

THE PIT IS FULL OF ASHES

BY WANG JUNTAO

The growing gap between rich and poor is causing increasing numbers of people to lose faith in China's top leadership. If idealistic and forward-thinking people do not involve themselves in resolving this social conflict, chaos may be inevitable. The question is whether China's intellectual elite is prepared to take up the challenge.

The large-scale peasant protests in Hanyuan, Sichuan Province and other similar recent incidents have attracted the attention of those inside and outside China who are concerned with China's political stability. Commentators have quoted the old saying, "Before there is chaos in all of China, there will be chaos in Sichuan," as a warning that widespread chaos may not be far off. But mainstream intellectuals in China are not alarmed. They believe that incidents like this are an inevitable result of fast-paced economic development, and that they can be controlled and will eventually cease to occur.

I believe that although the Hanyuan incident is not a harbinger of inevitable chaos, it can be considered a sign of potential chaos. Avoiding social chaos will depend largely on how China's people respond to the Hanyuan incident. Many social factors contributed to the Hanyuan incident; the most important are the Chinese leadership's use of force in responding to political protest and the intellectual elite's callous indifference to the suffering of the masses. The one way to avoid chaos is to reform the political system and establish a just and fair system of political decision-making.

The first cause of chaos: The lesson of the Qin Dynasty

To understand the significance of the Hanyuan incident, one must first analyze the process and mechanism of social chaos. Historically, social chaos has not been easy to incite. Whether during the era of Li Zicheng (who led an uprising in the late Ming dynasty) or of Mao Zedong, the process of fomenting chaos demands arduous struggle, domestic trouble and foreign invasions. In other words, large-scale social chaos cannot be

incited by rebels alone, but also requires a foolish and violent response from the ruling powers.

In order to understanding the phenomenon of collapsing authoritarian regimes, it is instructive to examine the sudden fall of the Qin Dynasty.

The Qin emperor was originally the chieftain of a small border tribe in the Han Empire. He created a highly centralized state administration, united the will and activities of the people, increased the nation's strength and united the country. As a result, Qin Shihuang was convinced that dictatorship was a necessary condition for a strong and stable nation. When Confucian scholars highlighted social problems, or suggested improvements for the system of governance, the Qin emperor felt that great order had already been achieved, and that the sole problem was the disruption these scholars were causing with their criticism. By expunging the criticism, he could do away with the problem. How would he eliminate the criticism? Eliminate the scholars. He therefore buried alive more than 1,000 Confucian scholars and carried out book burnings throughout the country, wiping out a large body of knowledge.

In spite of this, Qin Shihuang's policy of "burning books and burying scholars" did not result in lasting stability. An insurrection was launched a year after his death. Yu Xiang defeated the Qin army and buried alive more than 200,000 soldiers. Soon thereafter, Liu Bang entered the Qin capital, Xianyang, and the Qin Dynasty collapsed. The first Han Dynasty emperor, reflecting on the fate of Qin, instituted political reforms that permitted a measure of dissent. The reforms subjected policies to competitive evaluation, and ensured that tragic decision-making errors would not be made. From this point on through Chinese history, regimes that tolerated some dissenting voices were more enduring than their tyrannical counterparts.

While I was in Qincheng prison in 1989, at my preliminary court hearing, I tried to explain this analogy. I pointed out that if rulers silence those who attempt to persuade with reason, their next adversaries might not be reasonable ones. As the saying goes regarding Qin Shihuang, "Before the graves of the scholars and books are cold, Shandong will be in chaos. Liu Bang and Yu Xiang do not read books." Because Qin Shihuang did not listen to reason in 212 B.C. and killed more than 1,000

Confucian scholars, the Qin Dynasty lost its self-correcting mechanism, and within five years (by 207 B.C.), more than 200,000 soldiers were slaughtered. The life of each Confucian scholar could have saved the lives of 200 soldiers.

In 1989, when Beijing mayor Chen Xitong addressed the National People's Congress, he reported that the democracy movement planned to slaughter 50 million Communist Party members after its plot succeeded. This was an absurd lie, meant to ensnare the country's most authoritative institution, because Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang were reformers within the Party. I predicted to those overseeing my preliminary hearing that if China's rulers persisted in violent repression of peaceful and reasonable appeals for reform, their next challenge would inevitably be violent and unreasonable. Then there really would be chaos, and Communist Party leaders would face real risk of severe retribution.

