

Tiananmen Square

What the Media Suppressed

*Mao Tsetung's cadres
were clean,
The Gang of Four's cadres
were brave,
Hua Guofeng's cadres
were nowhere to be seen,
Deng Xiaoping's cadres
are all millionaires.*
— Poem from Tiananmen
Square, Spring 1989

This rhyme was *not* reported on BBC or Cable Network News from the U.S. nor did it appear in *The Times*, *Le Monde*, *Pravda* or

any other major daily newspaper, West or East. It was treated as all the other pro-Maoist sentiment that came up from some sections of the Chinese masses during the recent upheaval: something to be avoided or simply suppressed.

What the Chinese protestors wanted, and what the world's people were *told* they wanted, were not the same thing. The Western media one-sidedly played up the pro-West, pro-parliamentary democracy sentiments which were prominent in the leadership of the Beijing students. They dismissed the workers as an independent political force, describing them as

simply strong backs of support for the students, and attacked more radical and proletarian youth as "common criminals" profiting from the opportunity to blow off steam.

As for the Chinese regime, its media spewed out portraits of the protestors as counter-revolutionary agents in the pay of foreign powers, anti-patriotic, hooligans, KMT riff-raff, etc. Like the Western media, for example, they focused great attention on the handful of people who threw paint on the giant portrait of Mao in Tiananmen Square, downplaying how the

contending forces in the Chinese mass upsurge and how they developed, nor to sum up thoroughly the relative weight of the different trends. But based on a number of sources, including the media, China experts and people who were in China before and during the mass upsurge, it is possible to draw a number of preliminary conclusions. Not least of these is that, while it was not the main trend among the students, there surfaced a widespread pro-Maoist sentiment which has been systematically covered up by bourgeois reports, whatever their source.

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Before taking a look at these more radical forces, it is necessary to say a word about the student leadership. The Western media churned out an image of a sea of Chinese youth who worship "Western democracy". Yet the media itself showed images that contradicted this, including repeated scenes of the students singing *The Internationale*, the revolutionary communist anthem. A one-paragraph anecdote slipped in as a humour sidebar in the *International Herald Tribune* recounted that large numbers of young bicyclists would "let go of their handlebars for extended periods to wave a red flag while pedaling and singing *The Internationale*". The point is not that

students quickly rounded up the perpetrators, as well as how there was little or no open support among the protestors for such a deed.

The various policies of the Western and Chinese media resulted in a partial and distorted picture of the revolt and wound up presenting

the most prominent section of the student leadership in Beijing as the *only* significant political trend. It was not.

AWTW is not in a position to characterise precisely all the



A youth mocks PLA general.

the dominant trend among the student leadership was revolutionary Maoism. It definitely was not. Many of these students entertained all kinds of notions of bringing parliamentary democracy to China, often combined with an unhealthy dose of Gorbachev glasnost, and all sorts of other ideas. But their understanding was *contradictory*: the same students might sympathise with Gorbachev and uphold aspects of the Mao period in China, or call for parliamentary democracy and sing The Internationale.

Moreover, their viewpoints often changed rapidly and

dramatically as the battle developed. Some students fortunate enough to listen to BBC or see Cable Network News, which is piped into the hotels for foreigners, were reported to be confused and outraged when they saw the "free world" media giving its distorted depiction of how much they all supposedly adored America. For some, it was their first lesson in "free speech", western style.

But the Deng regime itself gave the sharpest lessons. Those who had been fooled into supporting Deng or at least the general orientation of the CPC leadership have been confronted rudely with the fruits of these positions. One group of secondary school student supporters of Fang Lizhi, the astrophysicist who found refuge in the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, wrote: "... when Deng Xiaoping first became the leader we believed that our situation would improve. Never in the farthest reaches of our imagination did we expect that it would become as bad as it is now." And this letter was written shortly *before* the massacre. Some students had come to the Square

with petrol, talking of burning themselves alive in protest — only a few days later they were using the petrol to make Molotov cocktails to repel the People's Liberation Army attack. As millions of Chinese search to understand what happened in Tiananmen Square, does anyone really expect that they will forget that for years the West had proclaimed Deng as the "great reformer", their "Man of the Year", as U.S. *Time* magazine hailed him?

