

Chapter 64

Wang Senior's Speech Fails to Persuade
The People Confront Their Army

And so they went back to the Square. The Nationalities truck had not come by and the buses were impossible, but Margaret was able to flag down a taxi on White Stone Bridge Road, so that after some loud negotiations they rode to the Square in style.

The Square was much more crowded than Margaret had expected after the previous day's alarms. At least a third of the people there were ordinary citizens. There were many family groups, complete with children and old folk. Nobody seemed much concerned about the situation.

Baoyu was with the Botanical Institute delegation at the east of the Monument. There were no more than a dozen, of whom Margaret recognized only the girl Xiaohong, fresh-faced Peanut Wang, and the Christian boy from Tianjin. The twins were nowhere in evidence. Peanut Wang had a placard saying DOWN WITH THE COMMUNIST PARTY! He was standing with a short, middle-aged man wearing glasses and a short-sleeved white shirt. Xiaohong came forward to meet them, knuckles on hips.

"Where were you yesterday?" she said to Norbu at once. "Our time of greatest danger, and where were you?"

"Yuezhu was sick," explained Norbu. "I had to look after her."

Xiaohong looked at Margaret for a moment, then back at Norbu. "Hng. Well, you should have been here. Our hunger strikers are sick, too—but they are still here with us."

“A lot of people are sick,” said the Christian boy, who had come up behind Xiaohong. “The twins got sick. Both of them!”

“It’s the conditions here,” suggested Margaret. “The Square is really beginning to stink.”

Arms akimbo still, Xiaohong paid no attention. “Well, since you weren’t here, the classmates elected me as their chairman.”

Norbu shrugged. “All right. What’s been happening? We heard about the soldiers being stopped.”

“That’s right,” said Peanut Wang, now at the side of the Christian boy. “The people stopped them. Now there’s a big split in the leadership. One group wants to suppress the students. But they can’t persuade the army to do it, so they’re stuck. Now the other group is getting stronger.”

“It’s just as my father said,” put in Baoyu. “There will be some changes in the leadership. Reforms.”

“Because of us!” added the Christian boy.

“Oh, that’s all rumor.” Xiaohong shook her head. “We don’t really know what’s happening. The important thing . . .” She actually lifted a finger and wagged it at Norbu “. . . is to keep the pressure on the leaders. That’s why we have to be here. If we’re not here, Li Peng has won. Don’t you see?”

Norbu nodded meekly. “All right.”

Xiaohong turned away, back to her charges. The Christian boy followed her. Only Baoyu and Peanut Wang were left, Peanut holding his placard with one hand, watching Norbu rather gormlessly. The middle-aged man was a couple of steps behind him, also staring at Norbu.

“You should introduce your father,” prompted Baoyu.

“Oh, yes!” Peanut Wang turned and pulled with his free hand at the shirt of the middle-aged man. “My father.” The man stepped forward and made little bowing movements. “Dad, this is my classmate Norbu and his girlfriend. She is overseas Chinese. From America!”

The man stepped forward. “How do you do.” He reached forward to shake hands with Norbu. “My son has told me a lot about you.” The man’s voice was cultivated, and quite without accent. He turned and shook hands with Margaret.

“Oh! You’re the teacher who became a successful peasant,” said

Margaret. Even before she finished the sentence she had put her hand over her mouth, afraid she might have said the wrong thing.

The elder Wang smiled. Before the introduction Margaret, watching them, and temporarily forgetting Peanut Wang's history, had thought the man to be a common worker, or at best some kind of minor office functionary. The short-sleeved white shirt, worn outside the pants, the cheap pants themselves and cheap black leather shoes, the short-back-and-sides haircut, the unshaved upper lip: a worker, or just possibly something like an elementary-school teacher. But when he smiled, you could see at once that he was an educated man.

"I hope I'm a better peasant than I was a teacher."

"My father's going to make a speech at the Monument!" announced Peanut Wang eagerly. "As a representative of the peasants."

"A bit of a deception, really, since I'm not a born peasant. But peasants are rather scarce here, and somebody has to speak up for them."

The elder Wang's speech, when at last he was led to the microphone on the topmost terrace of the Monument, seemed very odd to Margaret, and not at all appropriate to the occasion.

The Elder Wang's Speech from the Martyrs' Monument

Students! Workers! Guests! I have come from Lincheng County in Hebei Province. Wang Jun has asked me to speak to you on behalf of the peasants. I wish I could tell you that the peasants support your Movement. In fact, the peasants know very little about it. Actually, most of them are too busy with spring planting to worry about political reform. Their lives are very hard, and they have little time to reflect on such things. Probably, if they had time to listen while it was explained to them, they would support your Movement. So far as the peasants are concerned, I'm afraid you must be satisfied with that.

Since I can't say much to you about the attitudes of the peasants, I will address you as a representative of my generation. As you can tell from my speaking style, I am not a born peasant. I was an intellectual, sent down to the countryside

during the Cultural Revolution. There I have lived and worked these twenty years past. Now, we all know about the Cultural Revolution, and there's no point in raking over old fires. I only want to tell you this. For twenty years I've been reflecting on that time, on what happened then, and on some things that happened before and some since. I have been trying to think through the fundamental causes of what happened.

Now, you will hear a lot of nonsense talked about this. There are people who say that we Chinese can never govern ourselves properly. They say we are just “a dish of loose sand”. [Using a phrase coined by Sun Yatsen.] They say we have been slaves for all our history, and so we must always be slaves. Other people say because we've never had a proper religion, so we're spiritually listless and this makes it easy for us to be cruel to each other. There is even a school of thinkers now telling us that we think too much about words like “yellow” and “earth”, when really we should think more about “blue” and “sea”. All sorts of theories have come up to explain to us why we are so politically backward and why we treat each other so badly.

