Tiananmen, Television and the Public Sphere: Internationalization of Culture and the Beijing Spring of 1989

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The day after the Tiananmen massacre of June 3-4 my friends and I began to feel an acute deprivation of news.¹ We talked to everyone we could, especially anyone adventurous enough to have ridden into the center of Beijing to see the army deployments and the remnants of struggle. We tried to sort through the many rumors. But we suffered for lack of television and newspapers; we huddled around radios trying to hear the BBC or Voice of America above the static and squeals of the jamming. Only two weeks before we had enjoyed the freest press in the history of the People's Republic of China. Now it was almost impossible to find out anything. Television played irrelevant soap operas and Kung Fu movies; there were no news broadcasts, not even lies. Even telephone service from our university to different parts of Beijing was interrupted.

Finally two expatriate friends and I recognized the solution. We rented a room in the Shangri-La Hotel, a fancy Hong Kong/PRC joint venture a mile down the Xisanhuan road. There we enjoyed the benefits of Cable News Network reports every half-hour around the clock. There we found the CBS crew ensconced on the fifth floor, though Dan Rather had already departed. Fang Lizhi and his American friend, Perry Link, passed through as the former struggled with whether to seek asylum in the US embassy. My Chinese students came and watched the television reports. They used the phone to call friends around town and nearby, checking and cross-checking various reports. We sent and received FAXes. We cabled in reports to London newspapers and held interviews with American television stations by long-distance.

We were, according to these reports, 'eyewitnesses', voices from the center of things. Our words became the stuff of television reports. Yet, in order to gain some perspective beyond what our own immediate observations gave us, we were dependent on those same television reports, especially CNN, beamed to Beijing by satellite (which someone had, temporarily, forgotten to shut down at the Shangri-La). What we could see on the

¹ Though it is organized in terms of different themes, this essay overlaps somewhat with two longer ones. No attempt is made to give a narrative account of the protest movement here as this is done in "Democracy and Science, 1989: A Report from Beijing" (*Society*, 1989); "The Beijing Spring, 1989: Notes on the Making of a Protest" (*Dissent*, forthcoming), which addresses especially questions of leadership, organization and tactics in the student movement.

streets was a small if powerful piece of the action. What we could know first hand had, perhaps, a special veracity but was hardly the whole story. No one could really know the whole story, of course, but the only possible approach to a 'complete' view depended on the role of telephones and mass media (as well as a face-to-face network of gossip and discussion) in synthesizing the reports of many witnesses. We lived crucially in both the physical space of Beijing and the placeless (or 'metatopical') space of the international information flow. The army had made the first cease to function as a public sphere, at least for a time. The second became all the more important if more problematic at the same time.

China's recent pro-democracy movement was in part an attempt to establish a public sphere, a realm of political discourse outside the control of the state. If this effort had a physical location, it was Tiananmen Square. Students using the catchword 'democracy' called more concretely for civil liberties conducive to public discourse about the current state and future of China: freedom of speech and publication, association and demonstration.

But the 'Beijing Spring' of 1989 had both an intensive and an extensive relationship to space. It was intensively focused on Tiananmen Square. It seized that location, incorporated its material symbols into a new drama, packed a million protesters into its confines. The movement lost coherence and intensity as a function of distance from the Square. At the same time, the movement existed in a 'metatopical public space' of multinational media and indirect relationships to a world of diverse and far-flung actors. The movement's protagonists consciously addressed this world even though it had to seem distant, insubstantial and remote from their tangible experience. From the two-fingered 'V' for victory to the 'Goddess of Democracy' inspired by the Statue of Liberty, the movement wove symbols from a common international culture together with its own specifically Chinese concerns and conscience.

Four issues concerning the nature of the 'public sphere' in the 'Beijing Spring' of 1989 seem worthy of brief remark. First, there is the way in which the protest transformed Tiananmen Square from a state-oriented ceremonial space to a setting for popular discourse. Second, there are the many ways in which international media constituted a public sphere transcending the concrete movement activities in Beijing. Behind these lies the third issue, the way in which the internationalization of culture, wrought initially by capitalist expansion and Western imperialism, sets the backdrop for this and other Chinese protests. And finally, there is the question of just what sort of social institutions could nurture a democratic public discourse in a country of more than a billion people, a question which turns, I think, on relating the world of face-to-face, directly interpersonal relationships to that of mediated, indirect relationships. I can do little more than raise this last, very broad issue; I will hardly exhaust the first three.

Tiananmen Square has replaced the adjacent Imperial Palace of the Forbidden City as metaphorical center of China. Instead of the ceremonies of a court closed to commoners, Tiananmen Square offers ritual representations of popular government. During the forty years of Communist rule, it has been a place to which 'the people' came in large crowds to witness displays of leadership and to grant leaders authority by their acclamation. Especially during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, Tiananmen played a crucial role in Chinese politics. Here Mao addressed favored groups of Red Guards; here he reviewed the army. It was frequently from Tiananmen displays that new shifts of policy were inferred and from there that they spread out through the populace. It was also to Tiananmen that the true believers came for inspiration, for a glimpse of Mao, for the most Durkheimian of collective representations of social membership. Appropriately (on symbolic if not architectural criteria), Mao's mausoleum was placed in Tiananmen Square.

