

THE RISE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN CHINA

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Social movements are flourishing in China to fill the moral vacuum left by officialdom, Liu Xiaobo observes in this analysis of China's new class of "people's heroes." But Liu warns that civic associations alone will not provide an adequate vent for public frustrations if political suppression and economic disparity continue unchecked.¹

The fall of official influence and the rise of populism

Although the bloodshed of June 4, 1989 is long past, the incident has left an enduring legacy of public consciousness and a disillusionment with Communist Party values in the hearts of the people – including most officials.

While the Communist Party continues to monopolize public power and media, and to maintain its dictatorial position and political stability through suppression and ideological inculcation, the authorities have suffered a severe loss of prestige and credibility and can no longer hope for complete control of civil society in the long term. The top-down official policy of reform and openness is actually the result of pressure from the people below, and once the people become aware of their power, they will become harder and more costly to control.

In the reform era, as personal interest has become the greatest source of motivation for the masses, the concepts of "public" and "national" have surrendered much of their status to the concepts of "popular" and "personal." Public justice and morality has deteriorated as personal advantage has overtaken moral obligations as the chief preoccupation of the bureaucracy. The trend in recent years of graduates rushing to joining the Party for the reasons of personal advantage rather than to serve the people and the nation has resulted in a slide into systemic corruption and abuse of power. Official policies facilitating personal advantage have helped the Communist Party co-opt the social elite, but have simultaneously led to a siphoning off of public resources and increasing dissatisfaction among the lower classes, both of which have contributed to a decline in effective rule by the Party.

This debasement of official values has also resulted in a loss of respect for authority among members of the public, as

reflected in the increasing popularity of political jokes with sexual connotations. Popular satire is now applied to every department and all levels of government. Official efforts to instill patriotism after June 4th have brought about increased nationalism among China's citizens, but only insofar as national interests coincide with personal interests. If given a choice between personal and national interests, the average citizen will certainly give precedence to personal interests.

The debased status of the public sector has been accompanied by a rise in prestige for people or organizations with populist tendencies. For example, international media and private news sources are treated with much greater regard and credibility than official media. Although the Chinese Communist regime does not allow private media sources, private capital and people from outside the system have become heavily involved in the broadcasting industry, even under the banner of the state-run media. All of the state-run media have begun to give their news coverage a popular slant; if this results in censure, they fall into line only as long as it takes for the storm to blow over. In particular, Guangdong's top three newspapers, *South China Weekend*, *21st Century Economics Journal* and *21st Century Universal Journal*, and the bimonthly *Southern Exposure*, along with publications from other cities and provinces such as *Economic Observer* and *China Youth Journal*, all are diligently developing their popular appeal. Even the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, CCTV, presents programs and segments with a popular bent, such as "Eastern Leisure," "Frankly Speaking," "Reading Time," and "Half the Sky," and employs slogans such as "Caring about the problems of the people," and "Telling the people's stories."

Apart from reflecting changes in societal values and the professionalization of broadcasters and reporters, popular "color" is a crucial means of survival in the newly competitive media environment. The *People's Daily* and other party organs have resorted to the Party's administrative power to slow a relentless drop in subscribers.² The top Guangdong papers, by contrast, spurn official assistance and apply capitalist methods of marketing. The trends in reader subscriptions show clearly the people's appreciation for popular media and their loathing for Party mouthpieces. Even a senior Party official, Li Changchun, was reported during his stint as Guangdong's Party Secretary to have said, "Apart from *South China Weekend*, I only read Hong Kong newspapers."³

