

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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With the masses

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Dear Peter

1976 was a turning point in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). This was the year when the three most popular leaders passed away: Zhou En-lai in January, Zhu De (the famous military commander) in July, and Mao Tse-tong in September. Zhou and Mao, despite their declining health, were two figures of unquestionable authority and power at the time of their death. Their departure from the political scene left a big vacuum, and intensified the power struggle that had been waging since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. This struggle culminated in the removal of the Gang of Four one month after Mao died. In July, the worst earthquake in China's recent history took place. It was centered around the city of Tangshan, 100 miles east of Beijing. The toll was high: about 750,000 dead, an equal number wounded, and millions of dollars in damages. Superstitious beliefs, rooted deep down in the minds of the people for centuries, interpreted major natural events as ominous signs of great political changes. Mao died two months later.

1976 was also unique in the history of the PRC. It was the first time, since the foundation of New China, that a truly spontaneous demonstration had taken place in Beijing. A grass-roots action erupted, which was not called for, nor organized by any leader or official organ. On the contrary, it happened against the will and despite the power of the authorities. The masses spoke from their hearts in what was known as the "Tian An Men Incident."

This newsletter will let the masses express themselves as I heard or saw them. Having gone through many changes in the last 15 years, at times traumatic, often painful, people were eager to talk. And they did.

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"Thunder comes from where the silence is."¹⁾ Indeed, the Tian An Men Incident brought the masses's thunder upon the heads of the leaders. People were outraged to see open posthumous attacks against their "beloved Premier Zhou." They rightly perceived them as coming from what would later be known as the Gang of Four,²⁾ with Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, at the core. As Qingming Day³⁾ approached, they began to place wreaths in memory of the late Premier in Tian An Men Square, which was big enough to hold one million people. Poems were put up lauding him and attacking the leaders linked with many unpopular policies of the Cultural Revolution. Starting at the Monument to the People's Heroes, in the center of the square, white flowers of mourning spread everywhere like snow. These demonstrations culminated on Qingming Day, April 4, 1976. Two million people, from all over China, converged on the square to pay their respects to the late Premier. They sang revolutionary songs and delivered eulogies and pledges, some of which were written in the author's blood. It was also an occasion to vent their disapproval of many of the Chinese leaders especially the Gang of Four and including Mao himself.³⁾ One poem, considered the most counter-revolutionary by the authorities, summed up the essence of the Tian An Men Incident:

In my grief I hear demons shriek;
I weep while wolves and jackals laugh.
Though tears I shed to mourn a hero,
With head raised high, I draw my sword.

At night, 200 trucks were sent to remove the wreaths. The square was cleared. When this was discovered in the morning, the people's wrath burst forth. For the whole day, they rioted and demanded their wreaths back. Suddenly in the evening, the floodlights of the square went on. The demonstrators found themselves surrounded by the militia and the police armed with clubs. The suppression began. By morning, the square had been cleared once more and washed. Yet the job had not been done perfectly. In the words of Vice-Chairman Ye Jianying, the spaces between the flagstones covering the square were still blood stained.

The masses had spoken, though at a price. Lives were lost, and there was much physical and mental suffering. Six months and one day later, the Gang of Four was arrested.

1) Lu Xun (1881-1936), a towering figure in the modern literary field in China.

2) Memorial Day, when the Chinese people remember the dead.

3) "The day of Qinshihuang is done," was a verse in one poem. Mao favorably assessed the historical role of Emperor Qinshihuang, founder of the Qin dynasty, for having brought China under one rule, and for being anti-Confucian. Mao shared both characteristics.

Not everybody was elated to hear of the four's arrest. Xiao Lu was not. Xiao Lu -- "Little Lu," not her real name -- was a "worker-peasant-soldier student" at Beijing University. Upon hearing the news, she went to her room. She lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling for two days.

