
SOCIAL CRISIS

Faced with unrest, can Peking rule?

by Gregory F. Buhyoff

“Today on the mainland there are many people who do not have faith in the Communist Party and socialism . . .”

—The Hong Kong communist monthly
Zheng Ming, December 1981

The current turmoil in China is more than a struggle between rival factions within the Chinese Communist Party. At stake is the ability of the entire regime to hold onto the “hearts and minds” of a population increasingly disenchanted with its rule. The current relationship between the Chinese masses and the CCP is not unlike that which developed under previous dynasties when the emperor lost the “Mandate of Heaven” in the eyes of his subjects, and with it the right to rule. Ideology, be it Confucianism, Taoism, or Maoism, has always been what binds the Chinese masses to their rulers.

The Dengists, however, beginning in 1978, repudiated Mao’s “mind-over-matter” political spiritualism, claiming that they could better control the population through material incentives. Under such slogans as “seek truth from facts” and “emancipate the mind,” they argued that material reality, not politics, should henceforth propel the “Four Modernizations.” In line with this principle, the Dengists relegated politics to second place, and reoriented economic policies around *promises* of rising living standards. This about-face included the introduction of limited “free-market” arrangements in the countryside and promises of material incentives for increased production in the factories.

It was not until the spring of 1981, following the trial of the radical Maoist Gang of Four that the Dengists dared to take on Mao directly, launching the “de-Maoization” campaign out of their ideological think tank, the Academy of Social Sciences.

The campaign immediately provoked screams even from those within the leadership associated with the Deng faction who feared that tampering with the sacred name of Mao would unlock a Pandora’s box for the CCP. They recognized that the cult of Mao was the means by which the CCP maintained the fealty of the masses—its basis of legitimacy, whose toppling would leave an ideological vacuum. The esteemed veteran Gen.

Huang Kecheng, a leading official in the Discipline Inspection Commission, warned at the time, “Defaming and distorting Mao can only defame and distort the party and our socialist motherland. . . . What would take the place of Mao Zedong Thought if it were abandoned? Do they mean to call back Sun Yat-sen or Confucius? Do they mean to introduce into our country capitalist things from the West?”

Already in many parts of China the CCP is compelled to compete with age-old ideologies and practices which supposedly had been done away with long ago. Last year saw the re-emergence of the folk superstitions and secret-society ideology to which the predominantly peasant population has always turned in times of political and economic adversity. Their faith in the party leadership shaken, peasants in the countryside are turning en masse to fortune tellers, mediums, sorcery, and other superstitions, as well as organizing among themselves for mutual succor, a phenomena that has led to crime. Practices such as mercenary marriages, child-selling, prostitution, temple-building, drug smuggling, and organized crime have taken hold in many rural areas in open defiance of party dictates.

In Fujian province during the recent Lunar New Year festival, angry peasants rioted and ransacked the local party headquarters after officials tried to stop them from parading a statue of a Buddhist deity around town. This problem, the media noted, is not isolated. On Hainan Island, according to the official newspaper *Nanfang Ribao*, peasants from contending villages have engaged in pitched battles over land rights dating back to before the communist takeover in 1949! The same newspaper reported that pregnant women are enlisting the assistance of sorcerers to protect them from cadres assigned the task of enforcing the regimes’ “one-child-only” population reduction policy. The authority of previous landlords, and village monks, is on the increase, and such centuries-old secret societies as the Triads have come out of the woodwork with the breakdown of party authority on the local level.

Last year, China graduated its first batch of university graduates since the Cultural Revolution. However, few desire to work for the state, preferring rather to choose their own line of work. Students on campuses across the country are openly rejecting the official ideology of the state. According to first-hand reports, Communist Youth League-fielded candidates were trounced by non-party candidates in recent campus elections at several major universities in China. High unemployment and general pessimism about the future have made youth in urban areas prone to criminal activity, some of which is being manipulated by factional groups in the political struggle. In Tianjin, a major city in the north, the daily newspaper editorialized recently: “Juvenile crime is a major problem jeopardiz-

ing social order. Young lawbreakers and criminals are not only saboteurs of social order, but they are also victims of the pernicious influence of the Gang of Four.”

The political purge, intersecting a period of ideological breakdown and economic collapse, has given rise to organized gangs, secret armies, and secret societies, which are engaged in activities ranging from terrorism to economic crimes. Some of these are the same age-old secret societies that appeared in every previous dynastic collapse and which helped form the early Communist party. The danger of the situation is heightened by the fact that many within the civilian population have retained arms and explosives that fell into their hands during the Cultural Revolution.

