China’s Long Hot Summer

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A 60-year-old man, carrying his parakeet in a bamboo cage, struggles across the vast square and is shot dead by the soldiers. This is the first person killed in the bloody June 4 massacre in Tiananmen Square. Or so we are told by the local tour guide in Beijing as we hear the shocking news for the first time. The guide then describes to us the murder of a pregnant woman, a nine year old girl, and hundreds, maybe thousands, of students. Within hours of the killings mythologies already begin to unfold and the elevation of martyrs begins.

That imagery of a caged bird and an old man, however, has become a more appropriate symbol of what is happening in China today than the metaphors of rebirth and growth which were prevalent in the weeks leading up to the military action. On May 28, I was surrounded by 50 or 60 excited young Chinese people at the “English Corner” section of Shanghai’s largest park, Remin Park or the People’s Park. Every Sunday, crowds of English-speaking Chinese gather at the Shanghai Library side of the park to practice their English. This day they had a lot to talk about. Exactly 40 years ago, on May 28, 1949, the People’s Liberation Army arrived in Shanghai transforming control of the city from foreign hands to the new China. And now these young people were talking about the prospects of democracy and freedom for a newer China.

Just 10 days earlier China and the world witnessed the largest demonstrations held anywhere. Students, who originally gathered in Beijing to mourn the death of Hu Yaobang, began to chant for democracy and freedom. Soon, however, the millions who rallied in Beijing and the hundreds of thousands who marched in Shanghai were calling for Li Peng to resign and, in essence, for all the old leaders to step down. A “China Spring” was happening.

People have often asked why these huge demonstrations seem to occur during the spring: Prague in 1968, Paris in 1968, and now China. Perhaps the answer really is as simple and cynical as the observation that it’s more convenient to demonstrate during warmer weather. Perhaps, more likely, is an answer Joseph Campbell might argue, that spring is traditionally a time for rebirth and renewal: planting the seeds for later harvest.

Such was clearly the imagery when talking with Shanghai people that particular Sunday in May. While their dreams may have been for immediate results, their realism about social change led them to see the recent demonstrations as a planting for later fruition. The sense of rising expectations—typically the conditions under which revolutions are more likely to occur—came through loud and clear as I stood for two hours among the Shanghai people eager not only to practice their English, but also eager for information.

My arrival in the park was immediately acknowledged as the English speakers quickly formed a huddle around me, four deep and anxious to talk. Clearly and in often good English, the mostly young people competed to ask me questions, first about my opinions of the mass demonstrations, then about the economics of capitalism and the politics of democracy. Despite some attempts by me to change the topic to other social issues, as new faces entered to the growing circle, the questions continued in the same vein.

What they asked and how they phrased them concisely points out their central concerns.

Is it true that the U.S. government doesn’t own any farms or factories? Can someone appear on TV, criticize the government, and not get arrested? Are local leaders, like mayors, appointed by the central government? Can you choose where to live and work you do? Did Americans support the demonstrations? What do you think will happen to China and its leaders? Are demonstrations an effective way to change society? How do you remove leaders from office if you don’t approve of what they do?

These Shanghai young people devoured any and all information about American politics and economics. My 15 minutes of fame at the center of attention quickly became two hours as we discussed these issues. They showed a remarkable familiarity with the American system, even correcting me at one point on the eligibility requirements to run for a Congressional seat. Much of their news comes from the Voice of America and the BBC, they said. I wondered how many young Americans would say they regularly listened to the news or would have been able to discuss similar questions about their own country with as much depth as these Chinese people were doing.

Although I felt as if I were the defender of the American system, my answers were not simplistic patriotism about democracy and capitalism. I tempered by remarks by pointing out some of the criticisms: power in our society typ-