

Freer Expression Typifies A New Dynamism in China

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PEKING, Jan. 11 — “Marxism has become just another religion,” an earnest Chinese college student remarked during an extraordinary three-hour talk here last week. “The Communist Party taught us not to believe in religion, Christianity or Buddhism, so why should we believe in Marxism?”

The candid conversation, which would have been inconceivable only a few months ago, reflects the new atmosphere of increased freedom of expression that Peking’s leaders have recently been encouraging.

The student’s views are also part of an exciting and uncertain search now taking place in China to try to find a more democratic and economically successful path for the country to follow after the chaos of the last decade.

It is too early to gauge how far this effort will take China, since there is an inherent conflict between rule by an elite Communist Party and the idea of democracy. An earlier attempt to allow a greater degree of popular criticism in the middle 1950’s — called the “Hundred Flowers” movement after Mao Tse-tung’s advice to “Let a hundred flowers bloom” — backfired and led to a period of sharp repression.

But both a number of Peking’s elderly leaders, who look back nostalgically on the idealism of their youth, and the small groups of young workers and students who have been putting up wall posters over the last two months are talking

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Freer Expression in China Part of a Search for New Path After Chaotic Years

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about making China the first real socialist democracy.

"You are going to witness some major changes here," a senior Yugoslav diplomat recently told an American colleague. "There is going to be a kind of democracy, not democracy as you Americans know it, but democracy nonetheless."

Whatever the eventual outcome, the reforms introduced by Peking in the last few months have already produced a widespread belief that life is now improving. In addition to the greater freedom of expression, at least for that small number daring enough to speak out, there are more consumer goods available, the first foreign movies to be shown openly in China in years and a somewhat enlarged degree of control for individuals in choosing their jobs and education.

Perhaps the most striking change is that much of the debate about what China should become is being carried out with little reference to Marxism. Instead, conversations with Chinese and the reading of dozens of wall posters during a three-week visit suggest that many people want China to become more like the United States, Japan or Western Europe.

"Capitalism and socialism are just names — what is the real difference?" the college student said during the three-hour discussion. "The important thing is, we want happiness, freedom and an advanced economy. Whichever system achieves that, that's what we want."

Father Agreed With Him

The 21-year-old student spoke during a walk around the frozen lake and lovely old Ching-dynasty pavilions in Peking's Pei Hai Park. His father is a relatively high-ranking official, and he said he often discussed his views with his parents. Such exchanges are reportedly one of the key ways the Communist leadership learns what other people are thinking.

"After my father came back from a mission from West Germany, he told me he agreed with me," the student added.

What motivated him and his generation, he indicated, was the same purpose that has motivated all of modern Chinese nationalism. Ever since China discovered its backwardness when it was humiliated by Britain in the Opium War of 1840-42, Chinese reformers have wanted to catch up with the more advanced Western world.

In the 19th century, the early leaders of this movement talked about making China "rich and strong." It is not a coincidence that many of the posters in Peking these days once again use expressions such as, "We must make China rich and strong."

History of Looking Abroad

Each generation of Chinese over the last 140 years has looked abroad to learn from what seemed to be the most modern society. In 1921, when the Chinese Communist Party was founded, that appeared to be the Soviet Union, which was then experiencing the triumph of the 1917 revolution.

But Mao himself, in his later years, recognized that the Soviet Union had failed as a model. In his last interview with his American biographer, Edgar Snow, Mao said that the Soviet Union "won't do" to point the way, and then, according to Mr. Snow, "he would place his hopes on the American people."

The critical question is, how far can Peking let this new reform movement go. China's leaders themselves, after the chaos of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960's, prefer to call the new movement "emancipation of the mind," rather than liberalization.

In part, Peking's purpose seems wistfulness for the heady, victorious days of the wartime sanctuary in Yen-an, in the 1930's and 1940's, when the Communists were still young, lived simply in caves and were unburdened with their present huge bureaucracy. Memory can play tricks, however, and it is easy to forget that even then Mao started his first rectification campaign, clamping down on dissenting intellectuals.

To Win Over Intellectuals

Apart from the nostalgia, Peking recognizes that something must be done to restore the loyalty and enthusiasm of the country's intellectuals, officials and skilled workers, its most creative human resource, who were most affected by the persecutions of the Cultural Revolution. Without their participation, Peking will not achieve its goal of making China a



Hsinhua via United Press International

Demonstrators celebrating a new Chinese Constitution last March with a huge parade in Peking that followed the Fifth National People's Congress. Chinese leaders and ordinary people alike are now working toward freer society.

modern industrial state by the end of the century.

With this in mind, party leaders have been pushing to create a new legal system and to institute low-level popular elections and have publicly proclaimed an end to the disruptive political campaigns of recent years. Teng Hsiao-ping, China's senior Deputy Prime Minister and dominant leader, has pledged in interviews during the last two weeks to continue to allow dissenters to put up wall posters.

