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Coming Distractions: The Wobbling Pivot

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Prominent Qing specialist [Pamela Crossley](#) of Dartmouth College has a new book coming out in February, [The Wobbling Pivot, China Since 1800: An Interpretive](#)



[History](#), which is aimed at general readers and is designed to be suitable as well for classes devoted to modern Chinese history. One theme in the book that is likely to be of special interest to those who follow this blog is her frequent discussion of similarities and differences over time in patterns of unrest and the way that the state and its representatives respond to challenges from below. Focusing largely on tensions and modes of accommodation between central authorities and local communities, Crossley offers an intriguing new way of thinking about many of the big upheavals of the recent past, from the White Lotus Rebellion to the recent unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang. In this excerpt, however, which gives a good sense of the liveliness of the book's prose as well as the kinds of subjects it addresses, we see how her approach can also be used to shed light on minor fracasas of the sort that anyone who has spent time in China is likely to have witnessed at some point during their stay.

It is unusual for the contents of a semi-confidential email to become universally known on the Internet. But in March of 2009, after the nomination of Charles W. Freeman Jr. as chair of the American government's National Intelligence Council, his email to the ChinaSec listserv group of May 26, 2006 drew attention for this comment about the Tiananmen incidents of 1989: "I find the dominant view in China about this very plausible, i.e. that the truly unforgivable mistake of the Chinese authorities was the failure to intervene on a timely basis to nip the demonstrations in the bud, rather than – as would have been both wise and efficacious – to intervene with force when all other measures had failed to restore domestic tranquility to Beijing and other major urban centers in China. In this optic, the Politburo's response to the mob scene at 'Tian'anmen' stands as a monument to overly cautious behavior on the part of the leadership, not as an example of rash action."

Freeman's suggestion that the contrast is to tactics, and not to politics, leaves the comment dangling above the ground, out of contact with historical patterns of China's recent centuries. The hearts of China's political capitals have been occupied by state opponents and dissidents repeatedly over the centuries. State reaction is rarely swift, though it is often bloody. These events are products of a structural relationship between government and society that was strongly in evidence from at least 1644 to 1958, and since 1976 has been reestablishing itself to a modest degree. It is a system with a peculiar way of producing social and economic order, but one that in very extreme circumstances is vulnerable to catastrophic breakdown. Considered outside its historical context, it sometimes leads observers too quickly to words like "instability," "disorder," "chaos."

When I was following the thread that now runs through this book, my mind kept returning to scenes from contemporary China. I was in China for the first time in 1977. On an otherwise quiet afternoon in Luoyang, where the streets did not look particularly crowded, a loud discussion broke out between two men over a bicycle (in those days, bicycles were all *Flying Pigeon*, identical to any but the eye of love). A small knot of people quickly wound itself around the disputatious men, listening carefully, advising moderation and not, coincidentally, preventing the bicycle from going anywhere. The knot grew to a crowd large enough to block the narrow street. A few men at the front of the throng had joined in the conversation, questioning the men in turn, and repeatedly advising calm and honesty. After some minutes the inevitable representative of local public security arrived. She was a small woman, not plump but solidly built, with the regulation even hair length and middle part, and a bright red arm band proclaiming her official status. The crowd shifted only enough to allow her to make her way to the front, a few people darting glances of blame at the bicycle men for having brought the authorities onto the scene. The public security woman asked a few questions of the men and appeared, for a moment, to be attempting to break up the congregation and send the men on their way. But she was a late arrival on the scene. The two men who had begun negotiations between the adversaries continued in their role, with polite acknowledgment of the official's presence. Occasionally Public Security would inject her questions or views, but at roughly the same rate and pitch as others at the center of the circle. After ten minutes, the contenders nodded agreement to each other, one moved off with the bicycle, and the crowd, including the woman distinguished by her bold red armband, moved on to their business.

I had the strong feeling that I had seen something that was not the least unusual. Everybody took the dispute, the resolution and the public participation in stride. The crowd was not merely bystanders, camp followers or observers for sport. The quickness with which they organized themselves for conflict containment and resolution, the precision with which certain individuals assumed and fulfilled their roles, suggested to me something basic about the social methods of the Luoyang inhabitants who had entered the street expecting to do their shopping or their chores, but instead became embroiled in the forensics, the philosophy and the administration of a dispute between two men over a bicycle. I did not know at the time, but am convinced now, that in 1977 such a social phenomenon in Luoyang evinced ancient practices that a decade before had been under extreme assault, and wounded seriously though not fatally.

Another side of this phenomenon seems to be evident in two anecdotes recently related by the journalist Tim Johnson in 2008. In the first, Johnson discovers that it is impossible to get taxi drivers in Changchun to actually use the meters and issue receipts from them. Since the law requires that the meters be used and the receipts issued, Johnson approached a "security guard" (the contemporary equivalent of the security maiden I spoke of in Luoyang in 1977) to complain. The guard merely shrugged. Johnson commented, "At first, I found this a little irksome. But on reflection, I sort of admired the taxi drivers. The local authorities apparently had imposed an impractical limit on fares, and the cabbies rebelled in the only way they could. The security guard understood and sympathized." In a second vignette, Johnson ends up on a bus after the flight he expected to take was cancelled. The airline had chartered the bus at no expense to the passengers, and had obviously provided the driver with sufficient cash to take the high-speed, well-maintained toll roads to the destination. The driver, however, took a meandering, pothole-riddled route, keeping the toll fees for himself. Passengers repeatedly pointed out to him the highway ramps he was passing, but otherwise took no issue or action. Johnson experienced some outrage at this, too, but then reconsidered after taking a comparative view: "It was a minor inconvenience. I thought back to times in South America, where bus drivers would be in cahoots with armed bandits, pulling buses over at remote spots where everyone would be robbed."