In this way, Tiananmen straddled traditional modes of authority and novel, more 'popular' ones. During Mao's life, Tiananmen was used for ritual displays of the sort of publicity by which the authority of European monarchs reached their people:

Representation in the sense in which the members of a national assembly represent a nation or a lawyer represents his clients had nothing to do with this publicity of representation inseparable from the lord's concrete existence, that, as an "aura," surrounded and endowed his authority. When the territorial ruler convened about him ecclesiastical and worldly lords, knights, prelates and cities (...), this was not a matter of an assembly of delegates that was someone else's representative. As long as the prince and the estates of his realm "were" the country and not just its representatives, they could represent it in a specific sense. They represented their lordship not for but "before" the people.²

Of course, Maoist ceremonies differed in many ways from the European forms of court and/or feudal authority and even from traditional Chinese authority. Nonetheless, they shared the feature that Mao (like emperors and kings) represented the country to the people at least as much as he could be considered their representative in the government. To the extent he was the latter, he represented the people as a unitary mass, not as a differentiated body with diverse views or interests. Mao's speeches to the people were monological, not a polyphonic discourse; they were communications from the top of society down.³

² J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989 [orig. 1962]).

³ In European political history, the separation of state from society, now celebrated in analyses of Eastern European struggles for Western style liberalism, was prefigured crucially by the contrast between 'descending' and 'ascending' accounts of the legitimacy of authority. While the first treated authority as devolving from God onto Pope and Emperor, and thence to lesser lords, the second stressed the role of the community (especially in the Germanic tradition of tribal *Volk* and *Gemeinde*) in recognizing or granting authority to the "best" or "strongest" of its members. See W. Ullman, *Medieval Political*

At the same time that they incorporated traditional elements, Maoist ceremonies involved rituals of popular sovereignty. The very nature of the public place suggests this: a square built for popular political gatherings, not a market, still less a monarchical parade through city streets. Yet, the Square was not a place of discourse. It was not an Italian *piazza*; it did not house a New England town hall. It was over a hundred acres huge; crowds of perhaps a million people jammed into it. Once there, they were addressed as a mass, not a differentiated body of interlocutors capable of discourse amongst themselves, let alone with the government. Indeed, one of the most telling descriptions of the 1989 movement was that the protesters were tired of being treated as the government's masses and asked to be China's citizens.

In Tiananmen Square, in short, the Chinese government had produced a place which incorporated the imagery and representations of popular sovereignty, but which was used for acclamations of non-democratic party rule. In this sense, Tiananmen is a striking metaphor for the problem's gigantic scale and weak intermediate associations pose for democracy throughout the modern world. We have the external attributes of popular rule far more than the capacity to carry it out, not least because we lack the institutional bases for vital, effective and democratic public discourse. In the West as in China, manufactured publicity 'sells' politicians to the people; the latter respond as consumers with an acclamation of their support, but not as creative, autonomous participants in public discourse. The problem is not only cultural. No public square can be adequate to such discourse in a society of millions of people, let alone one with more than a billion. Such discourse must be carried out through the media and in at least quasi-autonomous communities and associations.⁴

When students seized Tiananmen Square, they seized a powerful, multivocal symbol. The Square spoke at once of the government, which used it to display its power, and of the people who gave the government authority by gathering there to acclaim official leaders. It linked the imperial palace to revolutionary monuments; it represented the center of China. By their actions the students transformed the meaning of the Square. Its popular side became dominant; this was the challenge to its power which the state well recognized. For a time, the students also made Tiananmen Square into a genuine place of public discourse. They met in small groups of friends for discussion, large audiences for speeches and even a more or less representative council for debating their collective strategy and carrying out selfgovernment.

Thought (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970); this was also a major theme of Otto von Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) and *Natural Law and the Theory of Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1934).

⁴ See Calhoun, "Populist Politics, Communications Media, and Large Scale Social Integration," *Sociological Theory* 6:2, pp. 219-241.

Public Culture

The official government of China was forced out of the reviewing stands and back behind closed doors. Figuratively, these were the gates of Zhongnanhai compound where many senior leaders have their residences. A line of elite troops held back a constantly heckling crowd at the ceremonial front gate, much as their predecessors had held back crowds outside the Forbidden City in previous generations. In fact, most of the Chinese leadership had apparently fled Beijing for military command posts in the Western Hills. But in the drama of the event, the very seizure of the Square and the sequestering of the government was a powerful (if generally unconscious) representation of the state as a continuation of the old imperial tradition rather than any form of modern, popular rule.

The students who seized China's metaphorical center also seized the initiative in presenting their views to the international press (who were gathered in Beijing in greater than usual numbers much of the time, largely because of the historic visit of Mikhail Gorbachev and the Asian Development Bank's first meeting in the PRC).⁵ From the beginning of the protest, some carried signs aimed at a Western audience: "Vive la liberté," they proclaimed, "give me liberty or give me death."