It is not surprising that sentiment for one or another wing of the current Chinese leadership and against the Cultural Revolution was initially fairly widespread among the student leadership in Tiananmen Square, given their privileged position in Chinese society. During the intense struggle that went on during the Cultural Revolution over whether to expand or reduce privileges as part of moving forward to a society without inequality and exploitation, not a few intellectuals genuinely and enthusiastically strove to serve the revolution. But some others who initially were enthusiastic for the Cultural Revolution grew weary as the intense class struggle proved protracted and were swayed by siren calls from the revisionists for "stability and unity". And still others clung fiercely to their privileges, bitterly

resented the efforts to narrow social inequalities and yearned for revenge. Thus many of the intellectuals at first welcomed or went along with the coup in 1976 against Mao's revolutionary comrades, but with different understandings and different agendas.

What has happened now has exploded many illusions. Many intellectuals may be privileged, but China is not — it is once again a nation basically held down and exploited by imperialism, and all the



revisionists' promises of a rich, powerful, modern, technologically advanced China are being translated into the reality of rampant inflation, shantytowns and rickshaws, national humiliation, hunger and female infanticide — in short, a painful nightmare. Now Deng's vicious repression has bared what bourgeois rule means in China, including for the intellectuals.

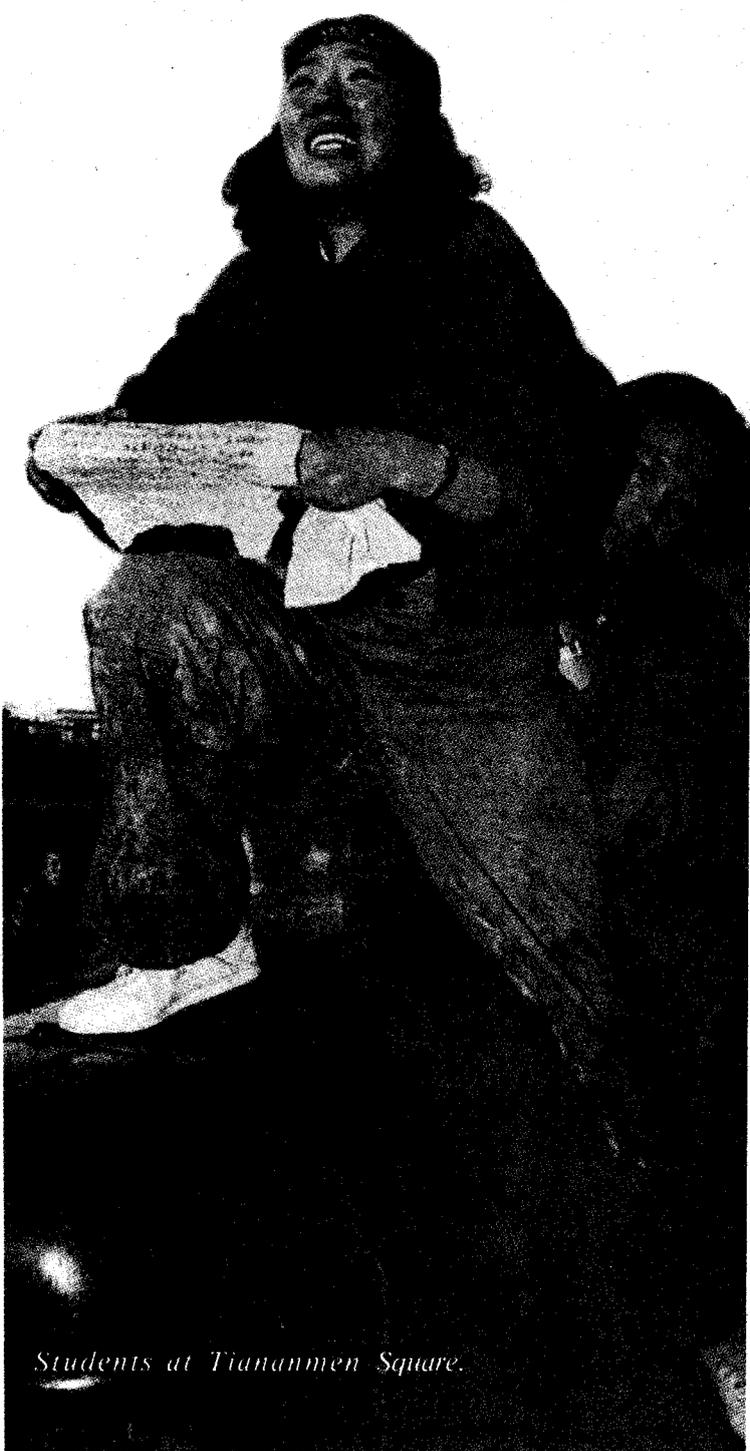
The whole world was outraged by the massacre in Tiananmen Square — but the