Xiao Lu typified the new breed of students that Mao's policies of the Cultural Revolution enabled to go to university. Caught in their mid-teens at the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, millions of young Chinese did not finish high school. Many of them became Red Guards at Mao's call to make revolution, bringing the country to the brink of anarchy. When their actions got out of hand, they were phased out, and the army moved in. The education system was at a standstill, but they "graduated" from high schools in the year they would have normally done so. After graduation, everybody had to work in industry as a worker, work in the countryside with the peasants, or join the army. In short, everybody was supposed to integrate with the masses.¹⁾

After a number of years with the masses -- anywhere from one to eight -- 3 to 4 percent of college-age youths would enter university to become worker-peasant-soldier students. Their academic level was tested, but the standard was low. The most important selection criteria were attitude towards one's work and one's political views. It was essential to the young Chinese to be armed with a letter of recommendation from the leadership of his or her work place. Otherwise, there was no point in applying to the university. The importance of the leadership recommendation led to biases and abuses in the selection of applicants. They obviously had to be on good terms with their superiors, and to show support for policies in effect at the time.

Xiao Lu did genuinely support the objectives of the Cultural Revolution and its actions. She was imbued with revolutionary fervor, and was "Chairman Mao's good child." She fought against everything that was old, feudalistic and capitalist. She approved the creation of new proletarian art and culture, which would reflect socialist China. She adopted Mao Tse-tung Thought as the guiding principle in building New China. She believed "politics must be in command," and the economy subordinate to it.

1) This often led to absurd claims. I met a young Chinese exchange student in Canada in 1974. He lived almost all his life in the city with his high-level cadre parents. Yet he claimed that he was from a peasant background. Why? He had spent 18 months in the countryside after he graduated from high school. What he did during that period, I do not know. But looking at his hands and face he looked, to me, as much a peasant as Confucius was.

Xiao Lu would go through articles with a tooth comb supporting the above positions, would engage in lively discussions on political philosophy, and would hold for truth whatever Mao was reported to have said. She felt deeply grateful to Chairman Mao and the Party for having given her the opportunity to enter Beijing University as a worker-peasant-soldier student.

April 6, 1976. Xiao Lu learned that the biggest capitalist roader,¹⁾ Deng Xiao-ping, had been purged from his positions in the party and in the government, at the recommendation of Chairman Mao. Other heads rolled too. The dictatorship of the proletariat seemed firmer to her.

September 9, 1976. The news of Mao's death spread across the land like wild fire. Though expected, it caused much uncertainty and anxiety; who would succeed him? An intense power struggle was known to be taking place behind the scenes. Xiao Lu knew that.

October 22, 1976. Xiao Lu learned in the student canteen that Jiang Qing, Zhang Qun-qiao, Yao Wen-yuan and Wang Hong-wen²⁾ were counter-revolutionaries, had tried to usurp party power, and had been thrown in the dustbin of history. These were the same leaders who, Xiao Lu knew, "held high the red banner of Chairman Mao," who defended him and his Thought against the repeated attacks of capitalists, and who brought his latest words and views down to the masses.

Xiao Lu was a believer.

And there were those who "turned in the wind like blades of grass."

Qinghua University

May 1976 "Deng Xiao-ping and his agents, Education minister Zhou Ru-xing and Qinghua University's Party Secretary Liu Bing, are all against Chairman Mao's education line."

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- 1) Capitalist roader: individual who does not follow the socialist road, but carries out capitalist activities.
 - 2) Zhang Qun-qiao was a Vice-Premier and a contender for the Premiership. Yao Wen-yuan was a polemicist and helped Mao launch the Cultural Revolution. Wang Hong-wen, an ex-worker, was promoted by Mao to the position of Vice-Chairman of the Party in 1973, at the age of 37.

June 1978 "The Gang of Four sabotaged Chairman Mao's education line.... They attacked Deng Xiao-ping without authorization. No instruction came from Chairman Mao or the Central Committee to criticize him by name. They wanted to force the hands of the Central Committee."

May 1976 "Since the Cultural Revolution, the laboring masses have become the masters, and hold the power over Science and Technology. The main purpose of the education line is to help laboring people master [scientific] theory."

