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The Tiananmen Protestors, Then and Now

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China Beat sent out a note to a few scholars and journalists who have carefully watched and written about the events of 1989, asking them to send in short commentaries detailing what they wish more people knew, associated with, or remembered about that spring. We ran the first piece in this limited series, by John Gittings, last week. This is the second piece.

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By Jonathan Unger

Looking back in time from a distance of two decades, we are apt to forget the economic circumstances in which the nationwide protests of 1989 arose, as well as the vantage points of the protests' participants.

In the late 1980s, people across China felt frustrated and angered by inflation and mounting corruption. This dissatisfaction had been moving toward a crisis point over the previous couple of years despite the fact that urban living standards, on the whole, had been rising steadily throughout most of the Eighties. But expectations of a better life had been rising even faster, and when inflation in 1988 began to overtake wage rises in the state sector, frustrations sharpened. Workers who had been willing to countenance the corruption of officials when their own wage packets were growing healthily became resentful in 1988 and 1999 when they saw that the close kin of officials were cutting themselves an undue share of the pie while their own slices shrank.

What held the protesters together was the very fact that theirs was a protest movement, without a clear platform. Had there been one, far fewer people might have participated – for the solutions to China’s economic ailments favored by different groups among the protesters were very much at variance. Some of the protesters who came into the streets – in particular the leading intellectuals and most of the students – wanted the economic reforms to proceed faster. Others among the protesters contrarily had discovered that the economic reforms had not been to their advantage: particularly those in the working class whose incomes were declining, and those whose jobs were no longer secure or who had already been laid off. Only a fragile unity was pasted together among these groups. The better educated had little sympathy for the circumstances of the laborers, and for much of the time the university students sought to keep the working class at arms’ length, preventing workers from entering the perimeters of their own demonstrations.

All the same, more than merely anger at economic woes and corruption held the various protesters on the same side of the political divide. They did project a vague common vision of what they wanted, and it was summed up in the word “Democracy.” The word was blazoned on a multitude of their banners. But by “democracy,” few of the protesters meant one person, one vote. Most of the university students and intellectuals had no desire to see the nation’s leadership determined by the peasants, who comprised a majority of the population. Many urban residents held the rural populace in disdain, and their fear was that the peasants would be swayed by demagogues and vote-buying.

Some of the protesters were nonetheless vaguely pro-democratic just so long as democracy could be put off to a future time. The then-Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang favored a policy called “neo-authoritarianism,” under which the Party would act as a benevolent autocracy until such time as the middle class had developed sufficiently to predominate in a very gradually democratized polity. Until then, China would remain in a state of tutelage, much as Sun Yat-sen had proposed in the 1920s. This was the program of the Party’s reform camp, and it drew support from among the urban educated elite.

If not immediate political democracy in the shape of multiparty elections for the nation’s leaders, what some of the educated protesters in Tiananmen Square wanted, rather, was an independent press that
could play a watch-dog role over the political leadership. They wanted access to more interesting magazines and films. They also wanted what they considered a more fair distribution of incomes, in which they would be beneficiaries. They wanted academic freedom, and the ability to safely advise and constructively criticize the government.

But their use of the word “Democracy” also represented more than that, and its mass appeal lay in this additional dimension. Above all, the great bulk of the participants in the protests wanted freedom from the petty constraints imposed upon them at their place of work or school. For decades, access to travel tickets, entertainment, accommodation, medical care – a vast range of advantages and sanctions large and small – had been controlled by work-unit bureaucrats, who dispensed favors to those who kept their noses clean or, worse yet, to those who obediently cowed to these Party hacks. People wanted out from under these stifling controls.

Everywhere across China, they named their new student groups Autonomous Student Associations (in China, literally Student Self-ruling [zizhi] Associations). So too, the organizations that the intellectuals established almost invariably were titled Autonomous associations. The workers’ groups were titled Autonomous Workers’ Leagues. The key demand quickly became that the government recognize their organizations, and not exact retribution for having established them. What the urban populace of China was demanding, in short, was no less and no more than “civil society” – an intermediary sphere between state and society that is not controlled by the state and that creates a ‘space’ between the polity and the populace. In China, even innocuous independent organizations had not been allowed. For the previous forty years all “mass organizations” were creatures of the party-government. What the populace essentially demanded was simply an opportunity to relate to each other without interference or oversight. It was for this reason that this word Autonomous held importance to them.

