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Our History

Remembering the riots of spring 1976 in China

- Features -

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It's 40 years since workers, students and school-students broke the oppressive regime that had come out of the Cultural Revolution in China and forced a change of direction on their rulers with mass protests in the spring of 1976.

1976 was a pivotal year for China. In September Mao Zedong, the leader of the 1949 revolution, died after a long illness. His death was followed almost immediately by the arrest of his wife and three close allies (known as the Gang of Four), the first move in a process that would lead to Deng Xiaoping's ascendancy and economic changes that would make China the world's most dynamic economy.

Six weeks previously, northern China had been rocked by the Tangshan earthquake, the most destructive earthquake of the 20th century, which killed at least 250,000 people. The city of Tangshan, 150 kilometres south east of Beijing, was almost completely levelled, and the shock was felt up to 700 kilometres away.

The events of spring 1976 are less well remembered, but were arguably just as important in determining China's future course. Tens of thousands of people took part in an illegal demonstration in central Beijing, which ended in fighting with police and militias, and similar outbursts took place in cities across the country.

Background to the riots

China's rulers emerged from the Cultural Revolution (CR) in the early 1970s more divided than ever. On the one hand, there were those who had risen to prominence during the CR, and who wanted to carry on its 'radical' economic policies. The Gang of Four led part of this group, but the victors were divided among themselves.

On the other hand there were the 'moderates', veteran bureaucrats who had survived the CR (sometimes in prison), and whose prime concern was repairing the damage done to the economy and party and state structures by the CR. They were led by Zhou Enlai, China's Premier since 1949 and the only senior leader apart from Mao himself to be untouched during the CR, and by Deng Xiaoping.

The economic damage was less than after the Great Leap Forward, as the CR had been concentrated in the cities, but industrial production was seriously hit. More seriously, Chinese science and technology had been at a standstill for almost five years. The ideal of catching up with the rest of the world economy as a siege economy seemed increasingly unreal.

Above both groups stood the figure of Mao, seriously unwell but still able to play the various factions off against each other. The stage was set for a series of complex and increasingly bizarre faction fights to claim the succession to Mao.

The first victims were the military leadership around Lin Biao, who had been anointed Mao's successor during the CR. He disappeared in late 1970, and for two years there was utter silence about his fate. Then it was officially announced that he was a traitor, who had died in a plane crash after trying to mount a military coup to restore 'the overthrown landlord and capitalist classes'.

His fall came at the same time as a decisive shift towards the moderates in both economic and foreign policy. China started importing foreign machinery and technology on a small scale, and very publicly opposed popular revolts in Bangladesh (1971) and Sri Lanka (1973), as part of move towards greater engagement with the world economy, a process which accelerated after the 1972 the visit of American President Richard Nixon.

The economic strategy quickly went sour, however, as a massive balance of payments deficit opened up, and control of economic policy swung momentarily back to the 'radicals'. But their stress on cutting back the wage rises which the moderates had allowed to stimulate industrial production led to widespread industrial unrest, in particular in the southern city of Hangzhou. In the summer of 1975 almost 60% of Hangzhou factories had strikes or stoppages, a wave of militancy broken only when Deng Xiaoping sent troops into the city.

The Qingming Festival

The succession battles were thus finely balanced when Zhou Enlai died on January 8, 1976. Jan Wong, a Canadian student at Beijing University, wrote:

I had never seen such universal grief. It seemed everyone was weeping, men and women, old people and children. Some were almost hysterical. Bus drivers, street sweepers and shop clerks all went about their chores with swollen red eyes.

As she explained:

Of the top Communist leaders, only Zhou had tried to mitigate some of the suffering of the Cultural Revolution, to stem some of the madness and to protect some of his old comrades from Mao's wrath. (Jan Wong, *Red China blues* (Bantam, 1997), p165)

The 'radicals' tried to limit the expressions of grief by banning open shows of mourning, a ban which was widely flouted in Beijing, and tens of thousands of people lined the route of his funeral procession, though the details had been kept a secret.