June 1978 "The Gang of Four thought if people acquired knowledge, it would be impossible to control them. Thus, they should be taught less, so as to allow the Gang of Four to monopolize knowledge."

May 1976 "We are not slowing our efforts in teaching and studying while struggling against Deng Xiao-ping. In our factories and workshops, we overfulfilled the first quarter's quotas by 15%."

June 1978 "For 2½ days each week, students did things the Gang of Four ordered them to do, such as writing 'big-character posters'¹⁾ and similar disruptive activities. Half of the rest of the week was allocated to physical labor. When could the students study?... According to the Gang of Four: 'Qinghua has only one speciality: to catch capitalist roaders. Anyone who does gets 99 points. Those who excel in Science and Technology get only 1 point.'"

May 1976 "Knowledge does not come from books, but from the workshops. So we adopted a 3-in-1 combination in education: a third of the time studying, a third doing research, and a third doing manual labor."

June 1978 "Students must spend most of their time taking courses in Science and Technology and in computer science.... Their main task is to study."

Two versions, two years apart, at the same place, and by the same person: Comrade Ma Wen-zhong, a leading member of Qinghua University's Foreign Affairs Office.

Comrade Ma was as zealous in attacking Deng Xiao-ping in 1976 as he was in attacking the Gang of Four in 1978. It just happened that an American working in Beijing had,

1) Big-character posters, written with Chinese brushes and pasted on walls, allowed people to express themselves openly. The right to put up these posters was removed from the State Constitution earlier this year.

like myself, visited Qinghua on both occasions. She submitted a question in writing asking for an explanation of Comrade Ma's role and the drastic change in his views in the two years 1976 and 1978. The question was put aside and ignored.

I took aside a professor of hydrology present at the 1978 meeting and asked him for clarification on Comrade Ma's role. He said:

"Comrade Ma is not really bad. He underwent political reeducation for over six months. He made a good self-criticism. He is much better now."

I guess, as a leading member of the Foreign Affairs Office of the university, Comrade Ma was doing his job, and doing it well.

Another person who maybe had a change of heart was Teacher Wu --not her real name -- who taught at the Beijing Language Institute (BLI) where all foreign students go to learn Chinese upon their arrival in Beijing.

October 1, 1977. Teachers and students at BLI had just spent the most memorable evening in Tian An Men Square celebrating China's first National Day since the overthrow of the Gang of Four,1) The square was packed with over 750,000 people. The sky was lit up by the most elaborate firework display I had ever seen. People were singing and dancing. It was a festival of colors. Excitement everywhere.

On the bus returning to the institute, Teacher Wu began to share some of her innermost thoughts with me and another Canadian student:

"You do not know how happy I am tonight. You do not know the significance of this evening to the Chinese people. A lot of us suffered at the hands of the Gang of Four, especially the intellectuals. We were persecuted. We were not allowed to teach, were sent out to the countryside to 'remold' ourselves. Many committed suicide. We were harrassed. Premier Zhou was with us, but he was sick. They even attacked him." By now, tears streamed down her cheeks. "But our wise leader Chairman Hua struck down the Gang of Four with one stroke. We feel freer to express ourselves. Now, we can work again. We feel libe-

1) Pol Pot was the guest of honor that evening, sharing the rostrum over Tian An Men Gate with the new lineup of the Chinese leadership.

rated once more. This liberation is more important than that of 1949...."

Later on, I learned of an incident which took place one year before that evening. It was the Summer of 1976. The academic year was winding down. Foreign students at BLI were getting ready to leave the institute, some to go back home. One of these, a Western European student, was doing the rounds of thank-yous and goodbyes. When she got to Teacher Wu, she thanked her, said a few nice words, and ended up with:

"Although we shall be miles away, I hope we can stay friends."

"You are from a capitalist country." Teacher Wu replied with a stern face. "You can not be my friend." She did not shake the student's hand.

