China in Revolt

Gordon G. Chang

THIRTY YEARS ago this past September, Mao Zedong, hero to the Chinese nation, died in the Communist-party compound in the center of Beijing. During his tumultuous life he played many roles, but today the Chinese people are asked to remember him as a patriotic poet. Of all the memorable lines he left behind, they recall the one he used just before proclaiming the founding of the People's Republic on October 1, 1949: "We the 475 million Chinese people have now stood up, and the future of our nation is infinitely bright."

Because Mao, the Great Helmsman, is now a symbol of national assertion, the Chinese people are not officially permitted to remember that he essentially enslaved them. China's Communist party has also forgiven him for some of the greatest crimes of the 20th century—crimes that led to the deaths of anywhere between 30 and 70 million people, virtually all of them Chinese.

Most of those deaths resulted from Mao's attempts to remake Chinese society as he saw fit. After coming to power, he embraced the concept of "permanent revolution," which soon evolved into "continuous revolution." Beginning in 1957, he launched in quick succession the Hundred Flowers movement, the Anti-Rightist upheaval, the Great Leap Forward, and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which ended shortly after his death in 1976.

Since then, Mao's heirs have institutionalized themselves and transformed his revolutionary party into a ruling regime. Although, in theory, authoritarian systems are inherently fragile and eventually fall apart, the People's Republic of China is now widely considered to be both resilient and durable. In the view of leading China specialists like Andrew Nathan, new mechanisms of governance developed by the Communist party since 1989 have given Chinese leaders the means to ensure the continuance of their rule despite rising popular discontent. Beijing's autocrats themselves go so far as to credit these new institutions for creating some of the fastest economic growth in history.

This development has certainly given rise to profound geopolitical consequences. Asia's small states now defer to the rulers in Beijing. Russia and India are learning to accommodate them. The United States hopes they will use their strength wisely. Although the 21st century has barely begun, many analysts have already decreed that it belongs to China, which the military historian Eliot Cohen has dubbed "the most important power in the world."

China, the nation, will always be with us. But is the modern Chinese state, the Communist regime anchored in Beijing, similarly permanent? In fact,

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it is bedeviled today by a raft of problems: corrupt institutions, debt-ridden regional governments, a degraded environment, insolvent state banks, unprofitable enterprises, bankrupt pension funds, failed schools, and overburdened hospitals, just to name the most prominent. But the most serious challenge to the one-party regime is the Chinese people, who, almost independently of their government, are taking hold of their future. They also represent the greatest hope for the Chinese nation.

The assertiveness of the Chinese people is manifesting itself mostly out of sight of Westerners, but its one plainly visible form is protest in the streets. Once Mao consolidated his power over China, the People's Republic became largely free of popular demonstrations, at least against the party or the state. Scattered worker and peasant protests, such as the wave of labor riots in Shanghai in 1957, were of no lasting significance. So strong was Mao's grip that there were virtually no disturbances even during the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950's and early 60's, when his industrial and agricultural policies led to the deaths of tens of millions. Nor were there anti-state protests of consequence in the later 60's or the 70's.

After Mao's death, however, and especially in the second half of the 1980's, the Chinese people began to express discontent at almost every opportunity. In April 1985, hundreds traveled to Beijing without permission; there they staged a sit-in outside party headquarters to protest their continued exile dating to the start of the Cultural Revolution. In the subsequent months and years, demonstrations—many of them directed against party rule—spread throughout the country. By January 1987 students were rallying in Tiananmen Square, the symbolic center of China.

Deng Xiaoping, the country's paramount leader at the time, declined to respond to this general mood of discontent, itself fueled largely by economic dislocation. Fortunately for him and the other veteran cadres, the Chinese people were not ready to demand revolutionary change. During the exhilarating days of the Beijing Spring in 1989, more than a million students, workers, and their allies would congregate in Tiananmen Square—but they came there to talk to their leaders, not to remove them. For me, the most powerfully suggestive image of the time was not of the euphoric crowds in Tiananmen Square, or the lone man in front of the tanks, but the three motionless students kneeling on the steps of the Great Hall of the People. This solitary trio had come to supplicate their leaders, who refused to see them.

This would be one of the last such moments. Six weeks later, Deng decided to use force to put down the protests. Beijing's residents, armed with rocks and little else, fought back against the well-equipped soldiers of the People's Liberation Army. By the time the tanks had pushed their way to the students gathered in Tiananmen Square, both soldiers and citizens had already died. The conflict was not inevitable—many senior party leaders and generals had urged conciliation—but Deng saw the need to reassert convincingly the supremacy of the party.

