

OFF TOPIC: JUNE 4TH'S LONG-TERM LEGACY

FENG CONGDE INTERVIEWS HAN DONGFANG

Two leaders of the 1989 Democracy Movement look back on what the movement and subsequent violent crackdown meant for China over the past 17 years, and its lingering influence in the country's future development.

Feng Congde (Feng): Han Dongfang, you helped organize worker protests at Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989. Looking back now on the events of June 4, 1989, what significance do you think they had?

Han: June 4 was a major event in Chinese history. On the one hand, from a broader perspective, it changed the direction in which the country was moving. It also changed the Chinese people's impression of China's sole ruling party—the Chinese Communist Party—and crushed the sanguine hopes that many people had placed in it. I myself was one of those whose hopes were crushed, and it changed my life direction—as I believe it did for many other people. In the past 17 years, it can be said that all the changes that have taken place in the government, in the ruling party, among the common people, in private enterprise and in the countryside are directly related to the events of June 4th.

Feng: How do you perceive the situation of Chinese society today?

Han: There are several urgent issues that can't be addressed merely through political discussion, but only through addressing concrete social and economic issues, including social injustice. The problem of peasant land is one example: over the past ten years, local officials, especially at the village and township level, have usurped farmland in the name of development, for instance, for the construction of industrial sites and golf courses. This is usually done without regard to long-term land use leases the peasants hold, and most of the compensation promised to the peasants ends up in the pockets of local officials. This problem has aroused considerable discontent and protest.

Another issue is that in the late 1990s, the government

began coercively privatizing the state-owned enterprise system by forcing employees to buy company stock, introducing a contract system and so on. Ownership of enterprises has even been handed over to the cadres who ran them at a fraction of the actual value of the assets, turning the cadres into proprietors both legally and in terms of labor relations. This chaotic, irregular and illegal transformation of the state enterprise system has caused an enormous loss of state assets funneled from the public coffers into the hands of the powerful elite, and has caused massive social discontent as the gap widens between ordinary citizens and the power elite. Another problem is the large number of workers who have been laid off from state-owned enterprises and left with no social security or means of livelihood. The resulting discontent is undermining society's foundations.

Another major social issue in China today is environmental pollution. During the industrialization process, local government officials have turned a blind eye to the big picture and national interests, including the use of energy resources, in favor of their personal interests. While exercising their power to plunder as much wealth and resources as possible, they overlook protection of the environment, which harms not only the poor, but also the rich, including officials. Ultimately people in every walk of life will pay for it.

Another issue is energy resources, which China lacks, but which it increasingly requires for the economic development that ensures social stability. No one is responsible for overseeing energy resources from the exploitation planning stage to the transportation and finally the effective use of the resources. For example, the utilization rate of coal in China is less than 30 percent—most of it is wasted through carelessness and over-mining. Mine workers are generally peasants who have lost their land or from places where crops are inadequate to sustain their livelihood. With limited alternatives, some travel to provinces hundreds of kilometers away to work in mines. The energy shortage and sharp increases in coal prices have contributed to a vicious circle in which mine accidents occur more frequently and mine workers enjoy no security.

All of these developments contribute to a growing power split between the central government and local governments. The interests of officials in local government lie more in the economy as they scramble for the last piece of the pie. If you

want to talk about who in China cares least about the Communist Party, it's local officials. They ignore popular discontent and grab as much as they can, which only exacerbates discontent against the Communist Party.

The interests of the central government lie more in politics. Central government officials are dissatisfied with the activities of local officials and want to curb them, but the system upon which they depend makes this impossible. If we review the history of our country, we see that China is currently in a historically critical phase. In Chinese history, peasant uprisings typically lead to regime change, but every time the regime is replaced, the new regime once again becomes corrupt and degenerate and arouses public discontent, which eventually reaches a boiling point and leads to a new popular uprising. I feel China has reached such a point now. The most critical issue for us now is to find a way to avoid re-entering this historical cycle.

Feng: You've outlined some of the major issues China faces. Do you see any solutions to these problems?

Han: I'd like to talk about some aspects related to my work experience: one is China's need for rule of law. Without rule of law, everything falls into chaos. There's a saying that you have to have a compass to draw a circle. We typically regard the legal system and regulations as only controlling the common people, but in fact, regulations should form a legal system that applies to each individual and entity, including the leader of the country or Party, a company, a house, land, lake, energy resource or anything else, with regulations clearly determining who owns something, how it is run or exploited, the lines that cannot be crossed, what things a political party can and cannot do, the responsibilities and the obligations of the government, and the responsibilities and the obligations of the citizen. Then society can work things out through the legal system instead of allowing the powerful to impose their will on the powerless.

