Heroes, History and Recent Chinese Politics

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The events in China from the death of Hu Yaobang on April 15 to the bloody suppression of June 4 was the most vividly and intensely experienced episode in modern Chinese politics. A roller coaster was suddenly launched which offered countless anxious and intoxicating views, rising to dizzying heights of popular participation, and finally crashing into a wall of brutal repression. Television put millions on the roller coaster, but China specialists would have been there in any case, because the fate of a country and people whom we care about hung in the balance.

The purpose of this essay is to preserve and analyze the sense of surprise and amazement as events unfolded, which to me is one of the deepest and most fragile aspects of the intellectual experience.

The sense of surprise is fragile because the immediate business of the discipline is to make sense of what happened, to rationalize the real, as Hegel might have put it. A by-product of this effort is the gradual emergence of a presumption of the inevitability of the course of events. As the course of events becomes better understood, the possibility of alternative outcomes becomes less understandable; the rational elides into the necessary. Subsequent events become a lens for perceiving situational potential, and the roads not taken are shadowed out. The old present loses its mystery and sense of chance.

Could things have turned out differently?

There are two types of affirmative arguments that could be made. The first relies on counterfactual hypotheses which cannot be disproven, but are problematic methodologically. For example, had Zhao Ziyang stood with the April 26 editorial, the regime's authoritarianism could have had a more human face. Had Deng perceived his choices differently, perhaps the court conservatives could have been the losers. If the demonstrators had not bound themselves to the positions of their most extreme participants, had Li Peng appeared more conciliatory, and so forth. The big counterfactual question of "could things have been different?" breaks into a thousand smaller ones difficult to deny and enticing in their implications.

Professor He Zhaowu of Qinghua University has argued recently that it is the business of historiography to consider all possibilities as well as historical facts, saying that "historical actualities can only be understood when placed upon the background of all possible cases that are
capable of being actualized."\textsuperscript{1} There is a certain existential sense in which this is true. A great part of the excitement and tension of an unfolding event is not knowing which way the chips will fall, and entertaining contrary possible outcomes. A lottery is most interesting before the drawing.

But such possibilities are infinite, and each has an indefinite branching of consequences. History cannot be held responsible for exploring all possible worlds. Just as Ockham's Razor eliminates possible but unnecessary arguments, making parsimony a virtue, so history exercises an economy of imagination and concentrates on what happened. History's concentration on what happened is not based on the assumption that history is predetermined and therefore other possibilities never really existed; it is based on the fact that history is irreversible and therefore the significance of other possibilities cannot be known. I would call this principle "Hegel's Hatchet."

The second type of argument is more complex than the counterfactual type. It is based on the scope of participation and support of the demonstrations. The participants--especially the students and journalists--were alert and informed observers of center politics. They were attempting to change Chinese politics by their actions, and this implies that they thought that change was possible. The risk and inconvenience of their participation was considered less important than the changes they hoped to accomplish. They intended to be heroes, that is, to change history through personal action, but they did not intend to become martyrs.

Of course, shared subjective belief does not simply become objective fact. But we are dealing with a very special case, because, as Max Weber persuasively argues, political and social structures are not objective configurations existing "out there," but are patterns of shared expectations and expected interactions--\textit{Chancen.} If we take Weber seriously and discard the objectivist connotations of our political vocabulary, the demonstrators were already changing Chinese politics by their actions. Their demands for freedom of organization and the press were in fact demands that the leadership tolerate and acknowledge freedoms that were already being exercised.

These sudden and massive changes in the \textit{Chancen} of Chinese politics produced a new and confusing situation which was interpreted as a "counterrevolutionary" crisis by the old guard. The leadership of the Party, as they understood it--the monopoly of political articulation--was not only being challenged, it was being abrogated. Imagining themselves as the rearguard of the proletariat, the veteran revolutionaries personally led a repression of the new popular politics and an apparent restoration of the old monopoly.

Ultimately, the answer to the question, "could things have been different?" is that things were different, and hence the crackdown. Chinese society has become more accustomed to

\textsuperscript{1} 何兆武 He Zhaowu, "Possibility, Actuality, and History-Picture," \textit{Chinese Studies in History}, vol. 22, No. 4 (Summer 1989), pp. 50-63; at p. 52.
personal and organizational dignity in the 1980s as the Party-State has withdrawn from total control. The masses were demanding to be treated as citizens: to have rights, and to control the behavior of officials through laws. Indeed, the masses were acting like citizens, expressing a presence and power of civil society never before seen in the People's Republic of China. Perhaps if things had been less different, or more different, or different at a different time, the outcome would have been better. But it is important to recall that the demonstrations and the parameters of Chinese politics that they pioneered are now an historical and political fact. Repression is another fact, and these two contrary novelties of 1989 will both be important determinants of China's future.

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