

ARCHIVES | 1989

## In Beijing Shouting Match, Students Are Overpowered

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES MAY 30, 1989

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems. Please send reports of such problems to [archive\\_feedback@nytimes.com](mailto:archive_feedback@nytimes.com).

For the first time in years, propaganda loudspeakers boomed out today over the low-slung houses and orange-tiled imperial monuments of Beijing, all but submerging with the sheer power of sonic amplification the lesser loudspeaker belonging to pro-democracy protesters still occupying Tiananmen Square.

The Government's high-decibel message urges the demonstrators to withdraw from the square. It repeats in thunderously syrupy tones what the newspapers have been saying lately - that the student protesters are motivated by laudable patriotic sentiments. But it adds a note that, like amplified messages themselves, has not been heard in a number of years.

"Why did this movement begin?" the voice asks. "Because," it answers, "we have slackened our attention to political education."

Then the voice, shuddering backward over the Forbidden City, echoing forward toward the orange-fringed mausoleum of Mao Zedong, goes on: "If we don't stop the movement, we will lose the gains made during 10 years of reform. Our Government and party have the power to solve the country's problems."

Students' Answering Voice

The students camped out in Tiananmen Square were trying their best to keep up their end of the loudspeaker competition, broadcasting their own messages.

And tonight, when a large, enthusiastic crowd cheered as a model of the Statue of Liberty was set up in the middle of the square, the loudspeaker blasting propaganda into the humid night air seemed a strange commentary, one obviously ignored by the excited throngs.

But for the most part, the superior amplitude of the Government's loudspeakers seemed a not-very-subtle emblem of the balance of forces emerging in the confrontation between student protesters and the Communist authorities of China. Two weeks ago, when a million people took to the streets to prevent the army from entering Beijing to enforce martial law, it seemed as if "people power" was winning.

But now, like a giant kicked in the stomach, the vast and powerful Chinese state, with its total control of the propaganda apparatus, has regained its breath, showing that, if it cannot persuade the students to give up their pro-democracy demonstrations, it can at least shout them down. From Out of the Past

While the Government's renewed recourse to loudspeakers as a propaganda tool is probably only temporary, they are reminders that several features of life long gone have been resurrected lately.

One is the very call for more ideological education being made over the loudspeakers. That harkens back to an era when Mao was still alive and the effort to instill politically "correct" ideas in the population was constant and time-consuming.

Another returned element of Chinese life is the language of the power struggle at the top, particularly the incessant repetition of slogans intended to portray the losers of the struggle as secretive and scheming but numerically insignificant "counterrevolutionaries."

The newspapers and television news broadcasts, for example, are filled with a new phrase in the lexicon of Chinese Communism: "The very, very small number of people." The phrase refers to the party leader, Zhao Ziyang, and a group of his lieutenants who have apparently been eliminated from power. A Slight Variation

Reminiscent of expressions like "the Gang of Four" - a reference to the Maoist group that was purged in 1976 - the new term has the virtue of succinctness. More important perhaps, it conveys the impression that it was just a tiny, isolated fragment of the leadership that formed an "anti-party clique," endangering Communism and striving to gain power for itself.

"The very small number of people who have instigated and created turbulence

must be exposed," Wan Li, the chairman of the National People's Congress, said, varying the "very, very small number" formula just a bit.

As in past power struggles, it is for the propaganda apparatus to give the impression of a great outpouring of support for what, in the present case, is being called "the important decisions of the party center" - meaning Prime Minister Li Peng's declaration of martial law on May 20 and the move apparently to purge Mr. Zhao and his closest allies. 'Resolute Support' Expressed

The newspapers have been reporting that well-known people, large organizations and octogenarian revolutionary veterans alike have expressed their "resolute support" of Mr. Li, making, virtually without exception, some reference to that "very, very small number of people" inside the leadership whose ultimate goal was said to be the overthrow of the Communist system.

For the dwindling numbers of students of Tiananmen Square, the phrase has become an object of mockery. They repeat the words in Chinese derisively over and over again.

The students' notion is that the ostensible "very, very small number of people" includes the majority of people in China. "They want to isolate us," a student from Beijing University said today. "They want to separate us from the mass of the people. But, in fact, the very, very small number of people are the leaders themselves." Square With a History

Some new things in old forms have also appeared in the last few weeks, not the least of them the very appearance of student protesters in the vast square in front of the Forbidden City.

Tiananmen, or the Gate of Heavenly Peace, was created by the victorious revolutionaries in the years after coming to power as an open expanse where events like triumphal parades celebrating the revolution could take place. Before, the square was smaller and narrower, encroached upon by traditional courtyards surrounded by walls and two imperial-style arches, all demolished after 1949.

Under Mao, Tiananmen was used for the mass rituals of fealty to the Communist Government that were an essential part of his governing style. The square became the place of annual military parades, of huge fireworks exhibits, and, most important, of supposedly spontaneous mass rallies to support the victors in struggles for power. The Symbolism Changes

When, for example, the radical clique known as the Gang of Four was purged in 1976, hundreds of thousands of well-organized demonstrators marched through

the square under red banners, beating the drums of celebration. Years before, during the Cultural Revolution, Tiananmen was where delirious teen-age Red Guards demonstrated their worship of Mao.

In 1976, there was an anti-Maoist protest at the square, later known as the Tiananmen Incident, that drew hundreds of thousands of people. It was a one-day affair quickly suppressed by the Government of the time, the one led by the ill-fated Gang of Four.

But the demonstration showed for the first time that the square, intended for the ritual of mass fealty, could also serve opponents of the party and the Government. Now, its occupation for over a month by pro-democracy protesters has probably changed its symbolism forever, transforming it from the place to show support for the Government to the place where official policies are protested.

A version of this article appears in print on May 30, 1989, on Page A00011 of the National edition with the headline: In Beijing Shouting Match, Students Are Overpowered.