



LETTERS

'Unhealthy Tendencies'

If there has been a positive outcome from the 1989 massacre of Chinese anti-government protesters it has at least been the virtual extinction of the 'whateverist' style of analysis of Chinese politics.

Whereas the original 'whateverists' were those who followed whatever Mao did or said, these latterday 'whateverists' can be relied upon to offer a neat, steady explanation for Beijing's latest idiocies, whatever they might be. These 'whateverists' are recognisable by the use of the same tortuous language as that employed by the regime itself, and their effect is to legitimise the regime, if not actually to defend it.

The piece by Nick Knight in the otherwise excellent China Supplement (ALR 125) demonstrates that the species survives, if not exactly prospering intellectually.

For Knight, the massacre was simply a result of the "contradictions and tensions generated in the economic realm [which] were inevitably reflected in the ideological realm", before bouncing off into "deep dissatisfaction with the party's political and ideological leadership".

Well, that's nothing if not succinct. I thought the movement was a battle between idealistic if not naive students—backed by large numbers of intellectuals and workers—and an ageing leadership of peasant revolutionaries who had not met a new idea since the 1920s.

Knight merely describes the massacre of some thousands of unarmed civilians as a "stiffening of resolve" in applying the four cardinal principles (which is really the one principle restated four times—the CCP rules, OK?).

So it was the economy that was to blame. The destruction of the old maoist, collectivist infrastructure and the opening to the West encouraged corruption and led to the party's decline in the opinion polls and the rise of 'bourgeois liberalism'. Funnily enough, this is not far from the formulation of Deng Xiaoping himself when, thanking the troops a few days later, he told them the counter-revolution, anti-government riot/uprising etc was bound to happen.

Knight contends the pragmatic policies diminished the marxism-leninism and maoism which had become "part and parcel of Chinese marxism" and engendered a cynicism among the population.

I would suggest that almost complete disbelief in Chinese marxism-leninism-maoism, or whatever passes for ideology in 'New China', is not a result of a change in economic policy. Likewise, if cynicism is the issue, I don't think this is because Chinese now have the right to carry out what were once heinous crimes, such as selling tomatoes on the street, or opening a hairdressing shop.

Rather, I'd suggest disillusionment stems from a variety of sources, all of them party-led: such as the anti-rightist movement (1957), the great leap forward (1958-61), the cultural revolution (1966-69), the Lin Biao affair (1971), the crushing of the democracy wall movement (1979), the spiritual pollution campaigns (eg 1983) and the first (1976) as well as the second Tiananmen massacres.

The 'whateverists' usually described these as a result of 'bad work style', which is a handy way of explaining away, say, the Keating-induced recession, 'collateral damage' upon a Baghdad bunker or any other cock-up that comes to mind. It is also worth pointing out that while the economic policies

may be merely pragmatic, as against legitimate in the eyes of the 'whateverists', they also work—unlike the 80% of the economy that it still state-owned.

Moreover, the reforms enjoy immense support. I've yet to meet a Chinese who wants to go back to the wasteful and barren days of workpoints and quotas. If Nick Knight has any ideas on how better to move a command economy forward other than introducing forms of market forces, I'm sure Li Peng (not to mention Presidents Gorbachev, Havel et al) would be more than pleased to hear them.

Knight does touch on corruption and, yes, it is true corruption has risen in the past 13 years, but so have standards of living. Corruption (*quandao*) was one of the targets of the student movement. A strengthening of democracy inexorably means a decline in corruption; that is, it's easy to be corrupt when you're not accountable, or when the press is a government mouthpiece. Knight did not touch on any of this, nor any of the other questions raised by the movement, such as its overwhelming popular support, and the legitimacy of the regime itself.

Chinese politics does involve some important and fundamental issues: human rights, the role/treatment of intellectuals, the role of markets in communist economies, the innate brutality of communist states and the evaluation of communist revolutions in agrarian states.

A mode of analysis, such as Knight's, which describes the natural desire for more justice, more democracy and less persecution as "unhealthy tendencies" doesn't offer much to the China debate, except to confirm the staggering capacity of some Western experts to be fooled.

**Robert Clark,
Bondi, NSW.**

Editor's note: The 'whateverists' are characterised by the expression: 'Whatever Mao Zedong said or did is all right with us.' They, represented by Hua Guofeng, held sway in the interregnum between Mao's death in 1976 and the ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping in late 1978.