Speaking to (or performing for) the foreign press had several functions. First, it mobilized international public opinion on the side of protesters against the government. It was quite remarkably successful at this. The 'China story' was front page news for weeks – perhaps the single most sustained visibility of any Third World country ever in the press of Western Europe and the United States. The press portrayals of the Chinese students made them seem remarkably familiar. They played on nostalgia for the 1960s. (Even in Beijing it was hard to remind myself that the two-fingered 'V' sign meant victory, not peace.)

Secondly, the foreign press also spread word of the protests throughout China, as people listened to reports beamed back by BBC and the Voice of America. Inside China, there was one halcyon week where the established press began to report fairly, frequently and accurately on the protest movement. This followed on the heels of active press participation in the protest itself. The most striking event of May 4th (when there was a large march commemorating the anniversary of the 1919 student and intellectual movement) was the arrival in Tiananmen of a contingent of journalists carrying signs calling for the right to report the news objectively and supporting the students. "Don't believe what we write," one sign said, "we print lies." In-

⁵ So powerful was this story that it represented a major coup for Dan Rather and CBS, which had committed to heavier coverage of the Gorbachev visit than either of the other major broadcast networks. After the massacre, ABC's Ted Koppel and NBC's Tom Brokaw rushed to Beijing to try to recover from Rather's scoop. Perhaps the most consistent coverage came from and the greatest prestige gain went to Cable News Network. Mike Chinoy even briefly escaped the anonymity which is the usual lot of CNN's broadcasters.

creasing numbers of journalists joined the marches during the next week. Print and radio reporters appeared first, followed by television news readers and journalists. They were visible in all the major marches of the next two weeks (and some gave their lives for being unable to return to censorship and lies as usual after the massacre). And from the 12th to the 19th, the Chinese press defied all precedent and current orders and began actually to report what was going on on the campuses, in the streets, and especially in the Square. For a few unprecedented days, the Chinese press was full of news reporting opposition to the government, and denials of official reports. The *People's Daily* ran a two-page photo spread, complete with a mother worrying over the health of her hunger-striking son. On television there was footage of Tiananmen and of protesters being fed intravenously in hospitals. There sometimes remained a hint of caution, an implication that journalists still thought a few things were too hot to touch, but the reversal was remarkable.

The Chinese papers and television had only their short period of relative freedom. By May 20th, the infamous Yuan Mu had been put in charge of the *People's Daily*. Thereafter only the slightest hints of the newfound 'objectivity' appeared – a bit more coverage to the party power struggle than many leaders would probably have liked, rather gleeful reporting on liberalization in Hungary, an occasional use of quotation marks around a word like 'turmoil'. Of course, even this silence was forthright compared to the radical rewriting of history which Yuan Mu would help superintend after the June 4th massacre. The BBC and Voice of America continued to spread reports to much of China, however, even after martial law was imposed. They broadcast in both Chinese and English, coming through at least faintly except for three days of apparent jamming.

Thirdly, the foreign press reportage on the Chinese protest movement spoke significantly to an international audience of overseas Chinese. One of the striking features of this protest movement was the important role played by people of ambiguous national identity. That is, Chinese people who were either citizens of the PRC residing abroad (e.g., as students) or Chinese citizens of other states were crucial actors. Some of them had helped to spread ideas about democracy in the PRC. They had not only talked to family and friends but written articles for newly flourishing periodicals and helped in China's massive translation programs for Western social science, literature and criticism. Others sent financial support. Still others lobbied the governments of countries where they resided. In this way they echoed the role played by overseas Chinese communities in Sun Yatsen's republican revolution. In 1989, however, not only were the overseas Chinese communities larger and richer, but China itself was a more distant homeland for many of their members. And the members of these communities were not as closely knit together by webs of personal association as they had been early in the twentieth century. Rather, they were mobilized significantly by the media. They were addressed as a single category of people whether deeply involved in associational networks or hardly at all.

The associational networks should not be discounted, though. Telephone lines were in constant use as students in the US reported to and heard from their colleagues on the Chinese mainland, and family members kept each other informed of what was going on in the protest – and in the other direction, what the international press was saying. Money sometimes flowed through those same networks. Reports in the US media give great prominence to the use of FAX machines. Though FAX messages were received in China, I do not think access to the machines was very substantial among student activists. FAXes were probably used more often for communication among overseas Chinese and students studying abroad. ChinaNet – a Bitnet based computer network – linked thousands of students and academics (this was a sort of halfway form between personal network links and mass media). Personal links were also very important after the repression in establishing the new expatriate organizations for pursuit of democracy in China.

As important a role as the foreign press played, however, it could not altogether make up for the absence of some organized media 'voice of the students'. There was talk of forming a newspaper but none ever materialized.⁶ Hand printing presses were used to produce single sheet flyers, but there was no place for reporting news from the students' point of view, let alone a discussion journal. Even the 1979 Chinese democracy movement had formed several of these. Its 1989 counterpart was stronger on mobilization and found deeper popular sympathy, but it fell behind on both theory and communication.