Another example of popular values overriding official values is the emergence of “people’s champions.” Such individuals began appearing as early as the 1970s and 1980s with the “May 4th heroes,” “Democracy Wall heroes” such as Wei Jingsheng and Xu Wenli, and “Intellectual heroes” such as Fang Lizhi, Liu Binyan and Wang Ruowang. June 4th produced its own round of heroes, such as Wang Weilin, who stepped in front of a tank, Professor Ding Jilin in her fight for human rights, Wang Dan among the student leaders, and “black hands” such as Wang Juntao and Chen Zhiming. Former top officials such as Zhao Zhiyang and Bao Tong became important moral beacons after being expelled from official favor, and old party members such as Li Shenzhi, Li Rui, Hu Jiwei and Xu Liangying have become increasingly important and daring spokespersons for the interests of ordinary people. Although these populist heroes are not recognized in the official values system, the values they represent have been greeted with solidarity and sympathy by many within China and by the international mainstream. While unable to spread their messages through the state-controlled media, such dissidents have attracted much attention outside of China, and through the growing popularity of the Internet they are becoming more widely known to their countrymen.

While the Chinese government’s policies of “Dilute the June 4th Movement” and “Political Cooling” have contributed to a reformist retreat, the silent majority continues to nurture values and notions quite different from the official mainstream. Unless the regime can reclaim its moral authority through a transformation consistent with the preferences of the masses, its downfall is inevitable. Russian scholars’ analysis of the crumbling of the Soviet Union provides just such an example. They find that American pressure from the outside was of less importance than the corruption and decay of morale that destabilized the Soviet empire from within.

Since the mid-1990’s, the Chinese government’s ideological legitimacy has weakened precipitously as ubiquitous corruption, economic stratification and brutal repression of independent thought has caused a radical deterioration of the circumstances of the disadvantaged majority and a corresponding popular dissatisfaction with the ruling cadre of Party officials. Because the masses lack any legal outlet to express their reasonable demands regarding rights and corruption, and receive no direct response from the authorities, they have increasingly resorted to demonstrations and protests. This has given rise to a new breed of dissidents and “people’s champions” bearing the labels of “Peasants’ heroes,” “Leaders of industry,” “Anti-corruption heroes,” and “Martyrs of faith.” They are not a product of political opposition movements, but rather of the people’s struggle to protect their own rights, and as such they have deep grassroots support. Although the Party’s censorship and repression have contained the influence of such heroes within limited geographical areas and populations, they have become important arbiters of morality and legitimacy. As the personal rights movement gains momentum, ultimately the scattered popular forces will coalesce into independent organizations, and local heroes will unite to face down the morally bankrupt agents of tyranny.

Some “people’s champions,” in particular commentators in the economic field, have been given more credit among over-

seas scholars than their actual benefit to the people justifies. A few, however, have moved beyond theory to become the conscience of their profession. For example, Wu Jinglian, a member of an official think tank, has gained the reputation of a “people’s champion” because of his concern for the rights of ordinary investors in the stock market. Others such as Yang Xiaokai and Zhou Qiren have gained popular plaudits for rejecting the numbers game and expressing deep concern over the rights of peasants and systemic flaws. There is also Liu Junning, who was expelled from an official sociological institute because of his strong advocacy of constitutional democracy, Qin Hui, who was subjected to heavy criticism at Tsinghua University because of his outstanding comments on social justice, and Li Changping, who lost his official position as a result of his advocacy on behalf of peasants.

In the legal community, lawyers such as Zhang Sizhi and Mo Shaoping have been honored as “champions of Chinese law” for their willingness to take on the defense of controversial political dissidents such as myself, Bao Tong, Wang Juntao, Gao Yu, Wei Jingsheng, Liu Nianchun, Fang Jue, Xu Wenli, Jiang Qisheng, members of the New Youth Study Group and Liaoning Labor Union leader Yao Fuxin. They have been placed under surveillance, arrested, reprimanded and otherwise molested for their trouble. Chongqing lawyer Zhou Litai built a practice in Shenzhen specializing in legal services for workers, handling 1,019 cases of ordinary people suing officials and more than 600 workers’ compensation suits. As a reward for the efforts of this “workers’ lawyer” on behalf of the disadvantaged, his Shenzhen office was shut down by Shenzhen’s Longgang District Court.

