

SELLOUT BY CHINA'S INTELLECTUAL ELITE

BY LIU BINYAN

One of China's leading thinkers places the failure of the 1989 Democracy Movement and subsequent political stagnation at the feet of the country's top intellectuals.

The reason why we need to think especially carefully about the 1989 Tiananmen Movement is not just that it was the first large-scale democracy movement since 1949, but that it was also the first that had any real chance of success. Let me state this more bluntly: it did not need to fail. The massacre could have been avoided. A number of long-term trends make it clear why this is so.

First, by 1989 the Chinese people had changed considerably since the Mao Zedong era. Mao, using methods drawn from his own genius—methods even more effective than Stalin's—succeeded in domesticating the Chinese people. Their consequent docility lowered their resistance as Mao led them ever more brazenly into disastrous blind alleys. Finally, in the midst of Mao's 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, a portion of the populace began to wake up. By April 5, 1976, resistance had grown to a point where millions of protesters (when Mao was still alive!) headed for Tiananmen Square to denounce the Cultural Revolution. Shortly thereafter, in 1978-79, came the Democracy Wall movement. The participants in these two movements—April Fifth and Democracy Wall—were not primarily intellectuals. They were young workers and farmers from the lower ranks of society, and only modestly educated. Here we see a key difference between China's resistance movements and those of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where intellectuals led the way. In China the breakthroughs came from the lower classes. In 1989 those classes were ready to keep on marching.

Second, the rank and file of the Communist Party had also changed. The Party's two original pillars of strength—its almost religious unity of thought and its ironclad organizational control—both crumbled during the Cultural Revolution. Many of Mao's disciples had their faith shattered. This is why, when "reform" was broached, resistance to it was weak (certainly weaker, by comparison, than in the Soviet Union). During the 1980s, conservatives in the Chinese leadership, aiming to revert toward Maoism, launched several campaigns

against "liberalism"—but were never completely successful. With each attempt, in fact, the liberals somehow ended up stronger than they had been before. The last time this happened was after 1987, the year Hu Yaobang was stripped of power. The man who replaced him, Zhao Ziyang, turned out to be just as determined a reformer as Hu. Reform under Zhao not only continued but accelerated. All this shows that a powerful momentum for reform had been building in China both inside and outside the Party. When the 1989 Tiananmen movement arrived, Deng Xiaoping labeled it "counterrevolutionary turmoil" almost from the start—and yet 70 percent or more of Party, government and military officials in Beijing supported the movement. Some even joined the students in the streets.

Third, even the top leader of the Party, Deng Xiaoping—although he wavered between the conservatives and the reformers throughout the 1980s—never gave in to the conservatives' demands for retrogression. Only this fact can explain how the unprecedented press freedom of 1988 and early 1989 could have arrived despite all of the previous campaigns against "bourgeois liberalism." In April 1989 Deng once again imbibed a bit of libel from the conservatives and labeled the students' activity "turmoil." But close examination of the ensuing days shows that Deng was still prepared to make certain concessions to the students and to allow democratization to move forward. For example, Deng allowed the students to continue occupying the Square; and after the students adopted the spectacular tactic of a hunger strike, Deng actually allowed the Chinese media an unprecedented freedom in reporting. This could have become a huge breakthrough. It contradicted the Maoist tradition of absolute suppression of any information that runs counter to the Party's interests.

But then why—if momentum at all three of these levels was moving toward reform—did the Tiananmen movement fail? And why did it fail so utterly, leaving scarcely anything to show after ten years of hard-won gains?

Today, fifteen years after the Tiananmen tragedy and twenty-five years after the beginning of reform, a clear pattern has emerged: during the 1980s China's most elite intellectuals were interested in reform primarily as a way to recoup their own social status, material comfort and creative freedom. They were not very interested in moving the larger society forward. In the fifteen years since Tiananmen, they have formed an

alliance with the regime and have succeeded in rising into the privileged classes, where they solidly support the status quo.

After 1978, China's writers, especially fiction writers, were the intellectuals who were given the most freedom and the best opportunity to influence society. But in the ten years prior to the Tiananmen movement, a few of China's most famous fiction writers led young Chinese writers down the road of modernist escape fiction. One of these senior figures, sometimes called "China's most clever writer," was even clever enough to become a minister in the central government, where he wrote fiction that indirectly supported the Communist Party while at the same time enjoying the panache of "dissident writer" in his reputation both inside and outside of China!

During 1979–1989, as freedom in intellectual pursuits gradually expanded, writers were increasingly able to pursue wealth and fame. Many rushed toward these rewards, relegating questions of social justice, especially for society's downtrodden, to the backs of their minds. They did not do the spadework for society that responsible writers could have done. It is hardly strange, therefore, that during the winter and spring of 1989 the most active of China's political intellectuals arrived at the outskirts of Tiananmen Square largely unaware of, and utterly unprepared for, the great tide of protest that was on the rise. In such an unprepared state, it was too much to expect that they could offer the students either an adequate grasp of China's societal issues or appropriate tactics of struggle.

Hence it transpired that the heavy burden of managing this

great test of the nation's fate fell entirely upon the shoulders of students around twenty years old. These youngsters had nothing much to go on except a few phrases about democracy that they had learned from the West. They were almost completely lacking in political experience and skill, and yet there they were—appearing time and again before the television cameras of the world—brimming with their youthful confidence. How could they possibly not have lost out to the pack of wily old scoundrels whom they were up against?

In June 1989, few people expected that this regime could hang on much longer. Part of the "credit" for its unexpected longevity must go to an intellectual elite who decided to offer support in exchange for personal privilege. It is worth remembering that among the social groups that the regime has bought off during the last fifteen years (including, notably, the bureaucratic class and the new moneyed classes), the intellectual elites have seen by far the biggest improvement. Not only have their material living standards risen sharply; their social status, which not long ago was at a nadir, has rocketed skyward; and the expanding freedom within which they pursue their creative work (a life-or-death matter in this kind of work) is another special bonus. Given all of this, how could the intellectual elite not be smitten with gratitude for this regime, and ready to serve it like loyal pups?

Translated by Perry Link



Protesters in May, 1989—doomed to fail? Photo: Reuters