As Deng correctly calculated, shedding the blood of hundreds had the effect of intimidating hundreds of millions. There were few disturbances in the years immediately following Tiananmen. But the event irrevocably changed the People's Republic. By the end of the 1990's, Chinese society was turbulent once more as individual protests, both in the countryside and the city, began attracting tens of thousands of participants. In early 2002, two of them—one by oil workers in Daqing in the northeast and the other by factory hands in nearby Liaoyang—may have reached the 100,000 mark. In late 2004, in China's southwest, about 100,000 peasants protested the seizure without compensation of land to build a hydroelectric plant in Sichuan province.

Protests have not only become bigger in size; they are now more numerous. In 1994, there were 10,000 such "mass incidents"; by 2003 there were 58,000; in 2004 and 2005 there were 74,000 and 87,000 respectively. This is according to official statistics, which undoubtedly undercount. According to the legal activist Jerome Cohen, a truer figure for the last year may be 150,000.

Virtually every segment in society (except, of course, senior Communist leaders and wealthy entrepreneurs) is participating in these public demonstrations. Almost anything, whether or not it is a genuine grievance, can trigger a sit-in, demonstration, or riot against party officials, village bosses, tax collectors, factory owners, or township cadres. Yet most observers still do not attach real significance to these protests—no doubt because, apart from a general desire for fair treatment, no common complaint or cause appears to bind them together.

"China is facing enormous problems," notes the scholar Steven Jackson, but "this characterization has been true for the past 150 years." David Shambaugh writes similarly of China's "curiously am-

bivalent state of 'stable unrest.'" Because demonstrators have yet to link up across the country, and do not clearly exhibit the signs of a truly destabilizing movement—generalized anger, solidarity among the aggrieved, an ability to resist official action, strong leadership, a broad coalition, and the like—China's citizens are still not seen as posing any particular danger to the People's Republic.

What we see today may indeed be nothing new: kings and emperors have suppressed countless protests over the millennia of Chinese history. Nonetheless, from time to time, the common folk—the *laobaixing*—have also changed their rulers by means of violence. More importantly, in the last century they have staged two tumultuous revolutions in quick succession—Sun Yat-sen's in 1911 and Mao's less than forty years later.

Every society changes from one day to the next. But the economic and social transformation in China, especially since the beginning of the reform era in December 1978, has been particularly startling. Mao regimented the Chinese people, oppressed them, clothed them in totalitarian garb, and denied them their individuality. Today, they may not be free, but they are assertive, dynamic, and sassy. A mall-shopping, Internet-connected, trend-crazy people, they are remaking their country at breakneck speed. Deprived for decades, they do not only want more, they want everything.

Change of this sort is inherently destabilizing, especially in a one-party state. Social unrest, writes Samuel Huntington, becomes especially dangerous when political institutions fail to keep up with the forces unleashed by economic change. That is the dilemma of the Chinese Communist party, which, even as it has sponsored uninterrupted economic progress, has itself changed remarkably little from Mao's days, and still stands in the way of meaningful political reformation.

As Tocqueville observed, "steadily increasing prosperity" does not tranquilize citizens; on the contrary, it promotes "a spirit of unrest." In prerevolutionary France, discontent was highest in those areas that had seen the greatest improvement; the Revolution itself followed a period of unprecedented economic advance. In the late 20th century, the same trends played out in Thailand, in South Korea, and in Taiwan.

In China today, it is middle-class citizens, the beneficiaries of a quarter-century of economic reform, who are once again confirming the pattern. In Shanghai, homeowners recently fought a state-owned developer who had reneged on his agreement to keep an area of open land in the middle of a multi-building project; one group of residents tore down a fence to stop construction, and when the developer put up another, an even larger group demolished it. In Dongzhou in prosperous Guangdong province, riot police ended up killing perhaps as many as twenty people who were protesting the government's arbitrary seizure of their land for a power project and denying them the use of a nearby lake.

This is not like Tiananmen. In 1989, Chinese protesters were peaceful until attacked. Those in Dongzhou, however, used pipe bombs as an *initial* tactic, to break up police formations. In present-day China, the well-to-do act like hooligans, and will even resort to deadly force, if that is what it takes to defend their rights.

Deng Xiaoping's strategy after Tiananmen was to buy off the people by means of economic growth. It was successful, but only for a decade. Change begat the demand for more change. Grievances that were once tolerable began to appear intolerable when people realized they could be remedied. Since the end of the 1990's, the *laobaixing* are no longer, to borrow one of Mao's favorite phrases, "poor and blank."