In discussing the rise of populism, it is impossible to ignore the recent trend of privatization of public power and public property, which has exacerbated the shift in public sentiment from public welfare to personal advantage. Unlike privatization among the general populace, which involves profiting from one’s own efforts, China’s privatization of public power and resources is a form of immoral and unjust profit and gain based on elite monopolies rather than fair and free competition. As a result, it inspires feelings among the disadvantaged not only of unfairness, but also of bitterness, and ultimately gives rise not only to corruption, but also to revenge.

The social divisions between the advantaged and disadvantaged in China in terms of power, opportunity, income, social security, access to resources and modern standards of living are now so great that it is almost a matter of “winner takes all.” In the 13 years since June 4th, the perceived dichotomy of “morality residing in the civil sector and power lying with the bureaucracy” has become so widely accepted that the authorities have been forced to take corrective measures such as the “Three Represents” policy. Ultimately, however, maintaining social stability depends on brutality, lies and bribery, with no pretence of morality. The byproduct of a thoroughly discredited system and bureaucracy is a society dominated by artifice in every sphere.

The development of non-governmental organizations

The social division between a “moral civil sector and a powerful bureaucracy” has given rise to two unstoppable forces that in

turn have spurred the development of non-governmental organizations. The social stratification resulting from redistribution of wealth, and the proliferation of value systems stemming from the new ideological openness and its transformations, have become the major forces driving the diversification of society in terms of interests, lifestyles and values. Especially in the non-governmental sector, social diversification, the development of civil society and the extension of personal boundaries have already become irreversible trends. Serious conflict between a diversifying social structure and the homogenizing tendencies of a rigid governmental system is becoming unavoidable at the same time that increasing popular discontent, coupled with a lack of officially sanctioned outlets, are giving rise to civil movements outside of this system.

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The Communist Party's persecution of political dissidents has led to political protest movements; its long-term blindness to the swelling ranks of the impoverished and disadvantaged has created industrial workers' and peasants' movements; its tolerance and even protection of official corruption has led to the anti-corruption movement; its suppression of systems of belief has generated religious movements; its refusal to grant freedom of assembly has fostered the emergence of secret non-governmental organizations that operate outside of the system. Unable to satisfy popular calls for social justice or incorporate opposing voices, this regime will one day find itself facing the complete loss of its systemic authority and the utter failure of its repressive power. That will be the moment when civil society, long excluded and suppressed by the regime, will explode forth.

The development of unauthorized civil organizations in spite of tight control and strict suppression by the Party is striking evidence of the gradual maturation of Chinese society. As long as the present system remains incapable of answering the people's demand for justice and providing expression of their legitimate needs, illicit social movements and civil organizations will continue to expand inexorably, flexibly and in secret. The main types include the following:

1. Religious and quasi-religious organizations

Qigong associations and religious house churches are the two types of social organizations that grew the fastest in the 1990's. The former rely largely on the resources of homegrown religious and quasi-religious organizations, while the latter draw resources from the West. Although Falungong, Zhong Gong and underground Christian churches (both Protestant and Catholic) all come under varying degrees of pressure from the government, religious faith cannot be destroyed by strong-arm repression — as the saying goes, "Three soldiers can seize a general, but an entire army cannot overthrow a human will." Since the June 4th incident, as official ideological propaganda has totally

lost its seductive power and the creation of independent organizations has been blocked by the government, home-grown religious organizations have triumphed over official repression, and their development has surpassed anyone's expectations. Spreading like "wildfires that burn without end, a spring wind that blows and blows anew," their numbers have reached tens of millions. In terms of numbers, resiliency and diversity of government-defying methods, Falungong practitioners provide an admirable model of non-violent resistance.

Catholic and Protestant family churches are spread throughout the cities and the countryside; official estimates number their membership at 30 million, but the true numbers far exceed government statistics. The disparity in numbers between the independent Catholic churches and the official "patriotic churches" is especially glaring, because while Protestants view anyone who recognizes the authority of the Bible as a Christian, the Catholic Church is much stricter on who can be considered a Catholic. There is only one spiritual authority, the Vatican, and Catholics only recognize the authority of clergymen appointed by the Vatican; anyone appointed by any other authority, including those forced upon the believers by a government, has no legitimacy. In China, however, the Communist Party has rejected modern civilization's separation of church and state, and has refused to recognize the religious authority of the Vatican or independent house churches. Instead, religious associations are government-ordained and churches are forced to accept clergymen appointed by the regime. Under these circumstances, many Chinese Christians (particularly Catholics) turn to illicit, non-official house churches to maintain the purity and integrity of their faith.

