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The Price of Heavenly Peace: Tiananmen Square 15 Years Later

by
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The Burden of History

Anyone who has walked along Chang'an Boulevard in Beijing in the last 15 years cannot help but be transported back to the spring of 1989. The ground still elicits the images of the tens of thousands of students and workers that gathered there to demand democratic reform of the Communist state. Even today, it is as if the square itself still vibrates with political meaning. This often happens when politics, history and location meet and intertwine. But whereas certain locales such as Berlin's Brandenburg Gate have come to represent the victory of freedom and democracy over fascism and totalitarianism, Tiananmen Square has taken on the opposite meaning: of the crushing and inevitable collapse of the democratic impulse and the gradual erasure of its memory. Students of history know all too well that the pursuit of democracy usually has more powerful enemies than allies; in Beijing on June 4th 1989, this historical lesson was to prove harrowingly true.

In the West, the crackdown was seen more as the bloody result of the actions of a totalitarian government. But the realities of the situation are more complex. Even though the 1980s saw dramatic reforms in Communist countries, Chinese reforms were more moderate and cautious. Mikhail Gorbachev's reformist agenda was echoed in China by the liberalizing vision of major political figures such as Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang who saw China's opening to the world has being more than merely economic in nature. The rigidity of the political systems that were formed and hardened during the Cold War were beginning to show signs of thawing. The word "reform" became as dangerous in certain circles as the word revolution had been 80 years before—it was a threat to all that existed and the encrusted, conservative elite that held power could smother the new-born impulse in its cradle.

But even the most conservative of the ruling elder statesmen knew that economic reforms were needed. The political and economic disasters of the “Great Leap Forward” in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 70s had brought the Chinese economy to the verge of collapse. Reform meant absorbing ideas and institutions from the West, but only in terms of economics, technology and science; what was explicitly excluded were the political and moral ideas of the western political tradition and its cultural products. In 1983, a political movement under the title “Eliminate Spiritual Pollution” was initiated to eradicate what the conservative elite saw as “decadent” and bourgeois elements in Chinese culture and art. But despite this, a “Futurologist School” began to emerge. Through an analysis of western thought and science, the reality of the gap between what came to be known as a “backward society” and the “modern world,” the Futurologists—led by figures such as Jin Guantao and Li Zehou—opened up a new horizon of consciousness for younger students and intellectuals. The centuries of Chinese isolationism had created not only a thirst and hunger for modernity, but a bitterness and anger at being held back from realizing it as well.

Meanwhile, the realities of the newly reformed economy that Deng had created by allowing markets to be resurrected in the countryside and allowing international capital investment and joint enterprises between Chinese and international companies was extraordinary. As the new economy flourished and reform deepened, the calls for democracy were once again, after decades of silence, beginning to be heard. The 1980s saw the emergence of a “market fever” (*shichang re*) that gave birth to a “cultural fever” (*wenhua re*). The rise of living standards and the yearning for a “true” modernity rekindled the old yearnings from the radical movements of the 1920s. The slogan of “Democracy and Science” was the perceived solution to Chinese backwardness back then, and it was only logical to see it as the solution to the same problem in the 1980s as well. In literature with novelists like Gu Hua and Can Xue and in film with directors like Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou and Tian Zhuangzhuang, Chinese culture was preoccupied with a project of self-critique which fed desires for political reform. It was only a matter of time before social and political crisis would shake China to its foundations.

Throughout the 20th century, democracy was never a foreign idea to Chinese intellectuals or activists. It is common for conservatives in the West to see the 1989 protests as the outgrowth of the American idea of freedom and democracy penetrating the Chinese walls and infecting its populace. But this is little more than a display of historical ignorance. After the collapse of the

Qing dynasty in 1909, movements for democratic reform and modernization were incessant, consistent and unwavering in their demands for Chinese modernization—democracy and western science were seen as the paths to modernization and students and intellectuals took up the banner of modernization under the auspices of both. Lacking a developed, industrialized economy throughout the first half of the 20th century, students and intellectuals—instead of a mobilized working class or newly emergent bourgeoisie—were the engine behind demonstrations and protests for democratic reform.