pronounced shock and disbelief of many of the student leaders reflected how much they misunderstood the actual nature of the regime. Their relatively privileged position in Chinese society cushioned them and blinded many of them to what the restoration of capitalism actually meant. Not grasping the qualitative leap that took place with the 1976 coup, many felt no reason to think that the Deng regime would act so differently towards protestors than had the revolutionary regime, which did not resort to this type of bloody suppression. The irony many of these people failed to appreciate is that even though the Deng regime looks to the intellectuals as part of its social base, because it is a reactionary regime which does not have the support of the broad masses, it needs and must ultimately rely on the bloodiest suppression to enforce its rule.

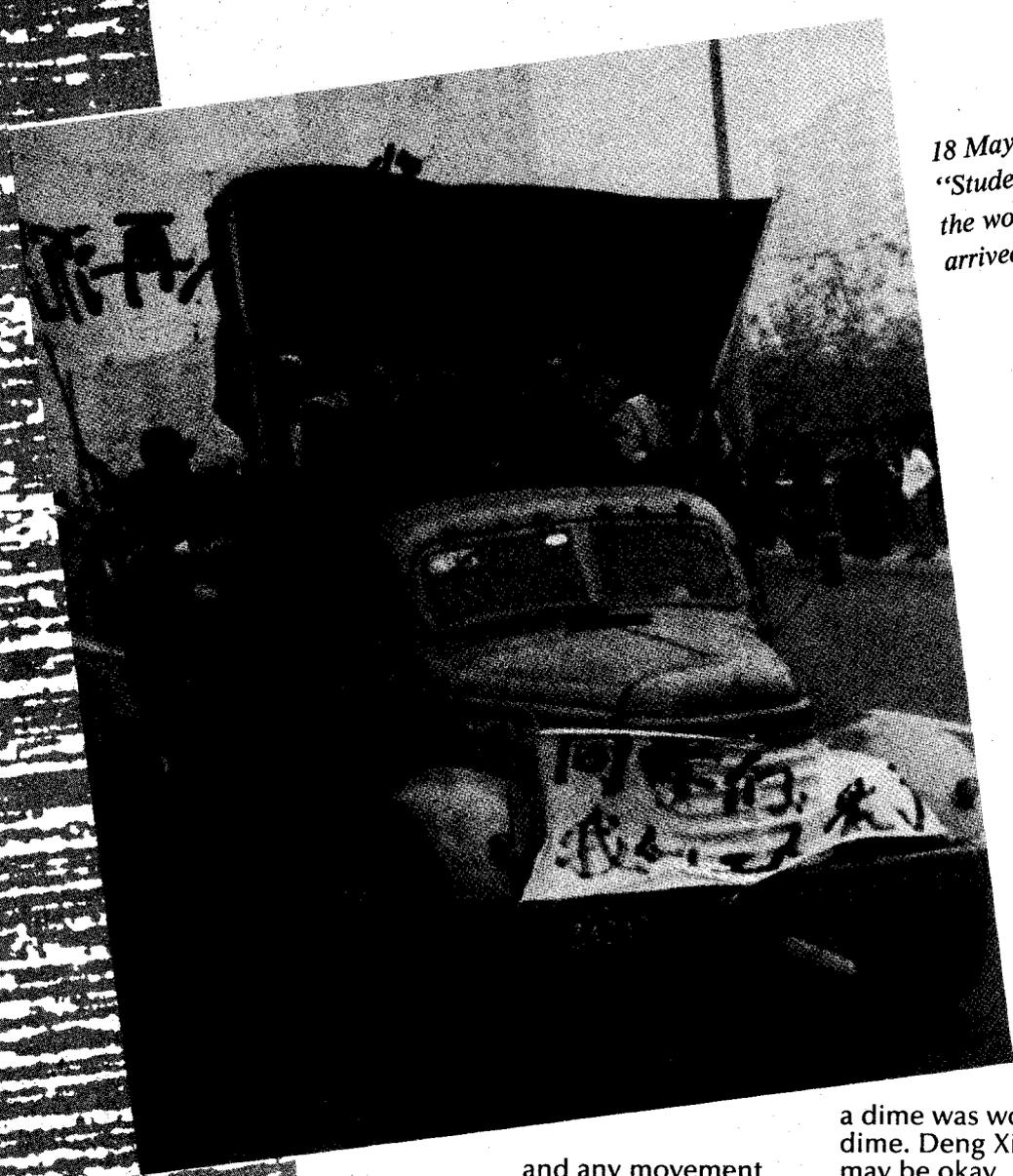
The fact that the regime has now pushed many of even the relatively privileged strata into opposition has created an excellent situation for a genuine revolutionary vanguard, a Maoist party, to seize on to forge a new alignment of forces against the reactionary Deng regime and to take advantage of disarray in the enemy camp.