Paradoxically, it was Mao himself, the great enslaver, who in his own way taught the Chinese people to think and act for themselves. In the Cultural Revolution, he urged tens of millions of radical youths, who were then forming themselves into roving bands known as Red Guards, to go to every corner of the country to tear down ancient temples, destroy cultural relics, and denounce their elders, including not only mothers and fathers but also government officials and Communist-party members. The young radicals seized these "reactionary elements" and paraded them in the streets, barred local officials from their desks, tortured and killed millions. Urban residents were "sent down" to work in the countryside. In some places, Red Guard factions fought pitched battles with one another.

The Cultural Revolution may have been Mao's idea of ruining his enemies, but it became a frenzy that destroyed the fabric of society. As government broke down, its functions taken over by revolutionary committees and "people's communes," the strict restraints and repressive mechanisms of the state dissolved. People no longer had to wait for someone to instruct them what to do—Mao had told them they had "the right to rebel." For the radical young, this was a time of essentially unre-

strained passion. In one magnificent stroke, the Great Helmsman had delegitimized almost all forms of authority.

The latter years of this wildly abnormal period were marked by a gradual return to lockstep Maoism, even though Mao himself was not always in control. His successor, Hua Guofeng, reasserted the primacy of state and party. But this proved to be more apparent than real, as would emerge soon after Deng Xiaoping pushed Hua aside in December 1978.

We now know Deng as a reformer, and we credit him and the Communist party for debating, then planning, and finally executing the startling transformation of Chinese society. Yet the truth is that reform progressed more by disobedience than by design. Deng began his tenure in adherence to orthodox Communist economics, by trying to implement a ten-year plan. But his early failure to meet the plan's goals forced him to back away and permit individual initiative, at first under strict rules. Peasants on large collective farms, for example, were allowed to form "work groups" to tend designated plots, but it was specifically prohibited for just one family to make up a "work group." The prohibition did not last: in clear violation of central rules, families started to till their own plots, and local officials looked the other way.

Subterfuge on the farm was followed by subterfuge in towns and cities. Although private industry was strictly forbidden, entrepreneurs flourished by running their businesses as "red hat" collectives: private companies operating under the guise of state ownership. Such defiance would once have been unthinkable. By Deng's time, frustrated bureaucrats and countless individuals, including some of the poorest and most desperate citizens in China, were ready to take the next step—ignoring central-government decrees and building large private businesses that now account for at least 40 percent of the Chinese economy. This became China's "economic miracle," brought to fruition even as government officials remained holed up in their offices in Beijing, preparing meticulously detailed five-year plans.

Today, China's mighty rulers are still struggling to come to grips with the demands and the passions of those they rule. In the fall and winter of 2002, Beijing tried to cover up an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) before it became too late to stop its spread around the world. By spring 2003, President Hu Jintao had to reverse course after Chinese doctors and nurses, at considerable personal risk, talked to the foreign media and the World Health Organization, and 10 percent of Beijing's population, roughly a million people, simply took to the roads. "The previous model of social governance by an all-powerful government is already hard put to cover a society which is flowing at high speed," a Chinese newspaper editorialized during the crisis.

It would be difficult to underestimate the role played by wireless communications and the Internet in this phenomenon. Societies change—or reach a "tipping point," to use the contemporary term—when enough people begin to think simultaneously in a new way. These days, Chinese thoughts and emotions travel through optical fiber at the speed of light—there are 123 million "netizens" in China, and 34 million of them are bloggers—and the Chinese are holding nationwide conversations for the first time in their history. Ideas—like, for instance, the idea of representative government—start out small and spread rapidly via countless chatrooms and online forums.

"Ignore government propaganda and live freely," wrote Liu Di, a college student better known online as the "stainless steel mouse." The state detained her in 2002, but thousands signed online petitions in her behalf and one man even called a press conference to campaign for her release. Beijing, fearing the consequences of a trial, eventually let the frail Liu Di go. The mouse had roared, and the all-powerful state retreated—a dangerous precedent for a government that relies on fear, and on citizen self-restraint, to maintain control.

It is true that, so far, China has been more successful than any other country in regulating its Internet community; but this is a battle in which it will never be able to claim final victory. "One site has been shut down 30 times," notes Liu Xiaobo, a dissident who has been jailed on various occasions, "but after a month or two they open up again. You can't shut them down completely." Political dissent, online and over the phones, not only gives impetus to new ideas but also supplies fuel to acts of dissidence. Mao built the People's Republic on the concept of isolation—separating China from the rest of the world and the Chinese people from one another. Three decades after his death, technology has put them back in touch. In China, a cell-phone subscriber—and no country in the world has more of them—can send a text message that may be read by 100 million citizens within an hour, and acted upon by tens of thousands.

