discreet they have been up to the present, the financial and diplomatic boycotts have the leaders worried. In effect, these measures detract from the legitimacy which they draw from their international standing, and more specifically, from their close relations with the West, the subject of dreams among many of the Chinese.

Normalisation with the Soviet bloc does not come as an alternative, because every person in China is aware of the Soviet economy's exhaustion. The leaders in Beijing know they are condemned to cooperate with the West and suffer the internal consequences. Equally, they know they are prisonners of a regional context marked by the triumph of capitalism, favourable for their development, but which implies additional domestic political constraints. If the leadership wishes to continue its exchanges with Japan and other newly industrialising countries, avoid a catastrophe in Hong Kong, stop Taiwan's drift towards independence and maintain relations with the overseas Chinese, it will be forced once again to make its regime presentable.

These external constraints translate internally into an equally severe ideological problem. The loss in strength of the revolutionary ideologies in the world has deprived the dogmatists of reference points: it is no longer possible to justify repression by continuing class struggle on the international level. The Gorbachev experience pleads in favour of Zhao Ziyang, and Deng Xiaoping will not be able to content himself for long with his Bulgarian, Romanian, East German or Cuban friends: for that matter, in these countries as well, there are long-term evolutions now firmly under way. Furthermore, the reestablishment of ties with the overseas Chinese moors the country to the great ideological currents of the world, while the most vital part of China—the coastline populations and the intellectual elite—is attracted by the West. The opening up already may have produced irreparable social ramifications in certain provinces of southern China. Hence Chinese domestic policy will have to take account of the fact that the country is penetrated by foreign influence, and that the more active sections are linked to the most dynamic poles of capitalism on this planet.

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Countdown to change

An essentially political factor must be pointed out. The "Great Leap Forward" physically debilitated Chinese communism while the Cultural Revolution debilitated it politically: here, the legitimising ambitions of communism collapsed. With the death of Mao, the regime found itself in a crisis of direction, and therefore consensus. Deng Xiaoping rescued it by attaching an artificial limb: the objective of modernisation. Yet its content was no more than a shaky compromise: Deng authorised society to emancipate socially, and to a certain extent economically, but not politically. For ten years, this compromise revealed itself to be extraordinarily effective, for the regime continued to survive and the population doubled its standard of living.

Nevertheless, Chinese society was not satisfied with its political handicap. Indeed, it was the economic success itself which, in progressively modifying the social structure of the country, reinforced the demand for democracy. Deng undoubtedly crushed the revolt of spring 1989: but by extreme means that no one else could have got away with. Even if he can still count on support coming from the depths of the apparatus, on the guarded neutrality of the peasants and on the political apathy of the urban populations, he has lost the backing of the most enterprising spheres of society. In these *milieux*, sentiments are either pro-West or at best, reformist. Consequently, if he still aspires to develop the country (and he cannot afford not to if he wants to preserve his original mandate), the Party will one day or another find itself forced to follow Zhao's policies, with or without Zhao.

It is evident: the Beijing massacre, the repression and the subsequent gestures at normalisation have not fundamentally altered the Chinese equation. At the risk of appearing paradoxical, one could even defend the idea that the stirrings of this past spring actually uncovered the erosion of the Communist regime. After all, the leadership took a month to decide to strike and then fifteen days to act: in the past, it was more rapid. The executions and arrests were less numerous than they would have been ten years ago. Dozens of dissident leaders actually succeeded in fleeing and some even still are being sought by the police. These events would have been unthinkable in other times—the Chinese were simply too frightened. This time around, though, they were not scared enough. And after Deng Xiaoping's death, it is hard to believe that this erosion will not start up again with even more force. Without a doubt, the day is approaching when this regime may kill nothing other than just a run-of-the-mill dictatorship...

Paralysed system

On the other hand, however, these optimistic commentaries are barely less superficial than the panic of the observers of Chinese affairs after the June 4 crisis. While the democratic protest went beyond simply denouncing the Communist monopoly, its defeat unveiled a crisis much more profound. The demonstrators did not want to take power; on the contrary, they were ready to rally behind Zhao Ziyang and the other reformist leaders. The essence of the movement was to make a point, not political action; the confusion and diversity of its political message have been duly remarked. It will take some waiting before the details are fully known, and even more in order to compare the long-term effects of this movement with other prophetic movements, like that of May 4, 1919, in China or that of May 1968 in the West. At the moment, one can see two aspirations that formed the ideological backbone of the Tiananmen crowd.

