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WHY DENG TREMBLES; A Leader Equates Protest and Chaos

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES JUNE 1, 1989

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For many Chinese and foreign viewers of the latest upheavals, China's script in the last few weeks has resembled a Greek tragedy: Deng Xiaoping is cast as the once-heroic leader whose intolerance and hubris cause him to destroy much of what he has accomplished. What impels a man like

Mr. Deng, China's senior leader, to undermine in a few weeks what took him a decade to achieve: a stable political order, respect in Hong Kong for China's good intentions, the preparations for a succession of power?

Mr. Deng's critics - and these days they are numerous - often assume that his decision to dismiss his chosen successor, Zhao Ziyang, and summon troops to crack down on the democracy movement simply reflects the tenacity of his ambition, an unwillingness or inability to share power. Mr. Deng is undoubtedly reluctant to give up the power he has grown used to, but there is an additional explanation to account for his horror of the democracy movement. Question With an Answer

"If our country were plunged into disorder and our nation reduced to a heap of loose sand, how could we ever prosper?" Mr. Deng asked in a speech more than two years ago, on the eve of his last crackdown on a student movement. "The reason the imperialists were able to bully us in the past was precisely that we were

a heap of loose sand."

He and others of his generation spent the first half of their lives in a China racked by division and chaos, where the hopes of modernizing movements always seemed frustrated by the country's disorder.

The lessons about chaos were burned into their psyches again when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966 and led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and other personal tragedies in their families. More Than Distaste

"They have a deep-seated allergy to any form of disorder," a Western diplomat said recently in Beijing. "They have an intense belief that they need stability in order to have development."

The distaste for student unrest is perhaps accentuated because Mr. Deng's oldest son, Deng Pufang, was permanently paralyzed after being pushed from a window at Beijing University by student militants during the Cultural Revolution.

"While Westerners have tended to think of China as under firm rule, Deng tends to see the potential for chaos, and may often feel the central Government is hanging on by its fingernails," explained Kenneth G. Lieberthal, director of the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan. "He wants reform but not at the price of chaos."

While Mr. Deng is best known for his efforts to open China's economy, and, to a lesser extent, its political system, these are simply means to achieve his most cherished aim: modernization. And Mr. Deng has made clear that he regards political protest as inimical to modernization. He seems to see bubbles of discontent not as a sign of China's resilience but as a sign of its growing malaise and weakness.

In a speech early in 1979, when he was cracking down on an earlier democracy movement, Mr. Deng warned that if it was allowed to continue, it would "inevitably lead to the unchecked spread of ultra-democracy and anarchism, to the complete disruption of political stability and unity, and to the total failure of our modernization campaign."

China will once again be plunged into chaos, division, retrogression and darkness, and the Chinese people will be deprived of all hope," he said. Power Became Habitual

In addition to this fear of chaos, there seems to have been a naked fear of losing power. For a group of old revolutionaries, men in their 80's who have held power for four decades and see their interests as virtually identical with their

country's interests, there was a deep-seated alarm at the possibility that the Communist Party would crumble the way that Chinese dynasties have fallen.

"To retreat means our downfall," President Yang Shangkun said in a speech to the Politburo now being circulated among party officials. "To retreat means the downfall of the People's Republic of China and the restoration of capitalism."

There is also evident in the leadership a deep resentment against Mr. Zhao's unwillingness to play by the rules. The old leaders constructed China according to their vision, and Mr. Zhao apparently came to threaten not only that vision but also their personal hold on power. Respect for the elderly is fundamental practice in China, and yet Mr. Zhao openly disagreed with Mr. Deng and other senior officials. While they warned of the dangers of unrest, Mr. Zhao hailed the patriotic spirit of student demonstrators.

President Yang, an 82-year-old veteran military figure, suggested in the speech that one of Mr. Zhao's offenses was a simple lack of respect, an unwillingness to be subdued even in the presence of Mr. Deng. Unacceptable Individualism

"He insisted on his own idea," President Yang complained in the speech, a copy of which was obtained from students and has been verified by people who heard it read in party meetings. "When Comrade Deng Xiaoping attended the meeting, he still insisted on his idea."

For Communist Party leaders, who for decades have felt secure when a single voice emanated from the party, there has been something deeply troubling about Mr. Zhao's unwillingness to be quiet. Mr. Zhao in his speeches never openly broke with his colleagues, but his televised speeches were more conciliatory toward the protesters than those of other officials, and President Yang appears convinced that this is what stimulated the democracy movement.

The old revolutionaries seem to regard the public as having little or no independent vitality, but are simply a weather vane to be directed by the force of the Communist Party or the force of opposing "bourgeois liberalism," whichever is greater. Their fear is that divisions within the party will strengthen the enemy.

China's former President, Li Xiannian, complained that "there are two headquarters" in the party, and that this confused people and encouraged unrest. While in the West there is a political tradition that glorifies the lone dissenter who sticks to his principles, in the Politburo Mr. Zhao's persistence came across as impudence and treachery. The Question of a Plot

Indeed, there may be more to the situation than is now known, and no one can

rule out the possibility of Mr. Zhao plotting against Mr. Deng. A member of Mr. Zhao's camp confirmed that the party General Secretary had directly challenged Mr. Deng's authority, and there are some hints that Mr. Zhao's aides may have tried to stir up unrest in the belief that it would help their man.

In 1976, when it was to his advantage, Mr. Zhao reacted to the purge of Mr. Deng by calling on the masses to "thoroughly expose and criticize the crimes of Deng Xiaoping." On this occasion, once again, his own interests may have crossed Mr. Deng's.

Mr. Deng and his comrades may have felt they had little choice but to take the actions they did, if they were to hold on to the power they had grown used to. It was not necessarily a blunder - a miscalculation of the impact of suppression on Hong Kong, on the succession plans or on China's domestic political stability - but a response to a higher imperative, from the perspective of the old revolutionaries. They felt that it came down to the need to preserve their own power, and also the need to save China.

Few people, in China or abroad, seem to agree with Mr. Deng that his actions have helped. But even many of his detractors believe it was such calculations that drove him to rise in a fury and turn on his protege and uproot the carefully laid plans for political stability and succession that previously had won him such acclaim.

Mr. Deng's actions have probably already cost him his reputation in China, for he is increasingly resented and disliked in the country he leads. Now the central question, which the coming months are likely to answer, will be whether his forceful intervention has staved off the chaos he dreads or merely worsened it.

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