The foreign press coverage was often of high quality, especially its camera work. But it was not without problems. It was remarkable how sheltered many reporters were. Photojournalists would prove extraordinarily brave during the violence of early June. But many reporters (and more anchormen) came with somewhat superficial knowledge of the situation and often stayed somewhat distant from the Chinese. The CBS crew stayed at one of Beijing's best joint-venture hotels, the Shangri-La, taking over the fifth floor. When they went to Tiananmen Square, they did so in a bus or a two-ton red truck, which they parked well away from the core of the protest and from which they only ventured out on specific forays for interviews or footage. They were able to arrange lots of interviews, including with key leaders, but they seemed to have little direct acquaintance with what was going on. Junior reporters found subjects and started interviews; big names like Dan Rather were brought in for the crucial footage. Journalists kept asking me – and often each other and other Westerners generally – to explain things. Many seemed more interested in the predigested accounts of other Westerners than in the first hand statements which Chinese students – many fluent in English – could provide for themselves. In one interview during this period, a reporter asked me who Yuan Mu (the chief government

⁶ Though a California-based Chinese-language newspaper, the *Press Freedom Herald*, has since been founded specifically to carry on the student movement for democracy.

spokesman) was and why people kept referring to May 4th. I don't think any of the major print media correspondents would have done this, but it was unsettling.

There was a remarkable sense of the press building on itself. Near the end of May, I saw an explicit version of this rather than the disguised use of 'informed sources'. The Hong Kong Standard quoted the Xinhua news agency quoting the Guangming Daily to the effect that students had returned to classes in Beijing – something I can certify to be false. More generally, press coverage was pretty uneven. There were good, serious stories and junk. Still, despite the knowledge that the papers were often simply reporting rumors and that their major advantage was better access to rumors coming from government circles, the sense of deprivation of information, the difficulty figuring out just what was going on, drove me out each night to buy two or three foreign papers. With the exception of a couple of days right at the peak of the resistance to martial law, one could get the Hong Kong Standard, South China Morning Post, International Herald Tribune and Asian Wall Street Journal. My copies made the rounds of Chinese students eager to learn what story of their movement was reaching the rest of the world.

Though its aims were far less transparently ideological and manipulative than the official Chinese press, the Western press also recast history as it tried to record it. Ted Koppel's major report from Beijing provides an example. This was basically a good piece of journalism. Its content was better than much reporting; its faults are indicative of a more general pattern.

Almost all Western reporters were drawn to individuals to personalize their stories; this undermined the presentation of a broad social movement. Koppel greatly overstated the role of a small leadership, especially of Chai Ling, whom he referred to a bit bizarrely as the 'student commander'. Koppel was drawn to her story, I think, simply because he had some new footage of her – an interesting interview – and it made good television to play it up. But the report was misleading in its implication of a much clearer leadership hierarchy than existed, its neglect of the broad and diffuse nature of leadership in the movement. The show relied extensively on 'China experts', drawing most of its information from these specialists who flew in just before, or even after the massacre, in order to offer their views of the situation from the more authoritative vantage point of Beijing. Somehow, perhaps because of this reliance on experts flown in for the occasion, the show failed to convey the drama of the movement or the horror of the massacre. Indeed, it even appeared to lend credence to the Chinese government's emphasis on the violence wrought by protesters against the army and its claim that no one (or hardly anyone) was killed in Tiananmen Square. This last was partly a technicality – most of the killing was in nearby streets and the Muxudi area, not in the Square itself – and partly simply a lie. But somehow it became, at least briefly, news.

Koppel's show also manifested one of the consistent biases of at least US coverage (one exacerbated, I think, by reliance on the 'China expert'

Public Culture

community, especially of political scientists). This was that while its sympathies might lie with the students, its attention was on the government. The way it reported the story consistently gave the impression that the really interesting questions were what the official political leaders were up to and who would wind up on top. It was at its best in tracing out the sequence of actions among the party leadership, diagramming troop movements and piecing together the final events of the massacre. Not surprisingly, it was much weaker on the questions of what made the student movement happen and what the students wanted. Biases against this sort of background are built into the canonical style of most TV reporting. So the activities and especially the goals of the student protesters all but disappeared from view except as the occasion for the leadership struggle and authoritarian crackdown.⁷

The mass media are only a part of the process of internationalization of culture which China confronts. There are exchange students moving in both directions, businessmen and 'foreign experts', tourists, literary translations and scientific works. The process started centuries ago with missionaries, traders and soldiers. For generations, Chinese intellectuals have sought answers to the challenges posed by contact with the West. For a time, Chinese communism seemed at least to many to offer a plausible, if not perfect, answer. More recently, this solution has been thrown into doubt, if not derision. The Cultural Revolution and its aftermath radically undermined the claims of the communist party to offer viable and attractive leadership. Deng Xiaoping's policies of pursuing rapid 'modernization' and Western technology have placed great store by certain aspects of Western culture while rejecting others. Among the many effects these changes have had on China has been a profound cultural crisis. It is a crisis with old roots.

