

# A mannerly revolution

One painful fact has emerged from all the confusion and hubbub that has raged about China these past weeks. We westerners don't have a clue what's really going on behind the scenes in China. For that matter, neither do most Chinese. Compared to China, enigmatic Russia is an open book.

Of course, it's plain to all by now that conservative leaders Deng Xiaoping and Premier Li Peng (pronounced Pung, just to confuse foreign devils) are up to their necks in hot and sour soup. Their attempt to get the army to squash student protesters backfired into a humiliating failure when senior generals refused to use force. So far, that is.

A similar process occurred during the Cultural Revolution. Idealistic and fanatic students, known as Red Guards, rampaged on. The army and police wouldn't act. Finally, even Mao concluded his Red Guards were causing anarchy. The army, under Marshall Lin Piao, went into action and crushed the Red Guards, killing tens of thousands.

The army then took control of China and some of its senior officers suddenly smelled the thrilling aroma of political power. In one of China's most mysterious episodes, Marshall Lin tried to assassinate Mao and seize power. The plot was foiled and Lin Piao was killed—in a plane crash, said the government. But underground sources claim Lin was gunned down in the secret underground command headquarters outside of Beijing under the Fragrant Hills.

Whatever the truth, it's always a danger to use the military to put down civil unrest. Experience has shown that once army officers get a taste of political power, they often want more. The Chinese Communist party, which has always dreaded a military coup—known in Marx-talk as "Bonapartism"—is obviously aware of the danger of calling in the armed forces.

But, confusingly, China is, in a sense, already a military dictatorship. Mao's armies seized power after fighting for 20 years. The army, as noted, put down the Cultural Revolution. Today, much of the senior leadership is made up of military men. Deng, it is often forgotten, was one of China's most redoubtable soldiers. He went on the Long March and commanded an army corps. It's no coincidence that the only official title he holds is chairman of the military committee.

In China, as in Israel, another nation with a large number of former generals in political office, telling where the military leaves off and the government begins is often difficult.

Another question. Canton has long been the centre of Chinese liberalism and free market forces. Yet protests there have been mild compared to those in Beijing. So too those in traditionally hot pepper, revolutionary Shanghai. Could this have anything to do with all the TV teams in Beijing? The students, after all, are not all saintly reformers. They're also kids out on a lark, a sort of Chinese Woodstock. And in a society where boy definitely does not meet girl before marriage, young people have lots of pent-up hormones to spur on their political ardor.

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Also noteworthy: Overseas Chinese communities have finally dropped their shyness and shown some gumption by backing the students.

Interestingly, Taiwan—the other China—last year quietly retired the last of its old guard left over from the 1940s. Over on the mainland, the same old geezers who fought on the other side of the civil war are still in power.

Please to also note how polite everyone has been. Chinese can get as angry and nasty as anyone, but so far the regime, security forces and protesters have shown enough good manners and civilized restraint to make even old Mahatma Gandhi smile. Good for them. South Korean students, take note.



So what then do I see in the leaves of my cup of oolong tea? Maybe Li Pung and Deng will be kicked out or upstairs and the more moderate Zhao Ziyang promoted to chief honcho. Watch for "youngsters" (both in their 50s) Yan Mingfu and Li Tiewing to become new, rising stars of the moderates. But also look for a possible military coup if chaos engulfs the regime. Or, just as likely, a severe repression.

Even more probable is a long, painful period of confusion, infighting and political zig-zagging as the men who run China battle for power to decide who'll be the Big Wonton.

Meanwhile, the rest of the communist world will watch the Chinese rumpus and take fright. See, hardliners will say. Give 'em an inch and they take a mile. Stop liberalization. Hong Kongers, no dummies, will accelerate their flight to Canada. Western devils will continue to scratch their heads and wonder at the inscrutability of those perplexing Chinese.