In late December, Shanghai radio warned: “Social order still remains rather unstable, and many complicated factors affecting public order still exist. It is necessary to make concerted efforts to strike at criminals, divide and demoralize gangs. . .” Sichuan provincial radio, referring to a situation common in many provinces, said in January: “In this struggle, we should make a smashing attack on the vicious criminals and severely punish those who are guilty of murder, arson, looting, rape, and bombing, and other criminal acts seriously disrupting social order.”

The party has found it difficult to command discipline because of the extent to which its *own cadres* are participating in the anarchy. In several highly publicized cases last year, cadre-led peasant armies of up to 1,500 raided and plundered state-owned enterprises, inflicting considerable losses to the state. A year-end Xinhua broadcast warned, “. . . this incident of looting and destroying state property in this colliery in Hunan has once again showed that some of our party organizations and many of our comrades fail to vigorously wage struggles against bourgeois individualism, anarchism, and erroneous trends in defiance of organizational discipline. The most important reason why such incidents *repeatedly occur* is the fact that the leadership of some party organizations is weak and lax and that serious tendencies prevail among some cadres [emphasis added].”

In industrial areas severely hit by Deng’s cutbacks, high unemployment has provoked labor unrest, demonstrations, and demands for Solidarity-style labor unions independent of the Communist Party. Strikes in the coal mines of Jilin province have broken out for the first time since the Cultural Revolution, while demobilized soldiers, discontent with government efforts to resettle them, have begun organizing groups to press their grievances. Last July in the coastal town of Meilü, in Guangdong province, 3,000 army veterans calling themselves the “Disillusioned Army” staged a three day violent uprising against government offices in the town

before they were put down by local troops. Small wonder that when U.S. Assistant Secretary of State John Holdridge sought Chinese support for a denunciation of martial law in Poland during a mid-January trip to Peking, he was told that China is in no position to support illegal unions and strikes in a communist country.