Since the late Ching dynasty, Chinese people have struggled to understand their country in relation to a much larger, more diverse and more powerful world than traditional Chinese culture taught existed. They have faced not only Western gunships, opium traders and merchants, but Japanese invasion, and Russian dominance over the early years of the Communist movement. Intellectuals have been torn between two tasks: absorbing what is desirable from foreign cultures and finding a new definition of Chinese identity which can serve effectively in the current world. Of course, views have differed on both what to adopt from abroad and what it should mean to be Chinese. The history of popular struggle in modern

⁷ An additional oddity to the Koppel report was a recurrent Merrill-Lynch commercial focusing on the global market. The show's major sponsor had its logo splashed across photos of students being attacked by the army, and at the end of the show made a segue from Tiananmen Square to an advertisement without even a title or other visual clue to mark the transition. Perhaps, I told myself, this might at least serve to warn some of the Chinese fans of American news media and democracy that both rest rather precariously on a capitalist system which recurrently challenges their integrity.

China – the last hundred years – is not just a history of leveling inequality and lifting peasants out of cyclical starvation. It is also a history of trying to assert a viable national identity in an often hostile world. Chinese leaders have often been as unreceptive to such nationalist assertions as to Western influences.

The May 4th movement of 1919, for example, was sparked by the willingness of Chinese negotiators at Versailles to accept extremely disadvantageous terms of settlement after the first world war. Though China had not been an enemy of the victors, they refused to stop the annexation of her land. The weak and corrupt imperial government was completely ineffectual, and indeed did not try very hard to win a better settlement. So young intellectuals stepped up a campaign of supplications to the emperor and added more public protests to it. Some paid with their lives. But the date of May 4th, which symbolizes this struggle, lives on as perhaps the most evocative in China's modern history. Students in 1989 repeatedly likened their movement to that of 1919.

The May 4th movement involved both nationalistic sentiments and a critical challenge to Chinese national culture. From the self-strengthening movement of Kang Youwei through Liang Qichao, Lu Xun and other prominent figures in the 1919 movement, Chinese intellectuals pointed repeatedly to failings in their traditional culture; they sought to develop a new Chinese culture which would retain only certain ties to the past and would appropriate a variety of positive features from the West.⁸ They wanted to identify the sources of China's weakness and to remedy them. 'Democracy and science' was the slogan in 1919. In 1949, communism became a more central catchword, but it was equally an import into Chinese discourse. Of course, these terms from shared international culture took on specifically Chinese meanings. Nonetheless, it is important to note that not only the labels but parts of the conceptual basis and the narrative tradition associated with these terms was incorporated into Chinese political thought and culture. In early May, I sat with a handful of graduate students on the Beijing University campus musing on the fact that their movement, which already was beginning to make them feel part of a historical struggle, came in a year of so many round-numbered anniversaries. They had stressed 1919; I added 1949, the year of the communist revolution. "Yes," said one with little enthusiasm, "but also 1789, the year of the French revolution and the signing of the US Constitution."

The very scene of this conversation said something about the background to the protest. Of all Chinese universities, Beijing University is perhaps the one which feels most familiar to an American. Its campus was originally that of Harvard's Beijing outreach effort, and it is laid out with

⁸ J. Spence, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1984) is an excellent introduction to this history. See also Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Lu Xun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) and C. Tse-Tsung, *The May 4th Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

quadrangles, spacious lawns, rolling hills, and even a pretty lake. No American arriving there would need more than a moment to realize that he was on a university campus. And in 1989 it looked more familiar than ever. Snazzy ten-speed bicycles were cropping up among the more traditional utilitarian Chinese designs. Students wore polo shirts with brand name logos splashed across their chests. Men and women walked hand-in-hand. One could buy Coke as well as the local orange sodas. A good number of students had earphones on their heads and Walkman stereos at their belts. Oddly, the first thing that struck me as really unfamiliar was the very high percentage of students who smoked – even though many favored brands from my home state of North Carolina.

Chinese students in 1989 partook of a great deal of an international culture, carried notably through the sale and consumption of various commodifies, but also portrayed on mass media which were making their way increasingly into China. This international culture also had a more intellectual side. Students and their teachers were as keen to catch up on the latest trends in Western social theory or literary criticism as Chinese army officers were on computers and weaponry. Habermas, Derrida, and Jameson were all popular names to cite, even if only fragments of their writings had been read. At the same time that icons of Western culture were imported, key symbols of China's recent past were under attack. Beijing University had previously been home to one of my favorite statues of Mao Zedong. In front of a central building he had stood, his hands clasped behind his back, facing into the wind, perhaps the wind of change. Though Mao was already dead when I first visited Beijing University, it hadn't occurred to me that this statue would have been toppled by the time I returned. I rather imagined that at worst Mao would simply lose his currency, but his statue would remain a landmark – a bit like the Confederate soldier on the front quad of my own university in Chapel Hill. Mao's statue was a casualty, however, not just of shifting political currents but of a deep-seated ambivalence on the part of young Chinese intellectuals towards their past. Not only recent symbols such as Mao but ancient figures of Chinese culture were subject to attack. Students grappled with the challenge of figuring out just what it did and should mean to be Chinese even while accepting certain Western influences and proposing innovations of their own. They had not lost their pride in being Chinese, but it was coupled paradoxically with a humiliation at whatever seemed to have made China weak in the modern world.

