A “VELVET PRISON” WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS:
THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURE IN POST-1989 CHINA

HIST 400

DECEMBER 9, 2009

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ABSTRACT

On June 4, 1989, the Tiananmen Square protests transformed Beijing into a virtual war zone. To many in the West, China was on the verge of a dramatic revolution that would see the collapse of communism and the emergence of a new democratic China. Since 1989 there have indeed been a great many changes that have occurred in China. What has most visible defined post-1989 China has been a profound tension as the Chinese Communist Party has sought dramatic economic development and modernization without the chaos the Mao’s “Cultural Revolution” or a challenge to traditional party authority. Building upon Miklós Haraszti’s work on Eastern Europe—The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism—this essay argues that post-1989 China has become a system in which the state no longer possess a monopoly on culture. Although the state has been successfully in reinventing its hegemonic structure and continued to maintain a large degree of control, individuals, groups, and the forces of the economy have also gained an enormous degree of influence in the construction of post-1989 “Chinese” culture and frequently undermined state authority.
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On June 5, 1989, an unidentified man stood alone in front of a row of Chinese tanks. The image, captured by a number of photographers at the scene, was soon scattered throughout Western news reports, which emphasized the power of the individual to stand up to the brute force of an oppressive state—a modern version of David and Goliath. The image was captured the day after the Chinese government sent the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) into Beijing to disperse civilians who had been protesting in and around Tiananmen Square for weeks. Following a previous failure to disperse the protesters in May, the Chinese government deployed the PLA with live rounds and tanks and ordered that the soldiers clear the square by dawn of June 4.¹

What ensued was chaos. Beijing was transformed into a war zone as the PLA openly fired upon civilians, wounding 7,000 and killing as many 2,600 people.²

Western democratic nations have often viewed the events that unfolded in 1989 as the brutal suppression of a democratic uprising against authoritarian-communist rule. Emphasizing images like the Goddess of Democracy and placing June 4 in the context of revolutions that occurred in the Eastern Bloc around the same time, however, tends to obscure the fact that the protesters in Beijing sought reform, not revolution.³

In the twenty years since June 4, 1989, China has undergone a dramatic economic revolution, transforming itself beyond many people’s wildest expectations. Although it is tempting to see China’s post-1989 economic development and the diminishing presence of a

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