

“The People’s Luck”

Anti-authoritarian China

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For the past two summers, I accompanied my wife, who speaks Cantonese and Mandarin, to China so we could tour part of the country before she started summer school in a master’s program in Chinese literature in Nanjing, a city famed not only for being pillaged by Japan in World War II, but also as the country’s center of teacher education.

We flew directly to Guangzhou (formerly known as Canton), and booked our tours from there. It is one of the manufacturing cities along the Pearl River, which is China's major industrialized region, having received a head start on the rest of the country due to its proximity to Hong Kong.

I was the only non-Asian on our trips (my wife is an overseas Chinese, born and raised in Saigon). Everyone else on our tour was from Guangzhou. We spent our time getting to know many Chinese people, ones on the tour and others we met along the way, learning things about the country we might not otherwise have come across if we had taken trips designed for Westerners.

It seems to me the profoundest idea of the Italian Autonomists, writing in the 1970s, was their sense that mainstream political economists, who, in studying capitalism, concentrate on the doings of corporations, markets and executives, have it all wrong. As I read them, it is the workers whose actions (even when they are quiescent) determine what capitalists can and can't do. A belief like this is behind one of the basic principles of anarcho-syndicalism, namely, that it is in the factory, not in voting booths, that the questions of who will hold power in society, workers or bosses, has to be settled.

It is in the same spirit to say that one can learn more about a country by spending time with its workers than by reading speeches of its leaders or newspaper accounts of its industrial progress. Indeed, more often than not, this information distorts reality.

Take the idea promulgated by Western media about China's cowed workers. The common wisdom has it that, while the country still languishes under an authoritarian Communist regime, the involvement of the country in global capitalist networks is gradually liberating people—not, of course, by giving them more democracy, but the chance to purchase Western products, opening them to “self expression” through consumption. The recent “liberation” of people in China, to the limited degree they are getting more control over their own lives, is not something given them by the market economy, but what they are seizing on their own initiative.

The Chinese lower classes are some of the most unruly on earth (for good historical reasons) and are much less prone than, say, the American populace, to tolerate either government or market abuses. Although the government of China maintains police state rule, attacking any formation that threatens absolute Communist Party domination of the public sphere, the population remains restive and bold.

A critic might say the fact that the people are unhappy about China's turn to the private enterprise capitalist road doesn't mean much if they are not in a position to change anything. Indeed, nothing I observed gives much hope that, by itself, these widespread rebellious attitudes will put brakes to the Chinese capitalist juggernaut. However, I will end by looking at the important work of American scholar Beverly Silver, on patterns of worker unrest, which will cast a more hopeful light on the situation.

Before looking at the historical and structural reasons for the Chinese people's temperament, let me describe some of the incidents that started me thinking about this.

1. In the fancy areas of Guangzhou, where most Westerners find lodgings, people change money at their hotels or shopping centers, but in the more downbeat Beijing Lu section where we stayed, you could only change dollars at the China Bank, where the wait was between one and two hours for service.

On one occasion, when the only teller, aside from one selling state bonds, closed for lunch, a customer jumped up and began yelling at the manager through a glass partition. When a security officer tried to calm him down, seven or eight other customers joined in, also shouting through the partition. The guard backed down, slinking away and a new window was opened.

2. When we went on a trip to Lijiang River, our tour had two groups. About 20 of us had flown from Guangzhou to Guilin province, and another 20 (less well-off) took a 22-hour train ride to get there. One afternoon, the guide mentioned a “special charge” for the next day's event. The more well-heeled of us agreed to the payment, but the other half refused to fork out the money.

Here's the interesting part. That night, the more outspoken members of the poorer group made the rounds, canvassing room to room, saying that even if we (the plane travelers) could afford the extra charge, it was an injustice and we should refuse to go on this special side trip in solidarity with them. They accomplished their goal and convinced us—so that, instead of taking a planned canoe trip, we all had a day eating in the market and wandering around the town.

I ask you: Are either of these two scenarios imaginable in the United States?

But, to glance at larger scale events, here are some of the things that were taking place in China this and last summer, as reported in the English language Hong Kong South China Morning Post, stories my wife also followed on state TV.

3. On August 19, 2007, upset by lack of information about miners who had been drowned as a result of being trapped underground when Typhoon Sepat struck, people in Xintai rioted, burning down three (!!) police stations.

4. During the same week, metal workers struck in Hong Kong (where strikes are legal), shutting down the financial district for two days.

5. On June 30, 2008, in Guizhou, after becoming dissatisfied with a police cover-up of a murder, 10,000 (!!) people took to the streets and proceeded to burn down three government buildings and (only one this time) police station. It took three days to calm them down.

Perhaps I'm naive, but I hadn't expected to see so much unruliness in the Chinese public sphere, and I began to look for factors in the environment or in history that might have disposed people toward such anti-authoritarian attitudes.