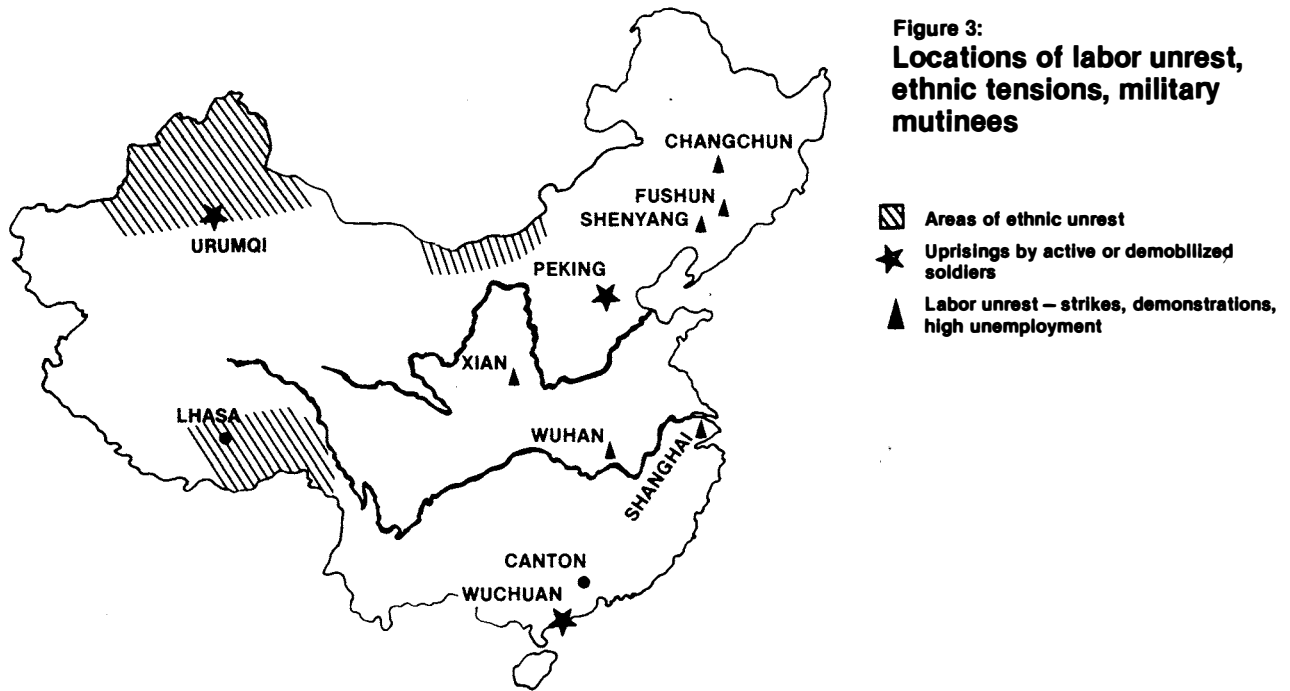
Deng’s Hong Kong policy under fire

“Weakness and laxity” is not the only aspect of Dengist policy which has drawn fire from factional opponents for engendering an “unhealthy” ideological situation in the country. One of the foundations of Deng’s foreign policy, the intimate relationship with Hong Kong and the Overseas Chinese, is under attack for bringing “decadent bourgeois” ideology back into China. The *Nanfang Ribao*, which serves southern China, said recently: “Along with the implementation of special policies and flexible measures in our province and the establishment of the special economic zones, external economic activities have been developed. . . . Nevertheless, it is undeniable that there are some cadre who have been corrupted by bourgeois ideology and have done things in violation of party discipline . . . speculation, graft, embezzlement, collusion with foreigners, harming the public for private gain, giving and receiving bribes, smuggling, avoiding customs, asking for presents and illegally obtaining foreign money. What especially draws our attention is that recently some people have become bolder and bolder and their desires greater and greater.”

Premier Zhao was forced to address this issue at the December 1981 meeting of the National People’s Congress. “In recent years, our international contacts have sharply increased,” he said. “As a result of corrosion by the corrupt ideology and life-style of the foreign bourgeoisie, instances of abandonment of our national dignity have recurred in some places.”

Strong polemical debates in the official media on the regime’s relationship with Hong Kong have served to demonstrate the lines along which the leadership is divided. The *Peking Daily*, in a Dec. 3 attack on “those who seek nourishment from foreign lands,” pitted the “Peking School” of socialist morality against the “Shanghai School” of corruption, referring to the days when Shanghai was the center of imperialist presence in China, now supplanted by Hong Kong as a generating point of “decadent culture.” The newspaper editorialized: “As we are currently practicing an open door policy in regard to foreign countries we want to import new technology and absorb foreign capital. Undoubtedly we welcome contributions from the Hong Kong and Macao compatriots. However, we definitely do not want to import exotic dress, decadent music, rock and roll, dances, and obscene books and magazines; neither

**Figure 3:
Locations of labor unrest,
ethnic tensions, military
mutinees**



High unemployment and disaffection with the Communist Party has incited workers to attempt the formation of Solidarity-style independent unions in Shaanxi province and in the important tri-city industrial area of Wuhan, and provoked demonstrations and labor unrest in Shanghai and in the industrial Northeast.

Tensions remain high between ethnic minorities and Hans in Xinjiang (Sinkiang), Xizang (Tibet) and Nei Menggu (Inner Mongolia), causing protest demonstrations.

Disaffection in army ranks has spawned mutinies by active and demobilized troops in several locations in China. In Xinjiang last summer company level troops stormed and occupied government offices in protest over an incident involving a local minority and a PLA soldier. According to usually reliable Hong Kong Communist press, an aborted uprising by PLA artillery units took place last winter just prior to the National People's Congress Standing Committee meeting which announced further cuts in the defense budget. In Guangdong, demobilized soldiers unhappy with government efforts to resettle them staged a three-day violent uprising against government and party last July.

do we want to import the hackneyed tune of bourgeois human nature, human rights, democracy and liberty. In short we must resist the corrosive capitalist 'civilization.'

Will Peking rehabilitate Mao?

The regime is faced with the reality that where it promised economic incentives and a higher standard of living as a replacement for ideological rigidity, it now has neither. Ideological fetters dissolving and economic promises bankrupt, the Dengists have been left with no recourse but to revive some tenets of the Maoist ideology they had so recently repudiated. "Seeking truth from facts," the code phrase for subordinating politics to material concerns, is being heard less and less these days. Calls for "keeping politics in command," and the need to stress "self-reliance," are more prominent in the official media.

Most telling is the restoration, as an ideological reference, of the "Daqing model," after Mao's pet industrial project, renowned for its spirit of sacrifice and ideological orthodoxy. Since 1978, "Learn from

Daqing" had been repeatedly criticized for glorifying its "political achievement" while fraudulently covering up gross mismanagement and destruction of oil fields which Mao's "mind-over-matter" irrationalities wrought. Nonetheless, on Dec. 25 the Xinhua News Agency broadcast the contents of a Central Committee circular resurrecting "Daqing," since echoed by the provincial and local media.

The revival of this erstwhile ideological anathema is less a concession to factional opponents that it is a desperate realization by the regime that they have no substitute to offer, economic or otherwise, capable of maintaining social control. Despite his efforts to cut Mao down to size, Deng must still turn to the late chairman in order to rally the masses.

Whether Mao's discredited policies will wash with a population that has seen one failure after another, regardless of the faction that has produced them, remains to be seen. There is a possibility that whatever the outcome of the factional battles, the victors may well find themselves presiding over a party that no longer commands the allegiance of the masses.