The lessons I perceive in the demise of the violent Qin dynasty after only two generations are as follows:

1. Rational dissent does not incite chaos. On the contrary, it assists in the peaceful resolution of problems. Through reasonable debate, government policies and the system itself can be renewed and restructured in accordance with actual circumstances and the will of the people.
2. Chaos only recognizes the forcefulness and irrationality of Liu Bang and Xiang Yu.
3. The prohibition and violent repression of reasonable dissent, as well as the elimination of all possibilities for a peaceful resolution, encourages people to abandon reasonable and peaceful methods in favor of superstition and violence. When rational and peaceful means of conflict resolution are unavailable, Liu Bang and Xiang Yu will rise in revolt. When Liu and Xiang are obliged to trample on the bones of the rational in their pursuit of justice, the fate of the rulers will be that much more gruesome.

Therefore, I take the liberty of altering the traditional Tang poem as follows: "The pit is full of ashes, the world is in chaos, Liu Bang and Xiang Yu do not read books." This is the obvious means of inciting chaos in China. The "ash-filled pit" refers to those who have been violently repressed for appealing to reason. Liu and Xiang are agents of chaos, and the phrase, "do not read books," refers to the renunciation of reason. The mechanism of chaos is to suppress all peaceful means of dissent. When those seeking justice have no alternative but to turn to resistance and rebellion, widespread chaos will result.

The second cause of chaos: Instability on the path to development

History reveals that Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin not only rejected the wisdom of Western political civilization, but also failed to understand the logic of traditional Chinese authoritarianism. Like the Qin emperor, Deng and Jiang believed that it was reasonable opposition that created disorder, and for that reason stifled all dissent. They differed from the Qin emperor in that they did not only employ violence and superstition in

this suppression effort. They believed that developing the economy would maintain stability and preserve their repressive regime. Although development has continued, it is a distorted development characterized by corruption, injustice and abrogation of public moral standards.

Social chaos has two models: the first is the massive chaos of the post-Qin period, which is revolutionary in nature. This results from brutal usurpation and repression by rulers, which leaves people no alternative but to rise up in rebellion. The other is the disorder resulting from peaceful evolution and gradual change. There are many examples of this type of chaos among modernizing nations.

When a country lacks development in any form, all is "peaceful," and political order is "stable." But when development speeds up and society's ideological and economic relationships undergo rapid transformation without appropriate policy and systemic readjustments, people become dissatisfied with their circumstances. When they are unable to peacefully and reasonably pursue their objectives, an opposition begins to develop. As problems deepen and dissatisfaction grows, opposition becomes more extreme, resulting in widespread chaos.

That is why although fast-paced development does not inevitably lead to instability, it is a common source of instability, because modernization results in the disruption of social management structures and coordinating mechanisms. Of course, modernization and its associated problems do not necessarily create instability, as long as the rapidly developing society can successfully address and resolve these problems in a timely manner. This depends on whether space is created for reasonable and constructive criticism, and whether alternative models are made available to adjust policy and the structure and system of governance. If the rulers eliminate this space, problems and dissatisfaction increase and peaceful evolution gives rise to chaos.

In this model of peaceful evolution leading to chaos, an official "book burning" policy that prevents reasonable and peaceful criticism and exploration of alternative policies is the major catalyst for chaos. It is another example of the saying: "The pit is full of ashes, the world is in chaos, Liu Bang and Xiang Yu do not read books."

Traditional economics provides limited insight into the relationship between economic development and political stability. When development increases along the lines of Pareto's Law,¹ in which the majority benefits while the minority does not suffer, it will lead to social stability. When development increases along the lines of Kaldor's theory of equilibrium,² under which the majority still benefit but a minority suffer, stability begins to be undermined. Zhang Wei, the former director of the Tianjin Economic Development Zone and now an economist at Cambridge University, proposed in an article that when development allows a minority to benefit but the majority to suffer, stability is very likely to be affected.

The political significance of the Hanyuan incident

This is the situation in present day China. On the eve of the 16th Party Congress in 2002, two reports evaluating the current situation attracted wide attention. Hu Angang, Wang Shaoguang

and Ding Yuanzhu³ pointed out that China was already facing a serious development crisis, one bordering on a fatal threat to the political order. These scholars hoped that the leadership would adopt measures to resolve or at least mitigate the problems that were causing such hardship for people. On the other hand, Kang Shaoguang⁴ argued that these problems would not undermine stability, because the political elite, economic elite and intellectual elite form a three-sided alliance that has the strength to suppress all challenges to their authority.