The rapid spread of these house churches reveals another failure of the Communist Party's religious policies: while the regime employs its authoritarian power to destroy churches and imprison parishioners, it has no way to prevent large numbers of people from assembling and praying every week, no way to make Protestants accept the God presented to them in the official "Three-Self" Protestant church, and no way to induce Catholics to abandon the Vatican's authority and accept instead the "patriotic churches" and their government-appointed clergy. So, with the rapid increase in numbers of Chinese Catholics and the spread of underground churches, the regime will at some point have to sit down to negotiate with the Vatican and come to some sort of a compromise on religion; otherwise there will be no way to relieve the tension between the official and popular faiths.

The development of China's underground religions also alerts us to the fact that China's restriction of freedom of religion is contrary to the people's desire to have control over their own souls. It demonstrates a popular recognition of the fact that if people do not take the initiative to fight for their legally guaranteed freedoms of speech, assembly and belief, but instead passively sink into the embrace of material satisfaction, they will have no escape from a life of terror and will never achieve the richness of an active spiritual life.

A discussion of religion in China has to include the Communist regime's relationship with Tibetan Buddhism and Islam in Xinjiang. It is interesting to note that on one hand,

the Communist Party recognizes the legitimacy of all branches of Tibetan Buddhism, but on the other hand, it does not recognize the legitimacy of Tibetan Buddhism's highest spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. This confusion arises from long-standing cross-cultural conflicts, and makes the relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and the Chinese Communist Party different from that between the Party and other religious organizations.⁴

2. Environmental protection and AIDS organizations

Since the spread of AIDS and the destruction of the environment are globally recognized problems, organizations dealing with these issues in China have attained a certain amount of influence. The environmental group Friends of Nature is recognized both at home and abroad; it often undertakes projects that involve international cooperation and receives donations from foreign sources. The group's founders, including Wang Lixiong and Liang Xiaoyan, often travel to remote villages and border areas to promote environmental awareness among schoolchildren in an effort to spread their message to the farthest regions of China. Dr. Gao Huijie and the civic organization known as Aizhi Action Project have not only carried out much practical HIV prevention work, they also revealed to the world the AIDS-tainted blood-selling disaster in Henan Province, along with the subsequent cover-up by the local government. This accomplishment was a major factor in spurring China to develop its HIV prevention program. The Chinese government no longer muffles its serious AIDS problem under a veil of silence, but talks openly about the ever-worsening HIV situation and seeks international help in dealing with it. However, the regime's chief motivation is merely to obtain more international aid.

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It should be mentioned that none of China's legally authorized civic organizations are what would be internationally recognized as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). All are covertly manipulated by the Communist Party, and their very existence depends on the Party's estimation of how much of a threat they pose to its power. Superficially, the chartering and administration of these groups falls to the Civil Administration Bureau, but their survival actually lies in the hands of the Public Security Bureau, which immediately bans or obstructs any organization regarded as a threat. For example, in 2003 the Public Security Bureau warned Friends of Nature to expel the dissident Wang Lixiong. The leader of Friends of Nature, Liang Congjie, immediately obeyed, first urging Wang Lixiong to withdraw willingly, and then expelling him when he refused. Wang Lixiong was a founder of the group and a member of its executive committee, and had made important contributions to its development, influence and operations. Even so, his expulsion followed no formal administrative procedure or any democratic process through the executive committee, but was carried out under the direction of the Party. Such authorized civil organ-

izations operate much like the eight showcase democratic parties; they are completely under the thumb of the Communist Party, and their internal affairs are controlled just like those of the Party through the completely unsystematic and disorderly rule of a few individuals.