The Qingming festival has been a tradition for well over a thousand years, a day on which people pay respects to their ancestors by cleaning their graves. The CR had aimed at banning all such 'feudal remnants', but Qingming stayed as a festival, on which people were supposed to honour revolutionary martyrs.

In Beijing, the most prominent statue commemorating revolutionary martyrs is in the very centre of Tiananmen Square, and in late March people started leaving wreaths there commemorating Zhou, first in ones and twos, and then in hundreds. The vast majority came from workplaces, clearly with some level of management tolerance if not approval.

On the day of the festival itself, Sunday 4 April, some two million people went to Tiananmen Square to lay wreaths (out of a Beijing population of 8 million). Mass demonstrations in the square were common events, but this was the first one since 1949 not called by China's rulers but organised from below.

Poems were attached to the wreaths and read out to the crowds, praising Zhou but also openly attacking the Gang of Four, with some even attacking Mao. One of the most famous was Bei Dao's *The answer*, which included the lines:

I came into this world

Bringing only paper, rope, a shadow,

To proclaim before the judgment

The voice that has been judged:

Let me tell you, world,

I don't believe!

If a thousand challengers lie beneath your feet,

Count me as number thousand and one.

I don't believe the sky is blue;

I don't believe in thunder's echoes;

I don't believe that dreams are false;

I don't believe that death has no revenge.

April 5 - the day of rage

Overnight, the city authorities cleared away all of the tributes. The crowds that turned out on the Monday were younger, many of them school students or former Red Guards, and they had had come to protest rather than just to mourn. By 8am there were tens of thousands in the square. When the police tried to move them on they fought back, overturning and burning police cars and trying to set building alight.

Roger Garside, one of the few Westerners then in China, reported:

Thousands of demonstrators linked arms and marched towards the building singing the "Internationale". A group of four formed to negotiate with the commander for the release of the wreaths and those arrested...The militia refused them entry to the command post, so they vaulted over the wall and ran into the building.

Later that afternoon:

Now young men were storming the command post. They broke into it, damage the ground floor and set it on fire; its occupants escaped by a back window. Smoke drifted across the square and the acrid smell of burnt rubber mingled with the sweeter scent of burning pinewood. (Roger Garside, *Coming alive - China after Mao* (Mentor, 1981), page

121.)

The police only regained control late in the evening, when a huge force of militia and police were unleashed on the few hundred people then left in the square. Similar demonstrations were reported in the cities of Hangzhou, Nanjing, Zhengzhou, Kunming and Guiyang, as well as in Anhui and Guangxi province.

Thousands of people were arrested or investigated in the aftermath, with an unknown number summarily executed. Deng Xiaoping, who had given the eulogy at Zhou's funeral, was blamed for the demo and sacked from all his posts. But the crackdown was short-lived - the 'Tiananmen incident', as it came to be known, had exposed how unpopular the Gang of Four were, and they clung to power only while Mao kept breathing.

Within two years of Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping had risen to power on the promise of reversing the CR, opening up the economy and restoring living standards. The 1976 riot was proclaimed a 'revolutionary action' (though the executions that followed were not acknowledged), and people again took to the streets of Beijing in the 'Democracy Wall' movement, which Deng had to tolerate for almost two years before he felt confident enough to smash it.

And in April 1989, when another popular leader died, people went to the same monument in Tiananmen Square, and the same process of grief turning to anger produced the biggest political explosion ever in China. Many of the organisers in 1989 had been school-students in 1976, and saw 1989 as carrying on the same fighting spirit.

Mention of Tiananmen Square now evokes the massacre of 1989, and the profound sense of defeat that followed, but 1976 deserves to be remembered as a key turning point in modern China's evolution, when workers, students and school-students broke the oppressive regime that had come out of the Cultural Revolution and forced a change of direction on their rulers.

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