A striking semi-popular manifestation of this had been the television series *River Elegy*, shown in the fall of 1988. This was produced by a group of well educated young men, heavily influenced by this literary-cultural discourse. They took their occasion and a good bit of their footage from a Japanese-produced travelogue about the Yellow River. Adding their own commentary and a wide variety of archival footage, however, they transformed the genre of travelogue into a kind of critical cultural analysis. The Yellow River is traditionally seen as the heart and source of Chinese life. They portrayed it as the focus of an inward-looking culture, characterized by mud and soil erosion, disastrous floods, and unfortunate human interventions. A dominant motif was the challenge posed when the Yellow River met the blue sea; striking aerial cinematography imprinted this visually into the viewers' minds. Chinese culture was compared to that of 'primitive' Africa – a shocking statement for proud and racist Chinese. The heritage of four thousand years of civilization was shown as more a trap than a resource. Mao Zedong was pictured facing the Yellow River but silent; this man who always had so much to say was quiet before the problems it posed.

River Elegy was also technically surprising and sophisticated by Chinese standards. It worked mainly through montage, with extremely rapid cuts from scene to scene (influenced I suspect by Hong Kong film fashions and reminiscent of recent trends in American TV advertisements and music videos). In the space of a minute, a viewer might see Mao, the river, the Egyptian pyramids, the Great Wall and a rally of the People's Liberation Army. Intentionally, it purveyed more information than any viewer could take in at one showing, and especially more than he or she could assimilate within received categories. It left the viewer, thus, with a welter of unresolved impressions. The voice-over provided only a partial framework for understanding. The film's real message was left just below the explicit, and heavily dependent on the visuals.

The film attracted a remarkably large audience on Chinese television, and was shown a second time before the authorities had second thoughts about their liberalness in allowing it to be shown at all. It also sparked a wide discussion among viewers. This reveals, first of all, that a much larger public than university-trained intellectuals was prepared to engage in a critical discourse about Chinese culture and China's future (though surely many found the film's more unkind comparisons and evaluations shocking and even offensive). In addition, the episode reveals that the government was not united in its stance on either Chinese culture or the limits of permissible public expression. The film could only have been made with the strong support of fairly powerful figures, and its repeated showing indicated that they were not isolated. A genuine liberalization in public expression helped to pave the way for the protest movement of Spring 1989. On the other hand, *River Elegy*'s third broadcast was stopped (as was a planned film by the same group on the May 4th movement).

River Elegy's popularity dramatized the centrality of the problem of culture for thoughtful Chinese in the late 1980s. Few doubted the desirability of economic 'modernization', though what form it should take was debated. But how was economic change to relate to culture? What did it mean to be Chinese in a world of computers and FAX machines, tourists and joint ventures, the internationalization of commodity flows and culture? Maoist communism had offered an alternative source of pride and version of national identity (incorporating some aspects of tradition while rejecting others). What elements of Maoism or Confucianism could provide a vision for the future? Or had both decisively failed the tests of modernity? Did that

mean wholesale Westernization or were there still the resources for an authentic Chinese path? In short, all but the most technocratic or cautious and party-loyal Chinese intellectuals and a good many others besides felt that China's modernization was in need of a cultural vision. However real the economic gains might be, they were either in jeopardy or even pernicious if not accompanied by a sound vision of Chinese society and culture.

This was essentially the point where most students and intellectuals thought they had a crucial role to play. Some were primarily trained to play technical roles in modernization, as engineers or doctors or demographers. Even they might have worries about vision. For humanists and the more culturally oriented of social scientists these worries were much more acute. And they were coupled with a sense that the government lacked respect for them and failed to provide for their role in China's modernization and strengthening. Not all of these students had a strongly political conception of what to do, of how far an insurrection could go, of what role the communist party might play, of whether multiparty elections were possible or good, or of what form decentralization of bureaucratic power should take. But the political ideas of nearly all the active leaders, as well as the sentiments of more 'rank and file' participants in the protest, were deeply shaped by this sense of cultural crisis and impoverishment. It was at the heart of the students' talk of democracy, at least as centrally as any imported Western specifics about the mechanics of liberal democratic rule.

These ideas and this sense of crisis had been widely enough disseminated before the protest movement actually got going in April that they could be taken for granted among the core of student participants. This was simultaneously a strength and a weakness. It helped to make the substantial early mobilization possible. It also impeded the development of both ability to spread the movement's message beyond its original student base and internal discourse about goals, methods and priorities. This cultural concern informed both the students' initial very moderate message – essentially "take us and our ideas seriously, give us a voice" – and their subsequent determination to persist as government recalcitrance made their movement more radical.

There were other aspects to the cultural crisis. There was, for example, the question of whether there had to be one China to which all Chinese belonged. One of the key dilemmas for China's future is how to resolve that issue. It is most pressing in the cases of Hong Kong and Taiwan; then there are the overseas Chinese communities throughout Asia and around the world. And it should not be ruled out as a question for the mainland itself as regional devolution is debated.