1. Causes of Chinese Combativeness: Economics

American economist Robert Pollin has noted the myopic interpretations most US commentators have given when they hail China "for achieving remarkable economic success through embracing a free market economy." Truth is, "in sharp contrast with the rest of the former socialist countries, China undertook virtually no privatization of either industry or land...until the early 1990s, and even over the past decade has proceeded cautiously with these measures."

The sticking point for those who argue China has not really become capitalist is the land question. Even now the vast majority of farms *are not private property but communes*. Indeed, as Italian economist Giovanni Arrighi points out, China's economic miracle began in the countryside with the establishment in 1984 of TVEs (Township and Village Enterprises). The state legalized and nurtured these entities: small-scale, *collectively owned* business enterprises in rural hamlets, whose "labor-intensive orientation allowed them to absorb rural surplus labor and raise rural incomes without a massive increase in migration to urban areas."

It may seem strange to emphasize the agricultural sector in an economy that, in the last 15 years, has seen one of the most rapid transitions to capitalist industrialization in history. But as China critic Joel Andreas has emphasized recently, what seems a contradiction is actually an explanation. As he puts it, "the land-tenure system established in the 1980s has served the broader interests of capital." It has averted the catastrophes that have occurred when large populations are displaced from the countryside and "has allowed rural subsistence production to subsidize the employers of migrant workers," so that, in down times these workers can go back to the communal lands.

Indeed, in another seemingly paradoxical development, in China *the more capitalist industrialization has grown, the more people are unemployed*.

In the early 1980s, the government set up Special Economic Zones (SEZs), "whose purpose," writes China scholar Craig Dietrich, "was to promote exports by creating enclaves and inducements for foreign investors and joint ventures." The first SEZ was in Shenzhen, sister city to Guangzhou.

As the businesses in these zones grew in influence, they were permitted by the government to take over from state enterprises. Inefficient and dictatorially run as these state companies were, they did provide the "iron rice bowl," that is, not only did they supply workers with modest wages, a flat, medical care, and education for children, but a lifetime job. Since the 1990s turn away from state capitalism to private capitalist forms, many government enterprises have been privatized or closed, and even remaining firms in the state sector are being made to conform to the private capitalist model, with the result, as Andreas details, that "lifetime employment guarantees were eliminated, and enterprises not only reduced the size of their workforces, but also discharged veteran workers and replaced them with younger workers who were less costly and more pliant."

Ironically enough, mirroring this change, the scenes of discharged workers hanging around a mothballed factory in Zhang Yimou's film *Happy Times* (2000) look quite like those of the British hands killing time at the idled ironworks in the opening of *The Full Monty* (1997).

The new privately owned capitalist enterprises depend not so much on proletarians, working year in and year out, but semi-proletarians, temps, who work for a stint and then return to their small towns when work runs out. In South China's Pearl River region, the employees, in response to the tide of foreign (mainly US) orders, flood into the city to begin work in July and end in December, at which point, they flood back out.

Aside from the fact that the seasonal nature of employment creates a different (and sometimes more rebellious) mindset than that found in full-time, year-round workers, this structure has resulted in competition between the southern metropolises for workers. As readers may know, China has recently instituted a five-day work week, rules against compulsory overtime, and a higher minimum wage.

However, this is not enough to attract workers to particular cities since they all share these benefits. This summer, Guangzhou raised its minimum wage rate, already over the national rule, higher. Meanwhile, in order to attract more permanent residents, Shenzhen continued with its program of opening more city offices to multi-party, contested elections. Now, it is contemplating making the mayor's office elective.

It may be that such sops will simply calm and buy off the workers, but let's reserve further judgment till we discuss Silver's work below.

2. Tiananmen Square: Its Unappreciated Significance

If we accept the idea that an organic anarchism is one of the social responses influencing the Chinese semi-proletarians, then we are immediately hit with a vexing question: How can this group be organized? Proletarians, who put in long hours in factories or offices, develop bonds of association, from working in harness and setting their own informal work rules.

Moreover, they may be situated in the economy such that work stoppages, particularly ones like the 1930s US factory occupations and sit-ins, pose serious threats to capitalist rule. As sociologists Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward show in their work on this period, it was this viable threat, not unions, that produced gains for workers. "Factory workers had their greatest influence and were able to extract their most substantial concessions... during the early years of the Depression *before they were organized into unions*. Their power was not rooted in organization, but in their capacity to disrupt the economy" (their emphasis).

Semi proletarians do not have this capacity since they are usually employed in marginal industries (whose stoppage would not seriously affect the economy) and, in any case, since they are only hired for short stints, they do not have the time to form ties with fellow workers that would allow them to carry out collective actions. Without being in the position to strike at or occupy factories or businesses, their power is severely circumscribed. Or, so it has seemed.

