...AND COMMUNISM DESTROYED ASIA

Twenty years after the Tiananmen student’s massacre, it is still forbidden to mention the matter in China

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Twenty years after the Tiananmen student’s massacre by the military following orders from the Communist Party, everything in China has changed and yet nothing has changed. Visible to all, China’s large cities have undoubtedly undergone great transformations. Largely invisible, China’s dirt-poor countryside seems unchanged, even immutable—as does the nation’s pervasive political repression. Twenty years after the Tiananmen massacre, it is still forbidden in China to even mention it: officially, on June 1989, nothing happened on Beijing Tiananmen Square.

Government discourse and children’s schoolbooks mention some vague disorder that took place that year, immediately followed by the Beijing police’s restoring order. Beyond these huge political efforts to hide the truth, most of the Chinese are aware of what happened and many do remember in their hearts. The younger generations however, are not that well informed about Tiananmen and their parents dare not speak; these young generations do not know much about Chinese history, past or present, in general. When in Beijing, I asked the well-known author of Red Sorghum, Mo Yan, if he would be able to write a novel about Tiananmen as he had done about the Cultural Revolution; he became very embarrassed: “it is too early”, he whispered.

Were there any victims on Tiananmen Square in June 1989? The Communist Party denies there had been any. Even today, their number is unknown: according to the Red Cross’ estimate, the Chinese military killed about 3,000 students. Most of the victims’ bodies have disappeared, snatched away and burned by soldiers to destroy the evidence of the massacre.

An association of mothers of Tiananmen victims, led by Ms Ding Zilin, a former Beijing university professor, has tried for twenty years to trace the names of the victims, with little success. The Communist Party ceaselessly harasses Ding Zilin to halt her efforts. When she receives funding for her research from overseas Chinese nationals, the Party confiscates the money—she has repeatedly been indicted for corruption and jailed. At least, Ding Zilin was privileged enough to obtain the restitution of the remains of her seventeen-year-old son, killed by the military. He had wandered into Tiananmen Square that fatal night, looking for some schoolmates. Today, Ding Zilin, because she is beyond eighty, is allowed to remain free in Beijing but she is still harassed and prevented from talking to other families who have lost a child in those same circumstances.

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The situation can be compared with last year’s Sichuan earthquake that buried thousands of young pupils under the rubbles of their poorly built schools – the survivors had better not talk if they want to evade police harassment or worse. So far, Ding Zilin’s association has been able to gather just four hundred victim’s names, the list has been published in Hong Kong.

Can so much cruelty be traced to some Chinese cultural tradition? It is mostly among cynical European leaders and admirers of the “enlightened Chinese despotism” that one hears this kind of cultural argument. The individual counts for little or nothing in Chinese culture, the argument goes. Only the larger community has legitimacy. If this were really the case, then Western human-rights organizations should be deemed enemies of the respectable civilization of an eternal China.

Communists do try to sell to the rest of the world the legend of their Party as heir to ancient traditions. If we were to accept this alibi, going against the Party would be an imperialist disparaging of Chinese culture. Some Westerners buy this alibi through ignorance or cynicism. In reality, true Chinese tradition would dictate that corpses and remains be returned to the families in order to hold proper funerals. The dead will never rest in peace without such restitution.

Thus, the Tiananmen massacre and the police-imposed silence that followed it have nothing to do with ancient Chinese culture but everything to do with the Communist Party’s repressive ideology. It also happens that the current leaders of the Communist Party, the president of the People’s Republic and the prime minister, both belonged to Deng Xiaoping’s ruling clique in 1989.

Deng Xiaoping ordered the massacre and his disciples are still in power. In China, little has changed after all. Communist parties in Asia have become a sort of a dynasty in which the ruling Emperor selects his successor. The people know this when they mention their leaders names as being “Mao III” or “Mao IV”.