Some of the present wall posters, which began appearing in November, give vent to largely personal complaints — a problem in getting housing, discrimination by some local bureaucrat, or even marital squabbles.

But many others involve broad political issues that directly confront the authorities, and some of the authors of the broadsides and people who have held rallies show signs of incipient organization outside the Communist Party.

Three Days of Marches

This week in Peking, for instance, 400 to 500 people dressed in the patched, faded garb of peasants marched for three days around Tien An Men Square to protest shortages of food and demand human rights in China. The people, who appeared to come from virtually all of China's 29 province-level units, including Tibet, said they did not want to overthrow the Government but simply to obtain redress against insensitive local officials.

The marchers slept at night in the Peking railroad station or other public buildings with no official interference. They said they had come to Peking by hitching rides on trucks or walking since they did not have travel permits to take trains.

Two weeks ago, a group of 28 young people distributed leaflets in Tien An Men Square explaining that they represented 50,000 other youths from a district in Yunnan Province who had staged a general strike to protest what they regarded as intolerable working conditions on state farms to which they had been assigned. They were all graduates of schools in the cities who had been resettled on rubber plantations, they reported, and had suffered from "cheating and oppression" by the local authorities.

In Shanghai last month, according to foreigners in the city, several thousand other students who had been assigned to work in rural areas marched on the local Communist Party headquarters and besieged it for several hours, demanding to see the head of the city party committee. They carried banners asking for three meals a day, guaranteed jobs in Shanghai and democracy, said the foreigners who witnessed the demonstration.

Posters have gone up over the last few days in both Peking and Canton, in the south, calling for a review of the case of

three daring writers who put up a poster in 1974 in Canton accusing the Communist Party of having become a new aristocratic and despotic ruling class. "If you can rehabilitate high officials, why not people who have no fame?" one of the new Canton posters asked.

Moreover, at least five separate writ-

ing groups have appeared in the last few weeks in Peking that have put up printed or mimeographed posters rather than handwritten ones. One such group, the Enlightenment Society, was offering copies of its posters in booklet form last week for the equivalent of 30 cents each. They were quickly sold out.

Another group, which put up a 48-page poster, called its publication "Peking Spring." The name evoked the ill-fated Prague spring, the liberalization effort in Czechoslovakia in 1968. But the name has a more important Chinese meaning, recalling the huge popular demonstration in Tien An Men Square on April 5, 1976, in honor of the late Prime Minister Chou En-lai and against the country's radicals.

Memories of 1919 Movement

In Chinese, the name for April 5 is written in numerical form, or 4-5. Given this way, it also evokes memories of the great student movement of 20th century China, the so-called May 4 Movement in 1919. That is written as 5-4, after its date.

These puns in Chinese may not translate well into English, but they have a deep, almost mystical significance for young Chinese today. Many of the posters made explicit comparisons between their demands and the May 4 Movement and recall that its great goals, like theirs now, were "democracy and science."

It is difficult to judge the exact attitude of the authorities to this ferment. Communist Party policy holds that the party must guide all political activity.

"It is the party alone that can lead the continuing struggle to win and defend people's democracy," a recent editorial in the party newspaper, Jenmin Jih Pao, proclaimed. "The people, under the influence of various kinds of nonproletarian ideology, are prone to anarchy and ultrademocracy once they are divorced from the leadership of the party."

'A Range of Opinions'

But clearly some leaders around Mr. Teng believe they should now encourage more democracy. "Let the people say what they wish, the heavens will not fall," another editorial advised. "A range of opinions from the people are good for a revolutionary party leading the Government."

Mao tried to do something similar in

the Cultural Revolution, unleashing a torrent of criticism by the Red Guards to check the party's growing bureaucratic tendencies. At the time, the attacks were aimed at many of the men who are now in power once again.

The party's problem now is how to stimulate constructive dissent, winning back popular confidence, without fighting those of its bureaucrats who are comfortable with their power and privileges.

At the moment, Peking may simply be letting the movement take its course to see where it leads. If it goes too far, there could be an official backlash. But, some diplomats wonder, might the movement develop enough momentum that it eventually would be irreversible?

Over the last year and a half, Peking has sent a steady stream of missions to Yugoslavia to study its relatively more democratic and successful brand of socialism, including its system of farming, worker self-management and freer travel abroad.

Way Station to Bolder Moves

At first some diplomats here thought Peking might be attempting to transplant some of these practices to China.

But a European engineer who has worked in China for several years said a ranking Chinese official had recently told him that this study of Yugoslavia was only a necessary way station to even bolder initiatives. "We had to get the bureaucrats used to these ideas gradually," the engineer recalled his Chinese associate as having said.

An article in the latest issue of a new youth magazine put the problem in terms of a question to its readers. It related an argument between two young men over a picture that showed America full of cars, television sets and other consumer goods.

One man thought it was a good thing, the other attacked it as revisionism. In conclusion the magazine asked, "What do you think?"