Another issue is the cultivation of civil society. Our country does not have a tradition of civil society. In fact, the Chinese

word for "citizen" actually refers to common people who are ruled by others, which is not very conducive to civic consciousness. So what is civil society, really? In constitutional politics, the term civil society refers to those people who have the constitutional rights of citizens. In fact, the common people in our country do not have constitutional rights, and that's what has kept civil society from developing.

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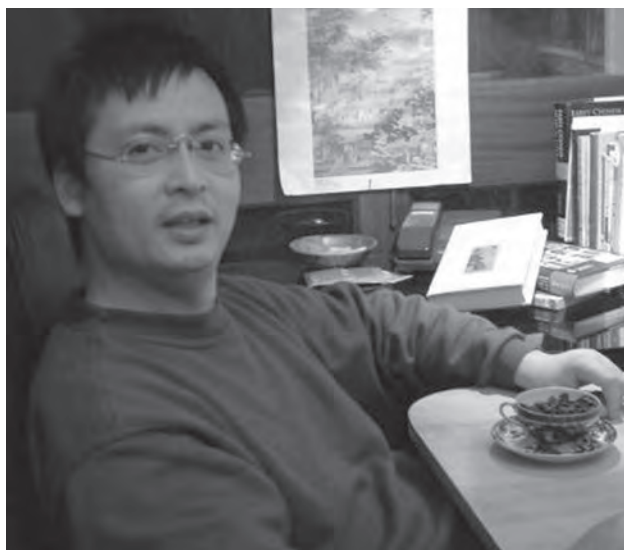
So the common people need to become citizens, but this transformation can't be bestowed on them by someone else—they have to do it themselves, through their own efforts. How? I see the forming of associations as a key step—workers forming labor unions, peasants, businessmen and students forming their own associations, and communities forming organizations to defend their rights.

It is worth emphasizing that citizens need to know how to use the law to protect their rights. In other words, the establishment of civil society needs the protections offered by the legal system. On the other hand, if the legal system is not accompanied or supported by the development of civil society, it will eventually revert to nothing more than a tool of the power elite.

Feng: Your organization, China Labor Bulletin, aims to protect the rights and benefits of workers. It is said that the lack of participation by workers and peasants in the 1989 Democracy Movement led to workers and peasants suffering the worst long-term consequences of the June 4th crackdown in terms of their livelihoods. The perception is that the 1989 Democracy Movement was a movement of intellectuals, and that because they fought for their rights, the Communist Party made concessions to them, while the Party thinks workers and peasants are relatively easy to bully, and so feels free to oppress them. What is your view on this?

Han: The truth is, a social movement develops as part of a historical phase, rather than being created or propelled by any particular individuals or groups. At that time, the workers and peasants were feeling fairly comfortable, so when they took up banners and demonstrated in the streets, they did so in support of the students. But what were the students fighting for? They were protesting corruption, and calling for democracy and greater media oversight to fight corruption, which they saw as threatening the rights and welfare of the people, that is, the workers and peasants. So we can see there was a misunderstanding between the two sides: the students were fighting for progress and rights for society as a whole, including workers and peasants, but the workers and peasants didn't feel they were under threat; they just felt they were doing the students a favor by lending their support.

As a result, there was no dominant force in the movement,



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just different social groups supporting each other. It was a peculiar phenomenon of Chinese society, and there's no point in blaming anyone for it. But one of the problems that resulted was that because the main demand of the students was to eliminate corruption, after the June 4th crackdown, the Communist Party became hypersensitive over the corruption issue, fearing that addressing this issue would vindicate the demands

of the students and be tantamount to a reversal of the official judgment of June 4th. Local officials took advantage of this raw nerve in the central government and indulged in corruption with little fear that the central government would take action. In the 10 years following June 4th, corruption developed at a rapid pace, laying a solid foundation for the more large-scale corruption that prevails today, and the loss of control by the

First Tiananmen, Then the World

BY HU PING

China's unwillingness to face up to June 4th bodes ill for its contribution to world peace.

Seventeen years after the violent official crackdown on pro-democracy protestors at Tiananmen Square, the subject of "June 4th" remains taboo in public discourse. This in itself makes clear the terrible conditions of human rights in China today.

What we need to consider at this point is whether in the past 17 years China has made progress toward democracy, or whether the Communist autocracy has only become stronger. In view of the present circumstances, what will China be like in another 10 to 20 years? And what influence will China have on the rest of the world?

The fact is, no one retains any faith that Hu Jintao will promote democratic reform. At a press conference during his visit to the United States in April this year, in reply to a journalist's question about whether China would implement democracy, Hu said, "I'm not sure what definition of 'democracy' this journalist friend is referring to, but we have all along maintained that there cannot be modernization without democracy."¹

What Hu was really saying here was, "You have your democracy, and we have our democracy. Given China's impressive accomplishments in modernization, it should be clear that China's political system is appropriate to China's conditions and that it is serving the interests of the Chinese people, and therefore it must be democratic."