Over the past few years, opportunism has become the Communist Party's guiding political philosophy. The Party has learned to become more flexible under international pressure; particularly when dealing with organizations that have a certain amount of international renown, its official policies adjust according to the perceived benefit. The transformation of the Aizhi Action Project from tragedy to success story in just a few short months illustrates this point. When the regime felt that the blood-selling scandal would damage the Party's image, officials banned the organization and jailed its leader, Wan Yanhai. This occurred just as the World AIDS Conference was getting underway, and the Communist Party's barbaric behavior met with a major international backlash. Apart from the beating China took to its international reputation, there was a real possibility that the U.S. would withdraw \$10 million that it had pledged in support of China's AIDS prevention efforts. The regime reevaluated its actions, and with the dual aim of recovering the respect of the global community and the threatened aid funds, it released Wan Yanhai. The government also granted the Aizhi Action Project official status and allowed Wan Yanhai to leave and return to China at will, facilitating the organization's solicitation of foreign donations. At the same time, the Aizhi Action Project lost its populist identity and became an officially controlled ornament of state authority. If the group once again transgresses state-imposed limits, it will almost certainly once again face official sanctions and repression.

3. Independent and official trade associations and cultural institutes

These civil organizations bring together a large number of intellectual leaders; some institutes are completely self-sufficient and have been able to reform themselves as civic associations. The most successful example is undoubtedly the Unirule Institute of Economics (*Tianze Suo*) run by the economist Mao Yushi, which sponsors biweekly lectures where intellectuals can engage in free scholarly exchange and debate. There are also groups such as the Beijing Military Economic Observation and Research Center (*Beijing Tajun Jingji Guancha Yanjiu Zhongxin*), which often holds public events. The most famous of these took place on December 18, 2001, when the Center held a "Conference on the Problems of Chinese Farmers in the Private Economy" in Panyu, near Guangzhou. The invited speakers were mainly members of the Communist Party's democratic faction, such as Zhu Houze, Du Runsheng, Li Rui, Yu Guangyuan and Wu Xiang. In addition, Liu Junning and other intellectuals recently founded an independent academic think tank called the Cathay Institute for Public Affairs (*Jiu Ding Gonggong Shiwu Yanjiu Suo*).

In addition, some famous independent bookstores such as All Saints Book Garden in Beijing and Sisyphus in Zezhou have been instrumental in promoting freedom of thought. All Saints often invites popular academics to give lectures, poetry readings and even small-scale art exhibitions on hot topics such as

societal transformation, disadvantaged groups, economic stratification, political reform and cultural constructs. On May 19, 2002, this bookstore hosted a meeting where American legal scholar Ronald Dworkin debated with Beijing academics and intellectuals, a most rewarding experience for the entire Chinese intellectual establishment.

4. The Internet

In the past few years, Chinese civil organizations have become increasingly aware of the usefulness of Web sites for consolidating information and human resources. The site set up by Liu Junning, Wang Yi, and Chen Yongmiao called "Pros and Cons of Constitutional Government," for example, aims to prove a public forum for popular topics, bring independent intellectuals together and promote democratic constitutional reforms.⁵

5. Independent and secret workers' and peasants' organizations

Large numbers of workers facing unemployment and severe deprivations have begun to demand more independence and power for labor unions; peasants, too, have begun to call for independent agricultural unions. Although the Communist Party strictly suppresses independent labor and agricultural organizations and uses official unions to impose top-down control, it has been unable to dam the rising tide of self-organized unions. A spate of localized demonstrations and protests is providing the impetus and foundation for union organization, while regional protest movements are already taking on the aspect of fledgling unions, and have bred a new generation of labor leaders such as Yao Fuxin of the Liaoyang Worker's Movement.