Manhattan's Tompkins Square 1988. Tiananmen Square 1989. Oaxaca 2006. These three events have dramatically announced a new and effective strategy by which semi-proletarians can bring their power to bear against the system. This new form of protest is *the massive, lengthy occupation of a public space in the most sacred sites of the nation-state*. *

(The analogy between these three events cannot be taken too far in that Tiananmen protesters were privileged students while in Tompkins Square, the homeless, squatters and assorted punks and anarchists fueled the uprising.)

The Lower East Side occupation started when, with activists' help, the homeless set up a tent city in the middle of the park. With squatter and neighborhood donations, the encampment lasted a year before, on August 7, 1988, the police drove out the resistance village, resulting in an all-night running battle between the police and the neighborhood.

The Chinese students, however, were from the opposite end of the social hierarchy, that is, the top. Yet, as the novel *Beijing Coma* by Ma Jian, a Chinese dissident who lives in exile in Europe, shows, the Tiananmen student occupiers were kept going by massive daily contributions from restaurants, factories and offices.

The people in these businesses explicitly called the students their representatives, telling them they hated the same abuses but would be too easily struck down if they dared the same kind of open expression. Recall, too, that when the army was set to enter the city, it was these workers, not the students in the square, who barricaded every main entry street into Beijing in an attempt to avert the bloodbath.

This brings up the main point. An occupation doesn't have to be well-managed. Its mere presence sets wheels in motion. The occupation persists, it continues to develop chains of sympathy which became particularly extensive in Beijing where the students stood up against an authoritarian state, which most citizens join them in resenting. Second, as long as the occupiers remain, they hold a sacred space in a new status. It has been converted from a ceremonial or recreational enclave into a seized stronghold for living out a (at times carnivalesque) confrontation, which calls into question schemas of public/private, as well as those governing private property. Even for those at a distance, it stands as a potent symbol of the limits of the system and the ability of groups to self-organize.

Third, occupiers, living and working together on site, begin to experience the solidarity and mutual respect which proletarians gain in their work associations and unions. But where the worker had to obtain this amidst alienating labor conditions, the semi-worker achieves this in a glorious (if temporary and squalid) autonomous space.

3. Causes of Chinese Combativeness: The Mixed Heritage of Communism

The Chinese political economy has mostly remained in the pre-capitalist condition some Marxists call the Asiatic Mode of Production. This holds true despite the triumph of the 1949 revolution and the official state ideology of communism.

Although the Chinese seem wild for the overt capitalist forms that now dominate their economy, allegiance to an elusive socialist equality remains among many, particularly the poor who are aghast at the new buccaneers who care nothing for the general welfare. This is similar to the resentment which fueled the many uprisings of the peasant and urban poor at the birth of European capitalism, when the lower classes realized the obligations of the former economic system were rapidly disappearing.

One reminder in China is the ubiquitous shrines to the founders of the Communist state erected by those who they venerate. Imagine visiting, say, the home of a long-dead US president. It would undoubtedly be filled with expensive knickknacks. Contrast this, then, to the former lodgings of Mao and Chou En-Lai we visited in Yan'an (once spelled Yen-an), the end point of the Long March, which had been the Communist war center from 1935 to 1948.

Furnishings in Mao's house: one table, one chair, one bed, all primitive and rough hewn. Viewing such revered sites certainly promotes a Spartan lifestyle. Not that Mao always occupied such minimalist quarters, but these are the ones to which tourists make a pilgrimage. The grander palaces the modern Chinese rulers occupied wouldn't encourage the work ethic, frugality, and sacrifice the emerging state capitalist regime needed from its proletariat. Now, they function as post-modern kitsch.

But there is another side to this, a more post-modern and contradictory one. On the first day of our tour, we visited the Longmen Caves in Luoyang, where vast Buddhas are carved into the cliff face. After our fellow tourists, a few of them Communist Party members, lit incense and bowed three times in front of the half-effaced, still magnificent statues, we went to the gift shops to buy souvenirs. Then, we paid to dress up in native costumes to have our pictures taken.

The next day we went to Yan'an, where after hearing pious lectures from People's Liberation Army tour guides and getting our pictures taken in front of wax effigies of party notables of the Heroic Age, it was again off to the gift shops. This time, we bought a Chairman Mao lucky charm—my friend Spencer says it embodies “the people's luck”—and then paid to get our photo taken, dressing up in 1940s PLA uniforms, complete with toy gun, to pose in front of a war poster.

The pervasive commercialization of religion and the ruling party's claimed revolutionary heritage probably has lost the power to manipulate imagery in support of the state and with it the veneration that all socialist rulers strive to propagate with such trinkets and shrines. It all remains less powerful than those peddled at American sites since the official mythology is more eroded in China. It has devolved into revolutionary kitsch.