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One of the great differences between the Chinese movement



Students at Tiananmen Square.



18 May 1989.
"Students:
the workers have
arrived!"

and any movement elsewhere was that the masses have a basis for comparison between Deng's bourgeois regime and the genuinely socialist society led by Mao. One joke making the rounds in China has Deng paying a visit to Mao's tomb to plead, what can I do? Mao replies, let's change places. An American newspaper reported that a ditty heard in the countryside before the spring turmoil broke out, at a time when Deng was much less exposed, goes like this: "Mao Tsetung was fine,

a dime was worth a dime. Deng Xiaoping may be okay, but a dollar is worth a dime today." In Tiananmen Square one could frequently see posters of Mao along with other prominent figures from the pre-1976 epoch. What such activity reflected was an understanding that life for the basic masses was growing harder as well as a longing for a past that was better.

Such feelings represent more than simple nostalgia for the past, however, for in China the past also had been the future; upholding China under



China, 1989. The banner of these street cleaners reads "Sweep away the dictator."

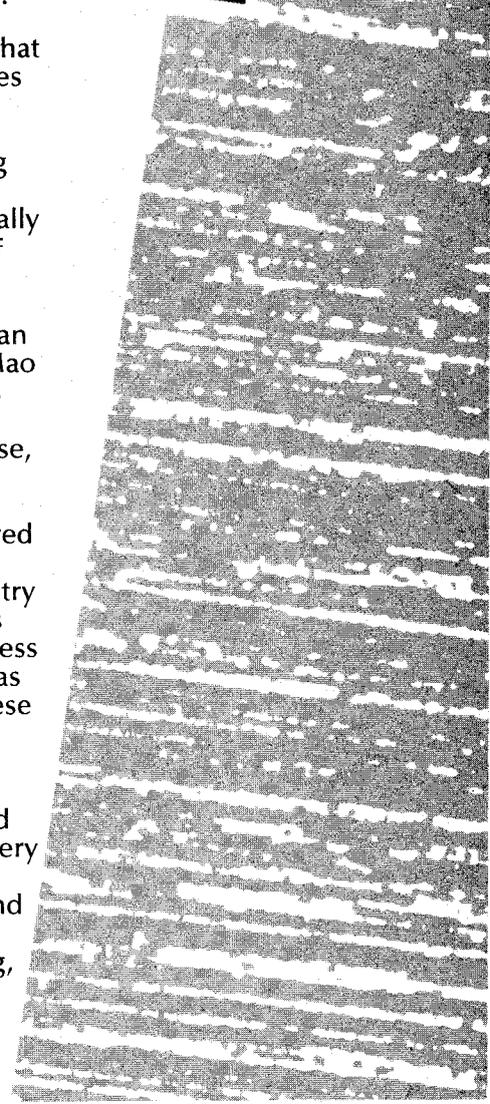
Mao goes hand-in-hand with knowing what needs to be done today. One woman talked of how during the liberation struggle the peasants had made sandals for the soldiers out of grass and reeds or anything they could find, and that was their way of contributing to the people's war. Now, the soldiers were sporting boots imported from the USA, and instead of liberating the people were shooting them down; the woman told of the feeling of betrayal she felt, and how this was a result of the line of Deng Xiaoping.