It was in 1978-79, after the deep freeze of Maoism began to give way, that the issue of democracy once again became the focus of mass appeal and government reaction. The “Democracy Wall” (*Minzhuqiang*) in Beijing was located in the Xidan section of the city where citizens gathered to read political tracts in the form of posters which advocated a new, open and democratic China. It was there that Wei Jingsheng wrote about China’s need for democracy. For Wei and other activists of the Democracy Wall movement such as Liu Qing, Cai Song and Lü Pu, democracy was a precondition for all other forms of modernization and progress. They paid the price for their ideas and their forceful arguments. Wei was sentenced to 15 years in a “reform through labor” camp and Liu Qing would serve 10 years. They were a mere prelude of what was to come a decade later.

China had struggled throughout the 20th century with feudal traditions and power structures that date back to its Confucian past. A line from Book VII of Confucius’ *Analecets* says: “I transmit but do not innovate; I am truthful in what I say and devoted to antiquity.” It was this burden of history and tradition as well as the conservative bias of Chinese culture that was coming into question in the 1980s with an increased intensity. And it was this type of culture that was easily manipulated by the Communist Party to ensure devotion and to minimize dissent. Democracy and western science were seen as the means to throw off these historical burdens, as it had been in the West throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Translating these needs into the language of politics was only a matter of time. When the Tiananmen protesters came to the square in the spring of 1989, the “cultural fever” of the 1980s had been underway for at least seven years. They were a truly new generation with new ideas; the consequences of the end of their movement and the reforms they sought are only now beginning to be seen, and they require interpretation.

1989 was not only a movement of students and intellectuals, nor did it spring from mimicking the student movements of the West during the 1960s, as many in America have believed. The Tiananmen Square demonstrations incorporated workers who formed unions in the square and demanded labor reforms and slowly began to involve the entire citizenry of the city. In other major cities in China, student and intellectual supporters marched and rallied, as they did in Hong Kong as well, at the time still under British rule. It was a mass movement, a national movement in the classic sense of the term. And as such, in the end, the events that unfolded in the spring of 1989 ought not to be seen as being of consequence only to China and Chinese politics. It is difficult not to equate the political and moral impulse of the students and workers who demonstrated and opposed the Communist state in China during those spring months with the impulse of the revolutionaries of the late 18th century in Europe and America. What the students and workers sought were not simple reforms. They sought the modernization that the Chinese revolution of 1949 had initially promised: to be free from despotic rule and centuries of social and political dependency as well as cultural paternalism and the canons of oppressive tradition. In the face of a liberalizing economy, one which had become more private, generating more wealth, they sought not only to spread reforms to other spheres of society outside of the economy, but to protect their interests as workers and as young intellectuals from the growing capitalistic nature of economy and society.

China, Capitalism, Globalization and Democracy

ALTHOUGH TODAY CHINA HAS CONTINUED ON ITS COURSE of economic reform incorporating more market institutions into its quasi-socialistic economic framework and moving increasingly toward western economic institutions, “liberalization” has come to mean nothing more than economic liberalization—the hope for political reform, democratization and liberalization seems now to be little more than utopian for liberal-minded Chinese intellectuals and their foreign sympathizers. Today, as a world economic power, it is possible that China has less to fear from chants for democracy than ever before—the turn to capitalism may effect certain reforms and transformations, but it looks increasingly clear that a return to the sentiment of the spring of 1989 will not be one of them.

In his now classic study of the development of democracy and dictatorship in the modern world, Barrington Moore wrote, from the vantage point of the

1970s, that “the partial truth emerges that non-democratic and even anti-democratic modernization works.” What we see in China is the evolution of a new kind of relationship between economics, politics and society. It is one that flies in the face of one of the core insights of neo-liberal western social scientists: that the emergence of capitalism and its development will give rise to democracy. The neo-liberal mantra wedding markets, democracy and human freedom could not be more incorrect when considering the case of China whose private sector has grown to eclipse the once predominant public sector.

In the social sciences, the classic argument about the development of democracy was that capitalism was a precondition for democratic development. This view—primarily of American bastions of conservatism such as the Hoover Institution at Stanford and prominent sociologists and political scientists such as Seymour Martin Lipset—gave primacy to markets as the engine for the development of democracy. The argument was simple: as free markets developed and people entered commerce, wealth would be created by a talented entrepreneurial class which would seek democratic political reforms as its wealth grew and its interests in autonomy and an emerging civil society became more concrete. Thus the link between capitalism and democracy has always been strong in American understandings of economic and political development and it was premised on giving primacy to economic liberalization.