We know that in March this year, the Chinese government published a "White Paper on Democracy" in which it clearly set forth that the democracy being implemented in China is democracy under the leadership of the Communist Party. And on May 11, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) published its *Yellow Paper on World Socialism*,² which states that "The homeland security strategies of the United States in the twenty-first century constitute the greatest threat to China's economic security."

CASS Vice-President Li Shenming wrote a forward for the *Yellow Paper* entitled, "The Prospects for Development of Socialism in the Twenty-First Century." In it he observes, "The upheavals in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the breakup of the former Soviet Union, the fall

from power of the Soviet government, all marked a low-tide for the prospects of Socialism and a high-point for capitalism in the post-war era . . . At present, the world socialist movement has not only withstood the impact of the upheavals in Eastern Europe, but has actually enjoyed a measure of renewal and development . . . Especially in China, which constitutes 20 percent of the world's population, the adherence to a socialist direction along with reform and opening has resulted in enormous accomplishments . . . World Socialism has already begun to emerge from its nadir and is experiencing a rebound." The writer predicted that the capitalist globalization led by the United States would eventually be replaced by a socialist globalization led by China.

This is a message we cannot afford to ignore, because it makes clear that with consolidation of power, the Chinese Communist authorities, or at least a portion of them, are increasingly losing patience with Deng Xiaoping's policy of "speaking softly and carrying a big stick." This was always just a matter of time, because that policy was meant to conceal China's true strength and capabilities only until the time was ripe.

The nature of autocratic governments is to expand their power, and such governments are intrinsically hostile to democratic governments. This is because democratic governments by their very existence offer an irresistible attraction to the citizens of autocratic governments, and therefore are regarded with fear and loathing by those governments.

China is a world power that makes up one-fifth of the world's population. If China remains a Communist autocracy for the next 20 years, it will inevitably use its enormous power to pose a serious threat to the freedom and democracy of the entire world. In this sense, we must acknowledge that China's human rights problems are in fact the problems of the whole world.

NOTES

1. Quoted in "Women yiguan renwei, meiyou minzhu jiu meiyou xiandaihua," Singtaonet.com, April 21, 2006, http://www.singtaonet.com/global/hjt/hjt4/t20060421_195864.html.
2. Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, *Shijie shehui zhuyi huangpishu*, 2006. See <http://www.cass.net.cn/file/2006051559241.html>.



Han Dongfang

central government. Before 1999, the central government still had a certain authority over the local government, but if you look at things now in 2006, at least in terms of the economy, how much authority does the central government have over local government? So we can see the far-reaching influence June 4th had on Chinese society, and it's something we should reflect on when we review those events today.

Feng: Back in 1989, you were actively working toward the formation of independent labor organizations. That seems to have been quite farsighted at that time. What was your strongest feeling at that time, and what hopes do you have now for the future?

Han: At that time, the thing I felt most was that I didn't know how to go about organizing the workers. I was a worker too, a railway worker, but I didn't know what a labor union was, what the relationship should be between a labor union and the workers, or between a labor union and politics or the regime, and what people a labor union should communicate with. Now, after years of working in the international labor movement, including visiting and communicating with other groups, considering the rights and benefits of workers and providing legal assistance to workers in individual cases, I know what's involved. The labor union is actually a special

interest group for workers that has no direction relationship with the regime. Its main target is the boss, the employer, and its daily concerns are pay, welfare, working hours and working conditions.

But even though the labor union's direct counterpart is not the government, this doesn't mean unions don't deal with the government. A labor union needs the government to serve as a referee or intermediary between the boss and the union. Another issue is official legislation. A government is never completely neutral, and always takes its own interests into account, but a labor union can use its lobbying capacity to influence legislation and enforcement by the government to make it more neutral and even favor the workers. This is a feature of special interest groups, and labor unions are no exception. That's why labor unions should be able to play an important role in resolving current social crises and avoiding the eruption of future social crises, because in principle labor unions resolve conflicts through peaceful organization and rational negotiation rather than by striking down or annihilating the opposition.

Feng: In the past we've seen many cases of workers defending their rights in which their leaders were arrested. Have there been relatively successful cases of workers defending their rights through independent unions?

Han: I feel we shouldn't simply reckon that the situation of one case can explain that of another. For example, in the case of the events in Daqing and Liaoyang in 2001,¹ workers had been demonstrating continuously for several weeks without being arrested, while back in 1990 or 1991, you wouldn't dare consider the possibility of going on strike. So events that take place during a certain stage and under certain conditions don't necessarily indicate what will happen five years later, and they shouldn't intimidate us from trying to do something. That's why I feel that we shouldn't allow the arrest and imprisonment of labor organizers in the past to serve as a psychological obstacle for Chinese workers to stand up and defend their rights today or in the future.