These two reports prompted a group of scholars to convene a symposium at Columbia University to evaluate and discuss their conclusions. At this seminar, the mood was grim. Attitudes toward the threat that circumstances posed to China's stability were sharply divided. Based on the evidence of an opinion poll, an old friend of mine asserted that China would not devolve into chaos because "Chen Sheng and Wu Guang (leaders of the Qin Dynasty rebellion) are in Shenzhen laboring and making money." Because he was a tenured professor at a top university who had trained at the best universities in China and the United States, and was an expert on the use of public opinion polls to measure the political mood in China, I could not oppose his view lightly.

Nevertheless, more recently Columbia University hosted a researcher from the China Academy of Social Sciences who had extensively surveyed protest activities among peasants in Hunan Province, and on the basis of the situation at China's grassroots level he had reached a conclusion exactly opposite that of the distinguished professor: Peasants were not only rebelling, but the opposition was taking on organizational and formally ideological dimensions as well. The local Communist authorities in these areas were already perceived as enemies. Without military intervention by higher authorities, local Party officials could only engage the assistance of organized crime to suppress the peasants. And the peasant movements were being led by demobilized soldiers. These leaders told the scholar that Chen Sheng and Wu Guang were not in Shenzhen making money, but rather were arming themselves for battle. Their opposition strategy was: "Petition at the higher levels, rebel at the lower levels." This scholar's conclusions were supported by many cadres and researchers working at these grassroots levels.

Now the Hanyuan incident⁵ and others like it are providing a conclusion to this argument, and this is the political significance of the Hanyuan incident. China's malady has developed to the point where problems like corruption, injustice and loss of public moral standards have worsened under Deng Xiaoping's reforms and multiplied under Jiang Zemin's policies. The suppression of reasonable dissent and debate over alternative policies has caused many people to lose hope in the peaceful resolution of problems, and to turn instead to violent rebellion and the seeking of revenge against their persecutors. The Hanyuan incident demonstrates that these forces of opposition are increasing in strength, and that if the situation continues to devolve, it will lead to chaos. This is why I consider the Hanyuan incident a portent of chaos.

Of course, portents do not always become reality. Widespread social chaos is not manifested easily. The critical factor is

whether the authorities recognize these signs and act to alleviate the crisis. The most important destabilizing factor at present is the regime's continued practice of "burning books and burying scholars," and the elite's attitude toward the increasing suffering of the underclass: disregard, callousness and indifference.

How can this crisis be ameliorated or evaded? Kang Shaoguang proposes an alternative administrative approach to resolving disputes. He suggests improving the ability level and conduct of administrators, while avoiding the adoption of bourgeois democratic practices. This sounds suspiciously like the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao regime's proposed emphasis on raising the efficiency and effectiveness of governance.

Hu and Wen, unlike Deng and Jiang, see the problem clearly, and propose to rely on the Party and government to resolve it. But China's current problems are all caused by the Party and the government, so this amounts to depending on the source of the problem to solve the problem. The actual result will be to further strengthen the Party and the government, and thereby to deepen and exacerbate the problem.

The only hope for resolution of these issues is to provide those who are oppressed by the system with an opportunity to monitor, criticize and reform the government and the Party. This cannot be a lawless mass uprising, but must be systemic reform carried out through stable, dependable, open and disciplined procedures.

Corruption can only be combated through the supervision of a free press and free expression of public opinion. Only an independent judiciary can carry out effective disciplinary action. Only through the open selection of political leaders can the public exercise political control. Disparities in wealth and opportunity can be resolved only by a voting mechanism. The loss of public morality can be reversed only by a newly empowered civil society. As long ago as 1989, Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang recognized that a one-party state is unable to rectify its own corruption. Only a multi-party system can improve the situation.

The Hu-Wen regime can afford to remain muddled, as they have not encountered any strong opposition from the urban elite. The elite mainstream's tacit approval of existing policies and their disdain for the suffering of the underclass are embodied in the views of Kang Shaoguang. It is not that the worldly and sophisticated elite are not aware of the historical lesson of the Qin emperor's policy of "burning books and burying scholars," but a number of viewpoints prevent them from recognizing the severity of the present problems.

The first viewpoint confuses the relationship between development and instability, and mistakenly believes that development automatically promotes stability. I have already alluded to economic, sociological and political theories on the relationship between development and instability, which show that under certain circumstances development can actually be a cause of instability.