In the countryside, the government's heavy-handed methods of dealing with peasants and its inability to satisfy their demands for justice has led peasants to rely on their own strength and ingenuity to endure the unendurable. Under these conditions, "peasant heroes" have emerged under whose leadership protest movements are developing in strength and number. In Renshou County of Sichuan Province, Zhang De'an led a coalition of peasants defying a corrupt faction in the county government that had set excessively high production quotas. Their cohesiveness, bravery and hard and protracted effort enabled them to overturn the production quotas, and their workload dropped to the lowest level in the past ten years. This kind of self-generated organization and struggle reveals the power and wisdom of ordinary people, and its result is far more meaningful than relying on the mercy of the rare virtuous official. The peasants' awakening to their own rights indicates progress beyond the old feudal mentality — instead of waiting passively for munificence from above, they take the initiative to fight for what is their due.

6. Independent political and human rights organizations

The most sensitive type of civil society group, these have come under the harshest repression, yet have produced impressive results. The Tiananmen Mothers Campaign led by Ding Zilin is an outstanding example of the people's power in urging the Communist Party to redress its wrongdoings and pursuing accountability and justice. Ding's association, formed by the parents, spouses and children of those killed or injured at

Tiananmen Square in June 1989, has sought international and domestic donations for the survivors and, under tremendously difficult and personally hazardous conditions, has collected evidence of the fates of the June 4th martyrs and called for justice and the rectification of the historical record. Even more astonishing, these people who suffered the most grievously as a result of the June 4th massacre conduct their resilient struggle under the motto of "Brotherhood, Forgiveness, Kindness and Reason."

The efforts of the Tiananmen Mothers Campaign have won global recognition, support and sympathy. Ding Zilin has received a wide variety of human rights awards in the name of this organization, including the China Democratic Education Fund's Outstanding Democrat Award in 1994, the Human Rights Scientist Award from the New York Academy of Science in 1995, the Alexander Langer Prize in 1999 and others. In 2002 the Tiananmen Mothers Campaign was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

In 1998, the creation of the China Democracy Party was announced. Although the Communist Party immediately arrested the key members of the organization and sent the rest into hiding or exile abroad, a small number continue the party's work in secret and regularly issue statements, giving the organization an enduring symbolic significance. The New Youth Study Group, founded by a small group of youths with humanitarian interests, was likewise designated an illegal organization; Yang Zili and three other group members are currently in prison. Under the provisions of the Illegal Organizations Intervention Act, the Public Security Bureau recently detained university student Liu Di, a move that produced a strong reaction both domestically and abroad. These crackdowns demonstrate how fearful the Communist Party is of the people's movement toward independent organization and thought.

The government's stake in free assembly

As explained above, there are no Chinese NGOs in the internationally accepted sense, and truly independent, self-governing organizations are not allowed to operate legally in China today. Most groups, whether they are legal and under government control or suppressed and illegal, lack the organizational ability to take advantage of their collective strength and remain in a scattered, embryonic state. With no safety valve for society's discontent and no official framework to accommodate a political opposition or allow the people any power to manage themselves, the masses and the bureaucracy have become increasingly polarized. There is no way to build a common foundation of values shared by both sides, or to create a new order in which public and private sectors compete with and tolerate each other as equals. China's present system has no tools at its command to deal with the interminable string of internal crises it faces. The bifurcation and decentralization of society is now unstoppable, and if this regime remains in power, the long-suppressed and hidden forces of discontent and resistance will one day burst forth and unite like a hundred rivers returning to the sea, creating a crisis of anarchy in China that will be disastrous for all.

In a system lacking legal, independent organizations to protect the people, and in which opportunities exist only for those at the top, the common ethical expectations whereby people,

organizations and governments are expected to interact on a peaceful basis have been replaced by unrestrained, extralegal and amoral practices. Put another way, today's social order is based solely on the employment of naked violence to protect the elite, and it could be uprooted at any time by the long-buried resentments and desires of the repressed. In the thirteen years of Jiang Zemin's administration, independent protest organizations sprang up constantly both in the cities and in the countryside. The common trend was for these groups to move from the country to the city, from the border regions to the central regions. Small and scattered groups in villages and towns allied to form unions encompassing entire townships, cities or even counties, and the protest movements became highly organized, showing considerable staying power. The large-scale protests in the Daqing oil fields and Liaoyang last year are good examples of these trends. An even better example is that of the Falungong, which has managed to launch a highly organized national and international protest movement.