4. Causes of Chinese Combativeness: General Dissatisfaction

One hot afternoon, we sat down in a huge, packed “yum cha” restaurant, overlooking Guangzhou’s Pearl River. (These restaurants serve only small dishes which people snack on as they have tea. “Yum cha” means “drink tea.”) We shared an eight-person table, and sat there for three hours, chatting with people as they came and left. It turned out this place was well patronized because a pair of customers could buy one appetizer and a pot of tea (which was refilled gratis) and then relax in air conditioning for hours. Total bill: 50 cents. And, there is no tipping.

One of the more interesting pronouncements we heard from a customer was the bitter comment, “The Chinese economic miracle is hollow.”

The speaker said although wages and benefits had improved, most people either worked part time or didn’t have a job. If we looked into it, we would find many cases where one adult in a family was working and two or three others had to depend on that single salary.

This is hardly surprising given what has already been mentioned about the large scale downsizing taking place since the 1990s.

But there is a further way to look at this dissatisfaction and its possible outcome provided by Beverly Silver’s magnificent *Forces of Labor* in which she concentrates on the international movement of the auto industry. Why is it that companies have relocated their industrial production to a given third world country and, then, a few decades later, relocate again somewhere else?

Her meticulous research shows that in every country where global auto manufacturers have sited large industrial bases, from Italy and Brazil to South Africa and South Korea, after a decade or so of labor peace, *without exception*, the workers begin organizing, striking and demanding more rights, ending by driving the companies “on the road again.” She believes there is no way China can avoid this same upsurge of worker militancy, though, she continues, at this late date, it seems almost as if these large producers have nowhere left to run.

5. Concluding Thought: The Bicycle

Although it is difficult to discern a single national character for any country, let alone one as vast as China, I hope I have supplied enough reasons to suggest the Chinese people have a marked anti-authoritarian streak although how this will serve them in their fight against their political and economic masters is yet to be determined. So, let me end by moving to a slightly different observation; one admittedly somewhat fanciful, anecdotal, and limited, to be sure.

Social critics of America, from Alexis de Toqueville to Louis Hartz, have noted the apparent contradiction between the widely proclaimed value placed on individualism, and the little tolerance Americans display for non-normative behavior as compared to what is allowed in, say, France or England. During my travels, it occurred to me that perhaps the American consumption of so many standardized commodities tends to produce a standardized mass psychology; a national character of passivity and submission.

What got me thinking this way was looking at bicycles in China.

In Xi’an at rush hour, one lane in each direction was reserved for bikes, scooters, and motorcycles. And, what a picturesque and exciting lane that was.

Not only all types of people, from trendily dressed teens to schoolkids in uniforms to men or women transporting goods, such as loads of shirts or vegetables, to businessmen or waitresses in uniforms. Not only all types, but all combinations. Couples on scooters, with the man in back with his hand around the woman’s waist; another on a bike with the woman in back, sitting sidesaddle.

A child, maybe four years old, sitting backward on a scooter, behind her mother to hold a rest bar. Another scooter held a father and three children. Two stood on the little floor space in front of him, holding the handlebars, another clutching him on behind in the seat.

We were moving slowly and I noticed a middle-aged woman, who looked like a nightclub singer, made up with lipstick and rouge, a flower in her hair and wearing a Vietnamese *ao di* (dress slit up the side), sat gingerly on the back of a bicycle, grasping the pedaler’s shoulders. Each time they came to a stoplight, the woman jumped off, I

guess, because she couldn't balance on the bike when it was stationary. When the light changed, she ran alongside until the vehicle picked up speed and then hopped gracefully back on.

All this was observed on the street, but bicycles also travel on inner city highways. I can't forget looking down from one elevated part of a cloverleaf we had taken to see below us, a slightly less elevated roadway that was filled solely with the fluid motion of hundreds of bikes.

I was struck by the difference between cars and these smaller vehicles. Not that there were all that many private cars. Rather, there were taxis and numerous buses. I realized that a bike or a scooter is a very expressive vehicle. This is not so much in the differences in make and decoration, although that plays a small part, but because of the different ways of riding and the dress of the riders. It's a big difference from the anonymity of a standardized car, which reveals little about the occupant. A car doesn't have the poignant loveliness of a bicycle and its rider.

From my experience, it seems the sprightly, quirky, joyous common Chinese have an ability to demonstrate a good deal more individuality, spunk and pleasure in life than there is room for in the society of the deteriorating American Dream.

And, they believe fervently, judging from their complaints about encroaching capitalism, in the necessity of upholding the rights of the people, including the right to revolt.

* Those interested in a more detailed comparison of the Tompkins Square and Tiananmen Square occupations can see my review of *Beijing Coma* at www.tribes.org/web/ [it is also in *The Occupation of Public Space: New York, Beijing, Oaxaca, Fifth Estate* #381, Summer-Fall 2009].

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