China’s path toward economic and social modernization was heralded as going against state ownership of economic enterprises which the Communist Party termed “wild and ultra-leftist socialism.” What the new elite in the 1980s sought was the rapid economic development of the country. The Communist Party saw its interests as being at one with the nation, and they were right about this for a good period of time. People did want their living standards to rise, and rise it has throughout the last two decades, steadily. But what Chinese capitalism has also created is a massively unequal society marked by brutal capitalist exploitation, environmental degradation and little regard for human welfare in individualist terms. China’s capitalism is what capitalism in the West would have become if it were not for radical workers’ movements to curb the excesses of the industrial workplace. Lacking unions or any other kind of political or legal protection, Chinese workers and their families have little prospects for progressive change in their condition.

Even when it operates within a democratic framework, capitalism is an abusive, destructive economic system. Without the checks and steering capacity of some kind of democratic accountability—something that in the West has even been eroding over the past two decades—it is an economic system that can lead to even more horrible results. Liberal capitalism is therefore in stark contrast with Chinese capitalism. Liberalization of the market means that its effects—the generation of inequality, environmental degradation, the lack of regulations of all kinds—go largely, if not completely, unaddressed. In the case where there exists a liberal polity, however, these effects can be contested by social movements to mitigate the market's effects. The lack of a liberal, i.e., democratic, polity means that this mitigation of the effects of the economy by the state cannot take place, and the operation of the market goes unchecked, its effects unaccountable to any sector of the public.

This has also affected Chinese culture, but not in the way that neo-liberal apologists have argued. Instead of economic development leading ineluctably to further calls for democratic reform, there has emerged a massive consumerist culture within China which seems to take after the contemporary United States. What Bin Zhao has called “Confucian capitalism” now mirrors what Daniel Bell referred to as the solution to the “cultural contradictions of capitalism”: consumerism, and on a mass scale, is the new face of capitalism, one untied from its traditional Protestant ethical foundations of thrift and asceticism. When capitalism is fed by raw, superficial consumerism, apathy in the political sphere is almost always a consequence. America and China may be more similar now than they have ever been—certainly more so than in the spring of 1989 when broad forms of democracy were on the mind of so many politically conscious citizens.

Expanding the Legacy of Tiananmen: Prospects for Democracy in a Globalizing World

THE AGE OF DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION IS OVER. The era of democratic reform looks bleaker than ever. Tiananmen Square is the last gasp of the impulse for mass democracy on a national scale. One would be hard-pressed to think of another movement even half of its size in the last 15 years that was a movement for national democracy. It is not that the ideas no longer have appeal, this would be absurd. Rather, the brutal fact remains that so long as the ideas and traditions of democracy are undermined and

successfully countered in the developing world, the less chance that it will have to succeed. Economic imperatives have won out over political principle. What we are witnessing in the context of globalization is the narrowing of the political sphere and the expansion of the economy as the road to modernization. Political instability—so long as it translates into economic instability—will be brutally quashed and it is difficult to see how any movement can compete with the technological and military power of the state as well as the effects of depoliticization that are put in place through educational programs and other ideological apparatuses. In China, this combination has been particularly effective; but even in places such as Iran which has a considerably more robust movement for reform and the political institutions to effect real change, has seen a slow weakening of the effectiveness of its reform-minded approaches.

As an event, the Tiananmen Square movement should be seen as more than a student movement. It was, in every sense of the word, a mass social movement that lost its political focus and, as it veered toward radicalism, also begged its own violent demise. The politics of social movements are all too commonly seen in naïve terms. For any social movement to be effective, as people like Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward have shown, they require regimes that are in some sense sympathetic to the demands of the movement. This was not lacking in China before May 19th, the day that the reformist Zhao Ziyang—China's near-equivalent of Gorbachev and Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party—was deposed and many of his reformist allies along with him. After this, the conservative forces within the Party held sway, and there was no one that the movement could find to continue dialogue.