These examples show that China's independent protest movements cannot revolve around the will of a few core members. Rather, China's populist organizations can succeed only if they aim to channel the political power of the masses into a new, non-violent societal order by providing the common man with a bit of flexible political space. The crimes and excesses of the elite, coupled with the continual suffering of the people over many years, have instilled in the people an eagerness to participate in the political process that has already reached a point sufficient to transform society. The more tyrannical the suppression, the more desperate the people's desire for empowerment, and the more worrisome the potential for violence. The state of affairs in China today is such that even if we were to ignore the economic stratification and the abuse of disadvantaged groups, and look only at the June 4th Massacre and the repression of the Falungong, the demands for justice inspired by these travesties have been enough to trigger political mobilizations on a national level.

The economic reforms launched in 1992 have allowed China's urban dwellers to suddenly enjoy a level of material prosperity most people never dared to imagine before. They have the modern amenities of a developed nation and even share in the post-modern age of globalization brought by the Internet and computers. Their material enjoyments far exceed – perhaps too far – those of the much more numerous people living in border areas and other poverty-stricken regions. Vacation homes, private automobiles, leisure time and foreign vacations not only soothe the spiritual wounds inflicted during Tiananmen, but provide distraction from the human rights tragedies that occur around them daily and mask the primitive, cruel realities that still exist in China.

In the long run, the extreme disparity in wealth and resources already evident in China can only worsen with time. Even if a regime sympathetic to the common man comes to power, the competition for resources in a nation with a population as large as China's will remain fiercer than in other countries, with the majority of the populace continuing to yearn in vain for the benefits of modern life. Jiang Zemin's assertion that in twenty years every resident of China will be living above the

subsistence level is nothing but a tyrant's glib, empty promise to temporarily distract the masses from the crises of the present and the hopelessness of the future. The truth is that the China is trapped in a vicious circle, and there is no evidence of official commitment to developing a more benevolent system.

In this situation, it is incumbent on the Chinese Communist regime to initiate political reform. Rather than trying to maintain a system of rigid official controls that has already sprung innumerable leaks, the government should amend the "Societies Law" to provide legal guidance and leadership for civic organizations and ease its self-imposed burden of managing every aspect of society. This acknowledgement of the people's right to autonomy in their everyday lives would allow the effective tapping of human resources and channel the latent creative energies of the masses into a positive force for a stable society. With the government giving official backing to the independent development of civil society, a new order could eventually emerge in which people would have the power to conduct themselves, defend themselves and coordinate their ideas and energies—in short, a free and benign society in which the government does not interfere in all aspects of daily life.⁶

Translated by Jonathan Kaufman and Stacy Mosher

1. This is a translated and edited version of an article that originally appeared on the Web site of MinZhu ZhongGuo (<http://www.chinamz.org/115issue/115gfdl1.html>)
2. In June the Party's publicity department, the State Press and Publication Administration, and the Post Office issued a joint circular putting a moratorium on compulsory subscriptions, except for scientific journals, from July to September. Song Jianwu, a professor of media economics at People's University, believes the policy will lead to the closure or merger of about 90 per cent of local Party papers. (Nailene Chou Wiest, "Ban on forced paper-buying bolstered," *South China Morning Post*, July 25, 2003.)
3. For more on the populist trend in mainland Chinese media, see my article "The Populist Trend in Broadcasting and Political Reform—the Popular Future of Free China (Part IV)" in the March 2003 issue of *Beijing Spring*.
4. For more on this topic, see Wang Lixiong's *Sky Burial*, and *Four Conversations with the Dalai Lama*.
5. For more details on independent websites in China, please see my article "Gentle Resistance, Gradual Confidence," published in the March 2002 issue of *Democratic China*.
6. For more in-depth discussion of the development of civil society, see Zhang Zuhua's *Political Reform and Systemic Renewal*, Chapter 8, "Fostering Civil Society."