The movement also temporarily opened up a political space where Mao could be publicly upheld by those who were already clearer on different lines. Pro-Mao sentiment was broad and heterogeneous, and the more advanced trend within this was

generally expressed in upholding Mao symbols closely identified with the Cultural Revolution, like badges and the *Quotations from Chairman Mao* (the famous Little Red Book studied by revolutionary masses throughout China and by millions of others around the world). Observers in 1988, for instance, reported that almost no one was wearing Mao badges then. Displaying Mao badges would be daring, even dangerous, as this amounted to openly going against the regime, which was attacking Mao's line and systematically dismantling the accomplishments of the Mao period and especially the Cultural Revolution.

In the months before the outbreak of the student movement,

observers reported that in Peking Mao badges were worn furtively, inside the lapel of jackets. Later, during the Tiananmen protests, and especially in the second half of May when workers massively joined the students, there was an outpouring of pro-Mao sentiment as badges were dusted off and pinned on. (Of course, while it seemed like the Western media found and interviewed every pro-American Chinese in the country and showed endless reruns of the "goddess of democracy", it was "unable" to find these pro-Maoists, and anyone waiting for interviews with workers holding Red Books was in for a very long wait — the Western media found only what it was interested in finding,



and only what was in its interests.)

Some observers on the scene reported intense discussions of Mao's works in the Square, with people reading out loud to each other from the Little Red Book and Mao's *Selected Works*. These books are now very difficult to find in bookstores (many had been preserved for years in basements, attics, etc.) — it is generally assumed that the regime wants to suppress Mao's writings, so there is a sense that they must hold some truth. Some of the youth involved in these discussions talked of going back to Mao as discovering the history that they had not lived through.

Some people went further to argue that what China needed now was another socialist revolution, that they had done this before in their history and that Mao was the leader who had the understanding to accomplish that. They emphatically remarked that the point was not just to get rid of Deng Xiaoping, but Deng's line, which has dominated China for the last decade.

This consciousness at times unleashed heroism of a kind that went unreported in the Western press. One observer related how just after the massacre, while the PLA soldiers were shooting at practically anyone who even looked defiant, a woman was riding her bicycle down the streets with a bullhorn, crying, "This regime is

fascist. You can all see it now. It's a fascist regime. We need another socialist revolution in China. They're killing our children. Don't you see them killing our children." Tears were streaming down her face as she rode from street corner to street corner drawing a crowd as she tried to explain what was going on.

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Though the workers entered the scene en masse later, towards the end of May, it was immediately apparent that they had a more realistic appreciation of what the stakes were and what would be required of them. It was widely reported that, as one journalist put it, "while students have organised road barricades, speeches and anti-government posters, it is workers... who have resorted to overt violence." The Chinese regime tried to drive wedges between the students and workers. Right after the massacre, for instance, the executions which were announced pointedly only included workers and unemployed. They feared not only that the students would ignite the workers and the huge numbers of unemployed flocking to the cities from the countryside, but even more fundamentally what the workers would bring into any