The second viewpoint is that, unlike in past centuries when starving peasants rose in rebellion, China's masses now have their basic needs met. It is true that in Mao's day a full stomach was enough to keep the masses quiescent. But in today's soci-

ety the lack of food and shelter is not the only source of dissatisfaction. Even in traditional times, the hungry were not the only ones who rebelled; some people abandoned their fields for the sake of improving their opportunities. This is even more the case today, as the government's own propaganda and all sorts of new sources of information and population mobility have led people who were previously satisfied with their station in life to have higher expectations and feel greater dissatisfaction with their present circumstances. The truly impoverished, on the other hand, are still relatively quiescent.

The third viewpoint is a belief that, because no alternative to Party rule currently exists, there is no political alternative. This does not take into account the possibility that the Party itself could split apart, and that an alternative could emerge from within the present Party. The argument is that if there are no external or internal alternatives to the Party, any attempt to dismantle it could bring chaos. This is like saying that if there are no doctors, anyone who gets sick will die. By suppressing and eliminating any outlet for alternative institutions and policies, the present regime facilitates the onset of chaos. Rational criticism and discussion can uncover problems and develop alternative models, and problems can be solved through adjustments to policies and reform of the system. If the leaders resist, they can be replaced by peaceful means with others more in tune with public sentiment.

A troubling future

In summation, it is not easy to incite chaos, but it is also not that difficult. The fastest way to chaos is Chairman Mao's system of disrupting peoples' livelihood and brutally repressing them. A slower but still effective way is Deng Xiaoping's approach of facilitating rapid economic development while paying scant attention to social injustice, and simultaneously cutting off all avenues of alternative political debate and thinking. Exacerbating this is Jiang Zemin's approach, leading to deepening corruption, loss of a sense of justice and public morality, and progression from a Pareto type of development to a Kaldor type, and finally to a Zhang Wei type, while simultaneously continuing to eliminate any space for a peaceful alternative. And now there is the Hu-Wen regime suppressing any legitimate avenues for the masses to express their discontent, so that the masses lose all hope in the ability to peacefully resolve their problems, and instead seek means to take their revenge on local cadres. The possibilities for averting chaos depend on whether the Hu-Wen regime continues along the Deng-Jiang road, or moves toward opening space for rational dissent and develops alternatives that will allow for timely adjustments to policy and governing structure to dissipate public wrath and avert a crisis.

The problem is that at present the Hu-Wen regime does not appear to be taking or planning effective action to resolve the problem, but is exacerbating the situation through the use of force. Not only is it unable to effectively rectify the problems of the Deng and Jiang eras, it also continues to blindly follow a policy of violence and suppression to control the situation.

The most misguided view of China's mainstream elite is that they consider the greatest evil and danger created by the

administration, that is, the suppression of all possible alternative models, to be a necessary measure to prevent social chaos. On this basis, these elites support the administration's current path of a peaceful evolution that creates increasing public discontent and that, by suppressing all possible alternatives, causes the people to lose all hope in peaceful rationality and to turn instead to mass protest, eventually resulting in the very chaos the government seeks to avoid.

In the words of a traditional poem: "Now that winter is here, can spring be far behind?" The Hanyuan incident asks us: "Now that the pit is full of ashes, can Liu Bang and Xiang Yu be far away?"

Writer's note: This article is an expression of hope that China's leaders and mainstream elite will change their perspectives and avert disaster. The justice of the people's cause cannot be evaluated merely on the basis of their contribution to political stability. Political and social justice should also be taken into account. If judged solely on the basis of promoting political stability, the action of the masses may be seen negatively. But in terms of political and social justice, their actions may be justified.

Translation anonymous

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EDITOR'S NOTES:

1. The Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), posited that in all countries and times, the distribution of income and wealth follows a set logarithmic pattern. Pareto also developed a theory that held that societies tended toward an equilibrium in which a balanced number of innovators and conservationists are present in the governing elite, and that an imbalance in this ratio led to instability and corruption.
2. Nicholas Kaldor (1908–1986) was a Cambridge economist who developed the theory of equilibrium in respect of economic growth.
3. The report, "The Most Severe Warning: Social Instability Behind Economic Prosperity," was written by Hu Angang of Beijing's Tsinghua University, Wang Shaoguang of Hong Kong's Chinese University and Ding Yuanzhu of the Sociology Department at Peking University.
4. Kang Shaoguang is a senior research fellow at the CCP's Central Party School.
5. For further information on the Hanyuan incident, see He Qinglian's article, "The Hanyuan Incident: Draining the Pond to Catch the Fish," elsewhere in this issue of CRF.