The demonstrations were more than the collective voice of disaffected students and workers, it was the largest movement for democratic reform and political, economic and cultural change in the post-war period of the 20th century. Even more, in an era where globalization continues to bind more markets to one another in different locations, the Tiananmen movement can also be seen as the last great movement for democracy outside of those places where some form of democracy already exists. The Tiananmen protests and the crackdown therefore need to be placed in a very different historical and political context: the context of global movements for democracy that have taken place since 1989 and the burst of political and social movements and events that occurred at that time. This context tells us a different, much more sober tale. The Tiananmen protests constitute not only the largest mass

movement for democracy in the 20th century, it is also the last mass movement for democracy that has taken place in the last 15 years. The increased power of the state in developing countries and the weakening, or outright lack, of democratic political traditions is at the root of this reality, and the trajectory of globalization seems all too intent on keeping it that way.

It may be commonplace to put blame for the lack of democratic change on the nature of the state, locating it as the source of all problems. But this quickly fizzles into libertarian fantasy. Franz Oppenheimer's phrase about the state from the dawn of the 20th century that "a small minority has stolen the heritage of humanity" is no longer a sufficient explanation for the lack of democratic reform in the political sphere in the context of globalization. What we are witnessing is the dawn of a new form of political economy in China—one that will serve as an ideal type for many other developing nations under the auspices of globalization. This is a kind of political economy that stresses the liberalization of markets even as it restrains democratic reforms within the state and its laws. It is one that puts primacy on economic development and growth and does not seek the same kind of development and openness of the state and society. The idea that capitalism and democracy are not only mutually inclusive but also two sides of the same historical coin is nothing more than apologia for capitalism itself and the hegemonic worldview of American liberal capitalism. But even in America, liberalism and capitalism are not wedded in some form of chemical affinity; rather, American society is the result of a liberal-capitalist *consensus*—one that has been erected between what historically has been two separate social aspirations: the first capitalistic which is the pursuit of profits and the other of workers and other members of a pluralist society that have sought individual freedom and social justice.

It is no longer enough to say that the crackdown and the subsequent efforts to quell dissent in China are the reasons for the subsequent political quiescence. Certainly the state's power has always been instrumental in crushing political change, but the reality is, I think, much deeper, in China and elsewhere: the rapid spread of capitalism has not led to a similarly rapid spread of democracy because capitalism and democracy—real democracy—really do not mix well. Rapid economic development and growth requires—as the political economist Rudolf Hilferding observed—an increased exploitation of labor and the environment; social dissent is therefore an obstruction to the dream of modernization, tolerance for unrest will therefore rarely be prolonged. But what of the predominant theories of neo-liberalism?

An emergent middle class has developed in places like China, and it is robust to say the least. But calls for democratic reform have been lacking from this class as a result of an increase in political apathy that has been made palatable by a new consumerism and an increasingly powerful state. The prospects for democracy are perhaps worse now in China than ever before in the 20th century.

Democracy is more than a framework for political institutions. It consists of more than elections and a system of checks and balances. Democracy is a mindset that requires a cultural component as well. Democratic impulses move people to solidarity, make movements that push for reform more rational and, ultimately, more successful. But the new dynamic of globalization should be seen for what it really is, and hyper-optimistic predictions about the future of democracy ought to be tempered by reality. The increasing power of economy over society—and the ability for the economy to play into a consumerist and politically apathetic populace—can only weaken chants for democracy, even by the most disadvantaged. In Europe, the Middle Ages went on for centuries with peasant revolts from below, but real change was not possible without a broader solidarity of different social strata.

We may very well be witnessing the victory of a capitalist form of globalization at the expense of robust democratic change. Indeed, the authoritarianism of modern Russia and China do not elicit the anxiety and fear in the West that their Soviet and Maoist manifestations once did; but at best, they are only marginally more democratic than those regimes. If Marx was right that men make history, but never under the conditions of their own choosing, then the conditions of the present need to be clearly demarcated. The context of global capitalism—one that is premised at the expense of democratic ideas—may be paving the path toward the very death of the political itself with its emphasis on market processes and the primacy of the interests of capital. In such an inverted world, the prospects for democracy depend not only on the infusion of democratic ideas, but also of an opposition to the effects of capitalism and the illusion that capitalist development is somehow equivalent to human development itself.

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