Was Teacher Wu a blade of grass in the wind? Or did she genuinely have a change of heart? Was she sincere in her antagonistic behavior with the foreign student? Or did she have to put on an act in order to survive the difficult time she might have been going through? Like myriad questions on China, these too remain unanswered.

Then there was the lost generation.

In October 1978, I spent 12 days in Shanghai on business. I commuted from the hotel by taxi which was provided. One of my drivers was a friendly man of 26 years old. I used to sit in the front with him not because I enjoyed watching him just miss the bicycles ridden all over the road, but to chat with him when he was in the mood.

One day our conversation turned to the education system. February 1978 was the first time that students were admitted to university under the new examination system and not at the recommendation of their work place. In order to accommodate the millions of young Chinese who had missed out on higher education during the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government decided that, in addition to new high-school graduates, anybody under the age of 28 years old could take the examination.

"What do you think of the new enrollment system?" I asked the driver.

"It is much better now. No more privileges or going through the back door. Also, the motherland needs capable people for the Four Modernizations."

"Apart from this year's high-school graduates, did many other people pass the entrance examination?" I inquired.

"Yes, quite a few. They brushed up on their subjects and took the test. Many of them have been admitted to university."

"How about you? Would you like to enter university?"

"Me? I am uneducated. I am stupid!" He was angry. "I am supposed to have graduated from high school. What nonsense! I was in the first year of high school when the Cultural Revolution began. We were discouraged from studying, always pushed to make revolution and work with our hands. Classes were constantly disrupted. I am more like a graduate of primary school. How can I catch up on my studies? I have to work. They will not give me time off to study. What's the point of studying anyway? I don't stand a chance of passing. I will be driving this car...." He started to cry.

We were silent all the way to the hotel.

And there were the dissidents.

He was also 26 years old. Both his parents were intellectuals teaching in one of the most prestigious universities in Beijing. He was 14 years old when the Cultural Revolution erupted. He felt sympathetic to its objectives and was willing to support Chairman Mao's line in his school, until.... Until the Red Guards came to his home. In his presence, invoking Chairman Mao's words, they beat up his parents, burned books, destroyed or took away anything they considered bourgeois or foreign: clothes, jewelry, furniture, works of art, records, pictures, ornaments....

At the turn of 1978, about a year before the news of Democracy Wall ¹⁾ splashed across front pages in the West,

1) "Democracy Wall" was a long wall on a major artery in Beijing on which big-character posters were put up starting in the Fall of 1978. They demanded more democracy for the people; supported Deng Xiao-ping; attacked pro-Gang-of-Four leaders,

he was telling me:

"Still not much has changed. We got rid of the Gang of Four, but we do not have democracy yet. Can I criticize the Party or the government without being severely punished?"

"We talk about the Four Modernizations. But how are we to realize them, with the cadres we have? Their main worry is to stay in power, live well, send their children to good universities, and take advantage of the system."

"You foreign visitors are gullible. You are taken around by the authorities. Then you go back and say that things are going well in China. Yet, people are suffering..."

"You think you have sex problems in the West. You think there is no problem here. Young people in China are no different from those in the West. The only difference is that we are more discreet." 1)

"Nixon made a big mistake. He should have followed up the Shanghai Communiqué with a genuine rapprochement. The effect on the Chinese people would have been dramatic. It would have been the real cultural revolution. Can you imagine what would have gone on in the minds of the people on meeting more Americans, watching more television programs about the U.S., and learning about the wealth, the way of life, and the technological level in America?" 2)

Later in the year, he took the examination to enter university as a graduate student. He scored very high. But he did not pass because his marks in the political science part were so low that he was disqualified. His answers to the examination questions, unacceptable then, are now common currency in China.

and later on Deng Xiao-ping himself; accused Mao of the abuses of the Cultural Revolution; and demanded redress to numerous personal cases. Claiming that counter-revolutionary elements had taken advantage of this new medium of public expression, the authorities silenced the Democracy Wall in the Fall of 1979.