mass movement. Just before the spring events, the official Chinese *Peasants' Daily* alerted its cadres to what it called "a second deification of Mao" (the first allegedly being the Cultural Revolution) where across the country people were hanging up portraits of Mao, singing "The East is Red" and reciting ditties glorifying the Mao epoch. The phenomenon, it reported, was arising spontaneously among poorer workers and peasants. The *International Herald Tribune* reported: "Intellectuals and manual workers may share hatred of China's corrupt and brutal leaders, but the big portraits of Mao Tsetung that industrial workers paraded through Beijing in the days preceding martial law were a reminder that most of China's masses long for an enlightened emperor, not democratic institutions." What the workers and peasants are longing for in fact is the rule of the proletariat and the continued revolution that Mao embodied.

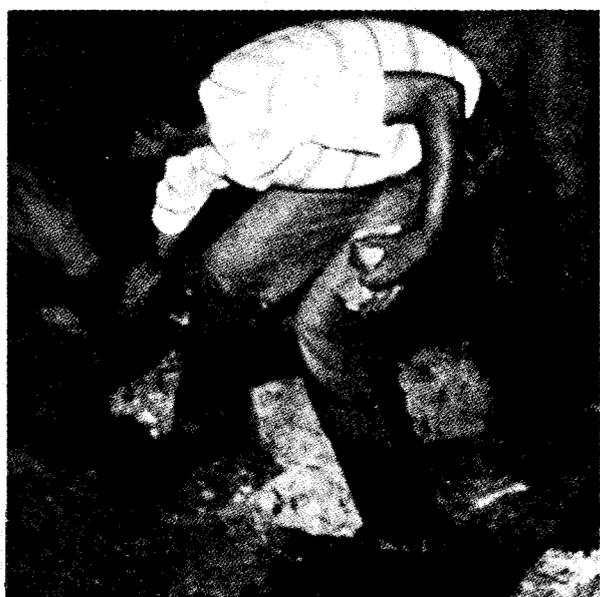
These recent developments in China bring to mind the point made by Mao in the different context of the Cultural Revolution:

"Although it was the intellectuals and the broad masses of young

students who launched the criticism of the bourgeois reactionary line, it was, nonetheless, incumbent upon the masters of the time, the broad masses of workers, peasants and soldiers, to serve as the main force in carrying the revolution through to completion, once the 'January Storm' had seized power. Intellectuals have always been quick in altering their perception of things, but, because of the limitations of their



Soldier disarmed by the masses.





instincts, and because they lack a thorough revolutionary character, they are sometimes opportunistic."

In brutally crushing the spring protests, one of Deng's main concerns was to strike at any potential rebirth of the Maoist forces and at the revolt and rebellion in which such forces grow strong. The uncompromising revolutionary spirit of the Cultural Revolution is still, for the rulers of China, all too alive and threatening. Pirated notes from a Party

meeting in late April quoted Deng as telling his colleagues: "This is not an ordinary student movement. It is turmoil.... What they are doing now is altogether the same stuff as what the rebels did during the Cultural Revolution. All they want is to create chaos under the heavens."

This spring's events are not, of course, a repeat of the Cultural Revolution. Instead of encouraging rebellion and revolutionary transformation from below, as Mao did when the proletariat held state power, the top party leadership today crushes dissent from above. Speaking to this difference, one bourgeois commentator accurately presented the viewpoint of his entire class: "Twenty years ago another

generation of students was against the same three things: compromise, inequalities, corruption. They called themselves the Red Guard and demanded 'extermination' of the 'devils and demons of revisionism'. They had a leader; they were driven by the messianism [sic] of the aging Mao Tsetung. There is no Mao today, thank God." The seeds that Mao and the Cultural Revolution planted, however, are very real. They have given rise to Maoist forces around the world, waging struggle from Peru to South Asia to the imperialist metropolises and in China too where the small but significant forces raising the banner of Mao and another socialist revolution are haunting Deng and the reactionaries and "creating chaos under the heavens" for their butcher regime. □



After the Tiananmen massacre, thousands gathered to mourn the fallen and condemned the criminal regime. Poems by Mao accompanied wreaths.