The key point is simply that participation in an increasingly international cultural field has brought China a variety of inspirations, from communism to democracy, and a variety of challenges. It has helped to shape the very formation of China's intellectual class, and gives it some of its most pressing concerns. In focusing on the democracy at the heart of the spring's protest movement – it was mainly a pursuit of civil liberties and a call for the

government to listen to the demands of the people – we should not forget the element of nationalism and the sense of cultural crisis which went along with it.

In Tiananmen Square, as hundreds of thousands of people gathered to protest, it was easy to believe that 'the people' had spoken with a single and unanimous voice. How, one wondered, could the government withstand their will? Yet at its peak, the Chinese democracy movement of 1989 never mobilized one percent of China's population. Some three-quarters of the country's people are peasants. They have grievances against the government, but the protesters did not speak to them directly. A very few may have had familial connections to the protesters. Some others may also have followed the protest with interest, but the vast majority presumably did not.⁹ One of the basic facts to face about the prospects of democracy in China is that only a tiny percentage of the population participates in political, or even literary, discourse. Relatedly, even though a crowd of a million people may be huge, it is not the whole people of China. One of the dangers of experiences like Tiananmen protests is that they make it easy to imagine that a particular crowd is the people. Repeatedly Chinese students told me, "the whole people of China have spoken," "the government cannot go against the will of the people." In the first place, governments may be quite able to go against the will of the people – at least in the short run – especially if they are prepared to use violence. More generally, one must be cautious in assuming there to be a single popular voice. This fact was sometimes recognized by leaders of the protest movement when they asserted that the government needed to view people as more differentiated, to treat them as individuals. But this recognition was often belied by the rhetoric of the movement, which was monological and authoritative.¹⁰

The issue can be put another way, posed methodologically, as it were. We 'eye-witnesses' to the Chinese student (and more generally democratic)

⁹ If one presents that absence of ties to peasants as a weakness of the movement, Chinese intellectuals are apt to point out that the peasants are not 'politically active' in China – an irony for the country where Mao pioneered the idea of peasant revolution. It is unquestionably true, however, that in China urban people have more political clout. Throughout the Third World, urban people tend to have more clout than their rural compatriots. This is a key reason why they are usually better fed: their food riots threaten to topple regimes; rural people just starve. An infrastructure of effective transportation and communications may begin to change this state of affairs. It allows for people in spatially remote locations not only to get their goods to market, but to put pressure on the government. It also allows for an effective flow of information about what the government is up to. Only with some of the reforms of the 1980s have China's peasants begun to eat well (and acquire a variety of consumer goods) on a regular basis – sometimes exciting the envy of city-dwellers by doing so.

¹⁰ In fact, one of the interesting features of the movement seems to have been efforts to develop a new rhetoric, to escape from this standard sort of voicing. Certainly this has been part of the program of China's younger generation of novelists.

protest movement were overwhelmingly influenced by what went on in Tiananmen Square. Yet for most of the people of China, and for the future of democratic struggles in China, it will not be first-hand observation which is crucial but the representation of the movement in photographs, narratives, news reporting, gossip, histories, sociological analyses, trials, speeches and poetry. Even the eye-witness accounts are shaped by the constructions put on events in all these other contexts. And crucially, no one is eye-witness to more than a fraction of this process of representation and construction.

The real issue is not simply who gets the story right for the history books. It is how the physically concentrated events of protest appear in the despatialized media which record and report them. The Chinese student protest movement will live on in significant part because of the intensive international media coverage it received. This will not guarantee that anything resembling a 'true story' is told in China. It will provide resources for later, more honest reconstructions. Archives have been established. Books are being written. The story will be preserved. But at the same time, it will be redefined, interpreted, canonized. For the most part, the accounts of the student movement are presented monologically, as simple statements of the "true story." There is Taiwan's true story and the PRC's true story (both available on videotape with narration in various languages). There is a true story being constructed in innumerable gatherings of Chinese graduate students in the US, and another true story in the overseas Chinese business community. The crucial question to be asked from the point of view of the public sphere is not which of these is right. Rather, the crucial question is how a less monological discourse can be fostered. How can communities of discourse be created which encourage critical discussion and reason, both about the reports themselves and their implications? Such critical discussion demands honesty (which is not the same as final truth); it offers the best approach to securing truth which is available in this uncertain world of divergent perspectives and interpretations. No *a priori* test of ideological or scientific correctness can substitute for this public discourse in a democracy.¹¹

Our conceptions of democracy are rooted in the image of the classical polis with its concrete public *place* – the Athenian *agora* or Roman forum; in the New England town hall; or more generally in face-to-face interaction: the structural basis of the small city or town and the rhetorics of interpersonal debate. Representative democracy has been seen as a necessary compromise. In modern large scale societies, however, democracy depends on the possibility of a critical public discourse which escapes the limits of face-

¹¹ This is, of course, a major motivation of the discourse-theoretic approach to politics and knowledge developed by Habermas in his work of the 1970s and 1980s, esp. *Theory* of Communicative Action, 2 vols. (Boston: Beacon, 1984 and 1988). Although his theory is highly rationalistic, it is not, as some would charge, a defense of some dogma of absolute truth, but rather of the ideal of truthfulness in communication, especially critical discourse.

to-face interaction. This means, in part, finding ways to make the spacetranscending mass media supportive of public life. It also means developing social arrangements in which local discussions are both possible and able to feed into larger discussions mediated both by technology and by gatherings of representatives.