“Our major mistake,” Wuher Caixi tells me from Taiwan, where he lives in political exile, “was to believe that we could talk with the Communist leaders”. In 1989, Wuher Caixi was elected by his fellow students as leader and spokesperson of the democratic demonstrations. Twenty years later, it remains out of the question to hold discussions with the Party. A farmer in the Shaanxi province whom I met during the summer of 2008 tried to find...
out why the village leader appointed by the Party, had confiscated his home. “One does not discuss Party decisions”, was all he got for an answer. The village leader gave the confiscated house to his in-laws. “Those people are not like us”, told me the helpless victim. Are those kinds of exactions a continuation of feudalistic cultural norms?

Again, Chinese traditions do not explain current day-to-day violence in China’s countryside: only the Communist ideology and the Communist Party organization can help us understand the plight of the repressed Chinese. Let us remember that current economic growth trickles down to twenty percent of the people, mostly from cities, not in the rural area where eight hundred million Chinese still live in medieval conditions.

Travelling through East Asia, from one Communist country to another and between quite different civilizations, one confronts the same forms of tyranny, expressed with the same vocabulary, and harshly imposed with similar methods.

In North Korea, which owes very little of its civilization to China, the Communist Party exploits the local people in the same manner as the Chinese Communists. In Pyongyang, as in Beijing or Shanghai, I could see that the urban population, usually members of the Party and members of the military, or with family connections to both, have reached a fairly decent level of life. In both countries, such relative well-being is based on a relentless economic exploitation of the rural population, which lives in slave-like conditions.

Karl Marx, if he could see the present condition of China and North Korea, would explain that the urban Communist bourgeoisie has confiscated the surplus value produced by the rural proletariat. And in North Korea, no more than in mainland China, one does not argue with the Communist Party. One wonders if it means anything for foreign governments to try to negotiate with the Party. In North Korea, like in China, civilization does not explain much about these regimes; it has all to do with the organization, not with traditions.

The “Organization”, or Angkar, was the name the Cambodian leader Pol Pot gave in the early 1970s to the local Communist Party. The Angkar systematically murdered one quarter of the Cambodian population when the Communists were in power, from 1975 to 1979. Should we look for some cultural explanation for this genocide? Did anything rooted in the ancient Khmer civilization, again very different from China’s, lead to the contemporary massacre? Nothing is to be found.
The common thread between the Cambodian killing fields, Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution, North Korea’s concentration camps and forced re-education in Vietnam, is Communist ideology. One same ideology, one identical kind of organization, the same holocaust. Mao Zedong alone is credited with forty million victims.

Asia’s twentieth-century drama has not been driven by poverty, overpopulation, colonization, or anti-modern traditions. The only true drama behind the mass massacres in China, the genocide of Cambodia, the exile of the boat people from Vietnam, the concentration camps in North Korea, the Tiananmen massacre, is nothing but Marxist ideology. Marxism has been the founding stone of the “Organization” and has provided the “scientific” alibis of its leaders.

In Phnom Penh, these days, one can attend the trials of some of the former Communist leaders who massacred their own people. They show no remorse and argue that they were trying to build a better society. “I tried my best to be a good Communist”, Duch declared to the judges, one of the main executioners of the now fallen Khmers Rouges regime. He was a good Communist indeed.

If the North Korean, Chinese, or Vietnamese leaders were to be tried, they would likely provide similar explanations: “building a better society, being good Party members”. This trivial self-defence and the disasters brought upon Asia, once again, are not related to any ancient Asian tradition. Marxism is a typically European ideology imported to Asia by leaders like Pol Pot, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping, who, by the way, had all happened to work or study in Paris.

In Beijing last summer, I asked economics professor Feng Lanru, now 86 years old, what the Chinese really wanted. When she was a young girl, Feng Lanru was close to Mao Zedong and...
participated with him in the so-called Liberation of Beijing in 1949. After the Tiananmen massacre, she left the Communist Party and became a human-rights dissident. Only because of her age, the police do not harass her anymore. “Are the Chinese satisfied with the relatively enlightened despotism of the Party?” I asked. “We are like everybody on Earth,” she replied. “We want the same democracy you have. We know perfectly well what a democracy is. We do not want a repressive regime in the name of the so-called ‘Chinese characteristics’.”