The first aspiration was to genuine, Western style modernity. The clamour for democracy was not solely political: there were also economic, cultural and moral components. The protesters were asking not only for leaders from among the people, but in addition, for a decent standard of living, respect for intellect and the installation of an honest administration. By doing so, they pinpointed the failure of the Communist leadership. Coming out of the crisis of May 4, 1919, the Communist elite was installed into power in order to fulfill a simple mission: to end social injustice and, above all, the economic, intellectual and

moral slump which had placed the former Empire in a humiliating situation. This elite acted in a blind and hasty fashion at a cost of terrible cultural and human destruction, and with considerable negligence for demographic problems. As far as the economic sphere is concerned, the first policy it conducted ended in disaster. In 1978, it then introduced a second policy that, despite growing obstacles, began to bear fruit. Now the country finds itself mid-stream, where past progresses are shinng light on the areas which remain to be covered.

Whereas the protesters' first insistence concerned their objectives, the second was with regard to means. In calling attention to the gap between the programme of modernisation and the bureaucratic decomposition of the Chinese system, the students closed in on the fundamental crisis which has plagued communism in China since the death of Mao Zedong. Chinese political history—it is here where China distinguishes itself from the Soviet Union—condenses the trajectory of the totalitarian failure into a very short period of time. In wanting to go faster, higher and farther than any other, Mao Zedong burned the engine of communism.

Positive fallout

Since the beginning of the decade, the ideological void has been total, evidenced by the invention of barren concepts such as "spiritual socialist civilisation" and "the initial phase of socialism". Time and again, the Communist Party of China has taxed itself to fill this void with vague notions like "reform" and "socialist legality", and to divert attention from its troubles by technical solutions: the up-and-coming generation of the Politburo with new General Secretary Jiang Zemin is composed of near-sighted technocrats, mere administrators.

There is something more serious: at a loss for doctrinal glue, lacking respect from others as well as its own self-esteem, the Party apparatus has progressively disintegrated. Today, it is paralysed by two severe diseases: corruption and compartimentalisation. Different officials enrich themselves at the expense of the people under their responsibility. The Party is now nothing more than a set of competing compartiments which obey the leadership with increasing difficulty. Under these conditions, the ineffectivenes of state mediation and the absence of any social relay are of decisive importance. For having had too much Party, present-day China has not had enough state.

For having systematically crushed and separated social groups, the central authority now faces only indiscipline and irresponsibility from society. In brief: for having been over-dominated, Chinese society has been under-politicised.

Incapable of carrying an effective toll on the leadership, last spring's movement was nevertheless correct in pointing out the immobility of the Communist system. Without doubt, in the end the movement will have positive fallout. In the big cities at least, it has formed a political consciousness and sociability which are not about to subside. It must be recognised, however, that in spite of its limitation in time and space, the springtime crackdown has worsened the system's paralysis. Feeling threatened politically, the octogenarians broke with the Western and democratic version of modernity. They are now devoting themselves to sweeping away all notions of compromise; but they remain incapable of reviving their moribund ideology. They are affirming once again the need for technical solutions, but they have chased away the best of their intellectual elite. They claim to be fighting against corruption in the apparatus, but the latter has become their best source of support. The leaders want to re-introduce order in the Party and the administration, now just as indiscipline is gaining ground. The army's local commanders, the provincial elite and other influential local circles have all taken advantage of the central authority's humiliation in order to increase their margin for maneuvring. Reading the Guangdong newspapers has become very instructive: here it can be remarked that the local leaders implement only a small part of Beijing directives. A difficult succession is building: who will risk obeying without reserve?

Above and beyond the disturbances, dramas and the shows of force, in reality it is the crisis of communism in general that is accelerating, in China as elsewhere. Analogies with the Soviet Union are not lacking, even if the Chinese equivalent to Gorbachev is temporarily out of the game. After having claimed to have circumvented it, Deng Xiaoping in the end could not avoid the political contradiction that Gorbachev has set out to attack, accepting the risks involved. In Beijing as in Moscow, the permanent and literally obsessive role of external factors is striking: on one side (that of the leadership), the need to close the gap with the West and capitalist Asia; on the other (that of the opposition), the attraction of the democratic model.[2]

There are two specific elements, however, which could make the Chinese situation particularly explosive. The first is the contradiction between the

worsening of economic problems and the weakening of the political means available to the leadership. The second element concerns the danger of a violent explosion that the intensity of expectation, the scope of social change and the strength of conservative forces create in an old and over-crowded country where the feeling of a common bond is lacking. Unbdoubtedly, the decomposition of communism will progressively liberate China from a history of servitude and massacres. But it opens the path to new risks whose severity is difficult to measure.

References

[1] *Le Monde*, July 14, 1989.

[2] See Paul Thibaud, "La fin du communisme", *Esprit*, October 1989.