We shouldn't use the terrible events of years ago to anticipate what's going to happen today or in the future or allow them to intimidate us into forfeiting our rights.

Nowadays you have taxi drivers going on strike, and in Heze, Shandong Province in February, thousands of textile factory workers went on strike for more than a week without anyone being arrested. They were fighting for something very simple, a raise in pay, and they got it. These situations show us that society is advancing, and that social and economic relations are changing, and behind the scenes government policy is changing as well. That's why we shouldn't use the terrible events of years ago to anticipate what's going to happen today

or in the future or allow them to intimidate us into forfeiting our rights. By defending their rights through association, negotiation and litigation if necessary, workers actually provide a very good model for solving China's future crises. That is to say, citizens defend their own rights through awareness, concrete intervention, peaceful negotiation and legal channels rather than waiting until the last minute, when they have borne too much too long and society explodes.

Feng: There are two ways to form a labor union: one is for workers to form their own labor union, and the other is to use the existing official labor union. What do you think of these two options?

Han: I don't feel it is necessary to choose one over the other. It depends on what the workers want and what they feel will be more effective in their situation. It also depends on workers' psychological endurance. Based on my knowledge of the mentality of China's workers and the legal situation, I think it's better for workers in companies without labor unions to organize themselves by electing a labor union committee in accordance with the Labor Union Law, and then register under the All-China Federation of Trade Unions with its existing regulations and procedures. This way no one takes any legal or political risks, and it sets a good example for workers at other nearby enterprises. This method also avoids covert activity; from the outset, the labor union presents itself as the counterpart rather than the opponent of the employer, and you're protected by law. This doesn't mean I oppose or dissuade workers from forming independent labor unions. If they're willing to do it, I have no reason to oppose it.

Feng: It's just that there are greater risks involved.

Han: In my view, it does bring greater risk, and may lead to trouble for some individuals.

Feng: We've talked about June 4th to the present day. Looking to the future, do you think a scenario like June 4th could occur again in China?

Han: I should make a distinction between my personal wishes and my objective judgment and analysis of the current situation. My personal wish is that such a scenario should never again arise. Although June 4th changed our views of official ideology and of our country, this change has brought little positive benefit to ordinary people, and the negative consequences far outweigh the benefits.

In April, while I was talking with some friends from central European countries and Russia, I asked them, "Please tell me frankly: after June 4, 1989, did the peaceful revolution that led to regime change in your countries take you by surprise? Were you prepared to take advantage of the results and opportunities?" They replied very frankly, "At that time we didn't have the

ability or the preparation to deal with the outcome, either socially or psychologically. Our civil society hadn't reached a stage where we could turn the outcome toward a positive direction." They made reference to the conditions in Russia today. But at the same time, they didn't feel they were wrong to seize the opportunity; they just felt they were not sufficiently prepared.

Then I asked them a second question: "Looking back now, if five or ten years before 1989 you had been given the opportunity to prepare for the events of 1989, what would you have done?" They said, "We would have accelerated the development of the legal system and civil society to deal with future opportunities. Then once the opportunities arrived, we would have been in a better position to seize them without considering them a burden. Another thing is that even if nobody ended up giving us these opportunities, establishing the legal system and building up civil society would have brought these opportunities to us."

That's why my preference is not for radical action, but rather for a gradual process in which citizens build up their own society, and establishment of the legal system is propelled by civil society. But this is just my hope. Today when I look at the declining trends and rapid escalation of social problems in China, especially at the corruption of officials and of the elite, and the increasing disregard for the common people, I believe that another June 4th scenario in China is likely; in reality, it could very well happen again.

However, if it does happen, the workers and rural residents will not be as complacent as they were in 1989, when they acted solely in support of the students. What will it look like if another June 4th scenario arises? Which social class will be the catalyst? Will it be the rural residents who have lost their land, or the hundreds of millions of migrants who leave their homes to work in the cities and are unable to obtain any security? Who will it be?

Regardless of which social class might be the catalyst, the possibility of another June 4th still exists. This realization should give us even more of an impetus, given our available resources and capabilities, to promote civil and social consciousness, and to find a way to resolve these feelings of anger and resentment through rule of law.

Translated by Wei Liu

The audio version of this interview can be heard as a Podcast on HRIC's Web site, www.hrichina.org.

NOTES

1. In Daqing, China's main oil-producing center, thousands of workers protested in March 2002 over the loss of jobs and benefits at the newly privatized Daqing Oil Company. Around the same time in Liaoyang, thousands more workers besieged the city's government offices over massive layoffs resulting from factory shutdowns. Two leaders of the Liaoyang protests, Yao Fuxing and Xiao Yunliang, were subsequently sentenced to lengthy prison terms.