China has made massive investments in television technology in order to bring TV to more than 90% of Chinese households by the end of the century; if one includes communal televisions in some rural areas, more than that percentage of the population has TV access now. The advantage of this to the government is its capacity to get its messages (whether propaganda or education) out to people in remote areas. It links the whole country together, fostering national integration, cultural and linguistic standardization and central political control. This was challenged not only by protesters in Tiananmen Square but by broadcasters who insisted on reporting honestly about those protests. As the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre showed, however, the government has been able to reassert solid control over this medium. And, because it is the main medium of national communication, this means that opposition - and even clear memory of the events of April to June – is seriously hampered. The spread of TV has not been accompanied by any comparable development of intermediate associations for critical discourse and passing of information outside of central control.¹²

No demonstration march, no spatially bounded protest could bring together enough people to define a public sphere adequate to democracy in China. A crowd is in any case prone to monological sloganizing, not dialogical critical discourse.¹³ The role of such protests lies in setting the agenda for a much more widespread discourse. It is as such physicallybounded protests become the occasion and topic for far-flung conversations that they have their most profound effects. Thus we must ask not only about these protests, and about how widely and how accurately they are reported, but about the settings in which people receive information about them. In his seminal book on the structural transformation of the public sphere, one of Jurgen Habermas's central distinctions is between a public which makes culture an object of critical debate and one which simply consumes it. In eighteenth-century salons, novels were debated; in front of television sets,

¹² Though people are afraid of eavesdroppers, China does have surprisingly widespread and effective private telephone service by the standards of communist countries. Development of communications outside of state control was a central feature of the growth of 'civil society' in China during the last decade. Book and magazine publishing were perhaps most important, as Orville Schell has depicted in *Discos and Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 1989). More generally, see R. L. Bishop, *Qi Lai! Mobilizing One Billion Chinese: The Chinese Communications System* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press).

¹³ I was impressed, however, with the amount of play in the formulation and variation of slogans and chants during the Beijing marches of May 1989, and with the occasions on which some plurality of voices engaged each other despite the inhibitions of the crowd setting.

twentieth-century citizens simply consume programming. Habermas may be too quick to attribute whatever differences exist to simple media effects. He may idealize the narrow bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century and fail to give adequate appreciation to the gains brought by including a larger portion of the population in free and sometimes effective political discourse.¹⁴ His core distinction is crucial though. What institutional arrangements and cultural features will lead to a critical discourse about the representations of the Chinese student movement, and what others will militate in favor of mere consumption of reports?

For all the excitement aroused by press coverage of the Chinese protest movement, it is not clear that it led to any great amount of critical reflection in the US. It seems to have done no more to push Americans to examine the state of our own democracy than enthusiasm for Poland's Solidarity trade union has translated into pro-union sentiment or activity at home. On the other hand, the immediacy of the experience has had an impact on many Americans who witnessed the protests first-hand, and perhaps on at least some of those who experienced them only through the media. Where their critical reflections lead will be determined partly by the contexts in which each tries to work them out.

In China, active and severe repression is putting an end to short term dreams of a democratic public sphere. Though many people will keep alive their memories of what actually happened in Tiananmen Square, they will have little opportunity for critical discussion in the near future. The government is working to undermine many of the loci in which critical discourse grew up during the past decade. Journals, tea shops and private companies have all been closed. Universities and middle schools are under closer supervision. Government ministries are being purged.

By comparison with Poland, say, China's nascent public sphere has little domestic hiding place. It is harder to run seminars in people's apartments. There is no Catholic church to provide links among peasants and city-dwellers and to offer protected gathering places. Yet the task of democratization is rather similar. It is to create a range of institutions outside the direct control of the state which support a lively critical culture about topics of political significance. Only such institutions can provide the necessary

¹⁴ "The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only" (*Structural Transformation*, p. 171). Beyond the specific effects of media, Habermas sees a collapsing of the private and public realms, the end to the kind of nurturant family which prepared individuals for public affairs and critical discourse.

Even in the strata which once counted as "cultured," the formerly protective space of the family's inner sanctum has been pried open to such an extent that the private activities of reading novels and writing letters as preconditions for participation in the public sphere of the world of letters are suspended. (*ibid.*, p. 172)

To be sure, this critique seems based on an idealization of nuclear family and a kind of split of private and public which tends towards both sexism and elitism.

linkage between face-to-face gatherings like those of Tiananmen Square and the 'metatopical' spaces opened up by modern communications media, and only such institutions can make both effective vehicles of sustained democratic participation.

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