Twenty years after the Tiananmen massacre, to truly understand China, we had better listen to Feng Lanrui, a lonely voice in an ocean of repression. We have a duty to remember the unknown victims of Tiananmen and to support Ding Zilin’s endeavour to retrieve their names. We have an even stronger duty to support the living, like Hu Jia and Liu Xiao Bo. Both of them are in jail for posting on the web a petition for political and religious freedom in China. The Chinese Communist Party would like us Westerners, to perceive China as a huge mass of faceless and nameless people, from where no individuals emerge without the Party stamp. The Soviet regime tried to do the same until we learned the names of Sakharov or Solzhenitsyn, among others. Today, we have to etch into our memory the names of those Chinese individuals who resist the anonymity of the totalitarian ideology.

We have so far described the Marxist regimes in Asia as immutable. But are they really? Will not economic growth lead spontaneously towards an open society? This is probably just a Western dream. Professor Samuel Huntington, in the 1980s, proposed a theory in which, past a certain threshold, economic progress would lead necessarily to democracy. He found inspiration for this view in Taiwan and South Korea. These nations, however, never fell prey to totalitarian Communist regimes.

The historical truth is that there is no room for evolution, there is no path leading to political reform in a totalitarian system: a Communist Party reigns or it collapses, as the Soviet experience clearly shows. When Gorbachev tried to reform the Party in the 80s, the Party quickly disappeared.

Asian Communists have closely studied the Soviet demise in order not to repeat what they consider the Gorbachevian error. Within the Asian Communist parties, any potential reformer in the Gorbachev style will be eradicated before he reaches the top. In May 1989, when Zhao Ziyang, then General Secretary of the Chinese Party, tried to negotiate with protestors on Tiananmen Square, he was immediately fired.

“We have a duty to remember the unknown victims of Tiananmen”
by the Party’s real leader, Deng Xiaoping. Deng unleashed the army against the students; Zhao Ziyang endured house arrest until the end of his life. Since then, no one with the open style of Gorbachev or Zhao Ziyang has ever been in a position to reach the commanding heights of the Party.

Perhaps, Chinese leaders have read Alexis de Tocqueville’s famous remarks on the impossibility of achieving political reform in an authoritarian regime. When trying to understand the French Revolution, Tocqueville wrote that the Ancien Régime had provoked its own demise by alleviating the yoke on the people. “The yoke,” he says “to which the nation was accustomed when it was heavy, became unbearable as soon as it was lessened”.

Contrary to what westerners would like to believe, we can be certain that there is no intra-Party confrontation in China, North Korea or Vietnam, between the so-called reformers and the hard liners. The hard liners’ ambition is to quell any attempt toward democratization. They also want to demonstrate to the world that liberal democracy is not inevitable.

Asian Communists do not really believe in the unity of mankind but oppose the Western mind to the Eastern mind. When listening to Communist leaders in Asia, it is evident that they consider liberal democracy to be good enough... for Westerners. What they call “Communist democracy” or “Democracy with Chinese characteristics” is promoted as being better suited to Asian civilization and superior to Western democracy. Regretfully, some in the West are ready to buy this propaganda. We should instead listen to Feng Lanrui, Ding Zilin, Hu Jia or Liu Xiao Bo. They tell us: “We are like you: we want to be free like you are”.

On a personal note, I shall always remember a visit I made to Liu Xia, Liu Xiao Bo’s wife when she was under
house arrest in Beijing. Once again, her husband had been arrested without any legal motive whatsoever. Liu Xia told me: “We, the Chinese human-rights activists, we are like the Jews were in Nazi Germany. We can be arrested, jailed, killed at any moment at the Communist Party’s whim. Why the Western media, political leaders, and intellectuals do not support us more is a mystery to us. When we all disappear, you will ask yourself why you did not do more. But it will be too late then.”