- 1) I beg to differ with my Chinese friend. Although I realize full well that one billion people are not all celibate, their sexual freedom is far more restricted than that in the West.
- 2) On this point my friend was right. A year later, on the occasion of Deng Xiao-ping's visits to Japan and the U.S., the Chinese media reported extensively on these two countries. The effect on the people was as my friend predicted.

These were some of the people I knew in China, and their reactions to the changes taking place. The friends I made were intellectuals, cadres and some workers, all in urban areas. They were as capable of independent thinking as people anywhere else. However, they imposed a strict discipline on themselves when speaking publicly, a characteristic of Chinese socio-political culture.

How different from my first visit to China in 1976. Not a single person asked me one question about Canada or the United States during that three-week period. I was given a most ethnocentric presentation of the country by government cadres, some of whom knew little about the world beyond the Great Wall. I left with the feeling that people were apprehensive of talking freely. Whereas now they compete with us in their eagerness to learn about the others' country.

Other changes took place in 1978 and 1979. Some of the most noticeable ones were on the street. More colorful, better tailored clothes for men and women appeared in shop windows. Women on the street showed signs of coquettishness: a touch of rouge, a silk scarf around the neck, hair curled, and a new leather pocket-book. A young lover in a newly bought beige western suit and necktie, circa 1960, shiny shoes, holding a bunch of colorful plastic flowers, and crossing the busiest artery in Beijing at the risk of his life, going to meet his fiancée.

A Sunday visit to Shanghai's Yu Garden. If the Chinese people one met there were to represent China, then this was a country of photographers. Among the hundreds of people enjoying the beauty of the garden, there were groups of young men passing around western clothes: a shirt, a necktie, a jacket and a hat. They would take turns putting them on to be photographed. I would snap the scene, wearing my Mao jacket.

In all Chinese cities, there were billboards with quotations from Mao, Lenin or Marx. Beginning in the Spring of 1979, the billboards in Shanghai were white-washed. A few weeks later, colorful advertisements for Chinese products such as medicine, cosmetics, lamps, clothes, and stationery, replaced the slogans. At the same time, billboards in choice locations introduced the Shanghaies to Japan Air Line, Mitsubishi trucks, Sony electronic products, Rolex watches.... From 7

o'clock in the morning till late at night, it looked as if there was a riot permanently going on outside the Shanghai First Department Store. People were elbowing their way to have a glimpse of the Sony products displayed in the brightly lit window.

The commercial network in China was state-controlled and used to be highly centralized. State-owned corporations had exclusive rights to buy and sell agricultural and industrial products. In 1979, elements of market economy were introduced, especially in the commercial sector. Peasants from neighboring communes started coming to the city with loads of fresh vegetables or other agricultural produce precariously balanced on their bicycles. They would squat on a busy corner selling the output of their private plots. A few months later, peasants grouped together bringing their produce on bicycle-pulled carts. In the Summer of the same year, even communes were allowed to peddle their above-quota production directly to the urban consumers in selected markets.

Business initiative was not limited to the peasants or their communes. Many unemployed and moonlighters set up stalls or squatted on sidewalks, peddling their ware: used books, hand-made children's toys, bamboo kitchen utensils and knitting needles, watch straps.... Others provided services such as photography, bicycle and shoe repair, and cold drinks. At times, Qin An Shi, a busy commercial block around the corner from our apartment in Shanghai, looked like a bustling "souk" in Beirut.

Beginning in the Spring of 1978, on the streets of Beijing and Shanghai:

"Hello! Do you speak English?"

"Yes, I do."

"Are you American?"

"No, Canadian."

"Canada, the country of Dr Norman Bethune. You are a friend of the Chinese people. Do you like your visit in my country (sic)?"

By the time the encounter was over, he -- I do not remember one instance of a she -- would have found out who I was, what I was doing in China, how much my income was, who the members of my family were, and so on. If I was in a hurry, I had to use a lot of diplomacy to shake off my greeter on the street. Otherwise, I managed to have my share of inquiries about him.

That was how I took the pulse of the country: with the masses.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Battat', written in dark ink.

Joseph Y. Battat