Today, the regime survives because no single cause has united the Chinese people and impelled

them to march en masse to Tiananmen Square. The government, moreover, still has the ability to fend off unorganized challengers and isolated protesters. Already the leadership is busy chasing down secret societies, political parties, and private armies dedicated to bringing down the Communist party. In late 2002, *Open Magazine*, a Chinese-language publication in Hong Kong, reported that the Ministry of State Security believed there were more than 60 such revolutionary organizations in existence; today there could be over 100. For every one that is uncovered and destroyed, at least another is ready to take its place.

The risk for the regime is that one of these groups will launch a genuine insurrection—some mass incidents have already risen to that level—that will merge with unrelated protests as if by spontaneous combustion to become a nationwide rebellion. As Mao memorably noted, "A single spark can start a prairie fire."

How else has the regime tried to cope with the restiveness it has unleashed? One way has been to permit limited participation in the political system, thereby simultaneously deflecting anger away from it and strengthening its otherwise failing legitimacy. For instance, Beijing has sponsored village elections, institutionalized a means of petitioning officials, and authorized judicial challenges of local government action.

By doing so, however, the party has not so much turned anger aside as it has stirred the demand for still more change. Even some local officials, acting on their own, now promote further political liberalization, as by conducting unauthorized elections in defiance of edicts handed down from the capital. Efforts to buy off peasants and workers with targeted economic benefits have likewise failed to stop or even slow the tide of unrest.

Beijing's autocrats have fallen back on another tactic as well, and one that entails real danger. The country's two most recent leaders, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, have attempted to channel the increasing agitation of Chinese society by whipping up extreme nationalist feelings, directed particularly at the Japanese. With almost daily rants against Tokyo in the party's media, the regime has indeed succeeded in making Japan a public issue. But, though this could not have been its intention, it has also given the Chinese people a volatile role in shaping Beijing's foreign posture, if not its foreign policy.

Last year, 44 million Chinese signed an Internet petition to stop Tokyo from securing a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. In April, violent nationwide protests, triggered partly by new Japanese textbooks allegedly whitewashing Japan's aggressive history, were organized largely by e-mail, text and instant messages, and Internet bulletin boards. "Net bugs" planned boat trips to raise the Chinese flag on the Diaoyu Islands, claimed by Beijing but under the control of Tokyo for more than three decades (the Japanese call them the Senkakus).

A few anti-Japan activists, such as Lu Yunfei, have built nationwide followings online. Beijing sometimes censors and restrains these voices, as when it quietly closed down Lu's website for opposing the purchase of Japanese high-speed trains. But, just as often, central leaders give in to the strident fringe. They are indeed in something of a bind. Having defined Chinese identity as anti-Japanese, they have made it politically unacceptable to settle for anything short of Tokyo's complete humiliation.

All this is putting at risk the stability of Asia and of the international system as a whole. As the Japanese observe Beijing's menacing behavior and read the rabid sentiments in China's chatrooms, many of them are beginning to think that, in the words of one leading Japanese analyst, "China is a threat because it is China." This view is off the mark—China is dangerous not because it is China but because it is Communist—but it is also understandable. And it has implications for relations between China and the United States as well.

Because of the formal military ties between Tokyo and Washington, any conflict between China and Japan will risk entangling Washington. More important, the nationalism so recklessly stirred up by the Chinese leadership for purposes of self-preservation has spilled over into other channels, including anti-Americanism. Recent incidents include the mass protests against America's accidental bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and the enraged public outcry after the April 2001 collision of a Chinese fighter jet with an American reconnaissance plane off Hainan Island. In both cases, Beijing was held captive by public hysteria for days until it could come to an understanding with Washington, in the latter case only by demanding and receiving an American apology that should never have been given.

As Premier Wen Jiabao acknowledged this past September, "We need peace, we need friends, and we need time." Unfortunately, at the very moment when the Chinese state depends critically on the good will of others around the globe—espe-

cially in the form of foreign markets, capital, and expertise—it has lost the confidence of its own most responsible citizens and placed itself at the mercy of some of its least responsible. The intensified internal repression of the last four years is a sign that the Communist party must increasingly rely on force to maintain its power, thus creating even more internal enemies and further delegitimizing itself in the process.

Leaving China a half-decade ago, an American banker remarked: "There's a billion people here who don't like following instructions." If anything, Chinese society since then has become even more willful. It may not always be defiant, but it is frequently disobedient. For better and also for worse, we have entered a period marked by the emergence of a great people from millennia of autocratic rule. For better—because a nation that can barely govern itself will not be capable of dominating the other 200 countries on the planet. For worse—because so turbulent and fretful a society is unlikely to rise peacefully, or to accept its role as a great power in orderly fashion. Thirty years after the death of Mao, the Chinese people have unfinished business to conduct, and their transition into the future is unlikely to be smooth.