It was precisely these demands, harmless though they might appear, that seem to have frightened the old men of Zhongnanhai, China’s Kremlin. It is likely that the crisis could have been brought peacefully to a close had they formally recognized the new organizations’ right to exist. But from beginning to end, China’s leaders felt they needed steadfastly to refuse that recognition. Their whole conception of the reformed Leninist state was at stake. Earlier in the Eighties, they had already bent enough to allow advisory forums containing “leading personages” to be formed. But even if some semi-autonomous forums were to exist in the new China, they, the Party leaders, would initiate them. First the students and then quickly other social groups were taking that initiative out of the Party’s hands, were grabbing the nettle for themselves. It signaled to the aged Party leaders a dangerous political environment in which people not only were shaping their own operational sphere but, worse yet, might well wish to use that new-found ground in future to play an active role in the political arena. In fact, they were in the midst of doing so in Tiananmen Square. This went against everything that the Party leaders were accustomed to or believed in – which is that the Communist Party is uniquely positioned to steer China into a better future, without interference. They were not willing to see the Leninist polity, their polity, successfully challenged and weakened.

Out in the Square, meanwhile, a new rights consciousness was quickly emerging, but it was still a crudely formed consciousness. As noted, the protesters who had joined one or another of the new jerry-built associations had been acting on an emotional feeling about what they were against – irritated by corruption and the difficulties in the economy and tired of the Party’s control over so many aspects of their lives. But very few of the activists and protest leaders held any real notion of what type of political structure might conceivably take the place of the strong-handed Party machine. Very few, even among the intellectuals, had any coherent political program to offer – just very vaguely worded demands for a liberalization and relaxation of the system. It was a movement of protest that was groping blindly in the dark.

Then and Now
If anything, many of the protesters at Tiananmen were more in favor of political liberalization than they are now. At the time, they admired Mikhail Gorbachev and the political reforms he was carrying out. But the collapse and dismemberment of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the corruption and plunging living standards that soon followed under Boris Yeltsin’s rule soured China’s educated on the idea of Party-led political liberalization along Gorbachev’s lines. By the mid-1990s, young Russian women were flowing into China to work as prostitutes. Chinese considered this shocking evidence of
Russia’s penury and humiliation. Many of the urban educated who had demonstrated in 1989 began to feel relieved that China had followed Deng Xiaoping’s policy of economic rather than political reform.

Nevertheless, many of them today still think of themselves as pro-reform, albeit in modest ways. They are apt to shake their heads in dismay at China’s environmental problems and express hopes that the government will give greater priority to the issue. Those with expertise are often eager to offer up suggestions on how to enact this or that small, incremental reform. What pass in China for academic papers are often really policy prescriptions on how to improve one or another aspect of China’s physical or administrative infrastructure, or relieve traffic congestion, or provide for a more effective education curriculum.

Generally, the urban educated today have what they wanted at the time of the Tiananmen protests. They feel they can make such recommendations and that their expertise is respected. They and their children also now have their personal space, in the shape of access to websites, chat rooms, and a wide variety of publications and films. They can say what they want so long as they stay within increasingly generous boundaries and do not challenge the Party’s political monopoly.

Above all, in their material livelihoods the urban educated are doing very well, whereas at the time of the Tiananmen protests in 1989, they had good reason to be angry. Their salaries were low, and sour jokes circulated about private barbers earning more with their razors than hospital surgeons with their scalpels. But in the years since, there has been a deliberate government policy to favor the well-educated. Year after year the professionals on government payrolls have been offered repeatedly higher salaries. During one year in the late 1990s, the pay of all of the academics at China’s most prestigious public universities was literally doubled in one go. Opportunities to earn high salaries opened up just as much in the private sector. Many of the university students at Tiananmen Square in 1989 now drive cars and live in fancy high-rise apartments. They have gained a lifestyle that they had never imagined possible, and they do not want to upset the apple cart. If the government’s plan was to co-opt the salaried middle class, it has worked.

Reflecting on the Tiananmen protests, one of the most famous of the student leaders, Wuer Kaixi, flippantly articulated their desires, “So what do we want? Nike shoes. Lots of free time to take our girlfriends to a bar. The freedom to discuss an issue with someone. And to get a little respect from society.” They now have all that, in spades.

As a result, the members of the educated middle class, including many of the former university students who crowded Tiananmen Square two decades ago, have become a bulwark of the current regime. Summarizing a large survey of political attitudes in Beijing, a recent book concludes that, among all urban groups, “those who perceive themselves to belong to the middle class and who are government bureaucrats are more likely to support the incumbent authorities.” If there is another outbreak like Tiananmen, in fact, many of them might prefer to be on the government side of the barricades.

Tags: 1989, 6/4, Tiananmen