So far as our political backwardness is concerned, there is no disputing or denying it. We must face it honestly. Let's not take refuge in excuses about we Chinese having our own special way of doing things, or democracy being suitable for some countries but not for others. Democracy just means that big decisions shouldn't be made until different viewpoints have been aired in public. Well, that's just common sense. It's not wild license, it's not the beginnings of chaos, it's not bourgeois liberalism or spiritual pollution. It's just common sense and decency, the way any great people should conduct their affairs.

Yet we Chinese—who are undoubtedly a great people, if you consider our history, our culture, our literature and philosophy—we don't have this democracy, this common-sense way of conducting our affairs. Why not? Well, we could argue all day about the reasons. I only want to say this: that democ-

racy needs some development. It depends on a way of thinking among the people that can only develop gradually.

I once saw a book called *English Constitutional History*. It contained more than eight hundred pages. Now try to imagine a book called *Chinese Constitutional History*. How long would such a book be? Eight hundred pages? I don't see how you could fill eight pages. You couldn't write eight characters! There is nothing to report. There has been no development at all. Our rights now, our methods of government and decision-making now, are just what they were in the time of the Yellow Emperor, five thousand years ago. Indeed, they have even gone backwards. In ancient times there was at least a definite rule of succession to the Dragon Throne, even if the rule wasn't always observed. Now there is no rule at all. Whichever one amongst the leaders is most skillful at calumny and intrigue, whichever one has cultivated the most allies and can call in the most debts, that one succeeds to the Mandate of Heaven. This is even more primitive than hereditary succession, which at least had a philosophical theory to support it. This is just government by gangsters.

So, comrades, let us admit our utter political backwardness. And let us acknowledge that we cannot advance all at once, that we can only hope to begin our advance, to write the first few pages of that eight hundred—perhaps the first chapter if we are lucky. Now we can ask useful questions. How do we begin? If, as it really seems, this wonderful Movement is now in a position to make demands on the country's leaders, what demands should it make, to help forward the process of democratization? What can we realistically ask for?

I suggest two things. First, our country should withdraw her armies of occupation from non-Chinese regions. Let Chinese people govern China. Let Tibetans govern Tibet and Mongolians Mongolia. Let the Turks govern Turkestan. These people don't want us running their affairs. Let's concentrate all our energies on building our own country—China. These

occupied territories are a distraction and a burden. Besides, history shows that great imperial powers can only liberalize themselves when they have shed their colonies. It was true for Turkey, Spain and Austria. It will be true for us, too. We should withdraw from these colonies, and apologize to their inhabitants for the harm we have done them.

Second, demand that the leaders set a date for free elections. Of course, elections are not the solution to all problems. You can even have democracy without elections—Hong Kong is quite democratic, though they have no elections. And we need careful preparation if elections are to have any meaning. Political parties must form, the press must be freed, and so on. But such things are easier to get under way when people have a clear goal, a target. If you can force the leaders to say in public, with the whole world listening: All right, ten years from today we shall have a free election, and abide by the choice of the people—then everybody will know our democratic development has begun. The rest I think you can leave to the people, who are not such a ‘dish of loose sand’ as our leaders believe them to be.

In making these demands, I hope you will deal very carefully with our country’s leaders. They are not fools, and they will not give up power just because we ask them to. I think they understand that brute force will not get them out of every difficulty; but they have many weapons other than brute force. If they cannot force you to accept their rule, they will bribe you. They will say: Look, just leave us in charge, let us put down all discontent and press ahead with economic reform, and everybody will get rich! Many people will be seduced by such an argument. Who doesn’t want to be rich? And our country is so poor we are bound to get a bit richer, no matter what policies our leaders follow. But beware of this promise. Without a modern open system, the wealth will gradually be sucked up into the pockets of the powerful. Power and wealth can only exist independently of each other in free countries. If the

people have no power, they will not be able to keep their wealth, it will be snatched from them by the powerful. At Spring Festival our peasants bring sacrifices to the God of Wealth. He wears the uniform of a Tang dynasty government official. That is our ancient tradition: wealth belongs properly to the powerful. If a man gets rich outside the power system, he must be a kind of criminal. That tradition must be cast aside if we are to become a modern country.

And even if this bribe fails at last, there is a worse one. If they cannot keep power by appealing to your greed, they will appeal to your patriotism. They will say: Well, perhaps we haven't done a very good job of putting rice in your bowl, but look! our army and navy are the strongest in the world. All the other countries are trembling for fear of us! This is the bribe that I dread most of all. If our leaders take that path, sooner or later the world will unite against us and destroy us, and our cities will be burnt ruins, like Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and all our children will be dead.

Finally I urge you to have courage. A philosopher once said that courage is the most important virtue, because without it you cannot practice any of the others. Have faith in your cause! Be clear in your goals! Don't be afraid of marching soldiers and threatening proclamations! You are in the right, and the whole world can see it! Stand up with dignity and courage and face down the gangsters! Nobody elected them, nobody loves them, nobody wants them! Ours is the greatest, most ancient, most civilized nation in the world! Our Han race outshines all others in ability and achievement! We had sages, poets, engineers and doctors when the peoples of Europe were living in caves! We lack only a modern political system. Let's take the first steps to such a system right here! Let's write that first chapter! Right now! For our future generations, for the future of the whole world! Freedom! Truth! Democracy!

The speech got a mixed reception. Several people applauded—Norbu

among them, with special enthusiasm for the part about the colonies. However, most of the students sat on their hands. A few called out in disgust.

“Counter-revolutionary!”

“We want to reform the country, not break it up!”

“You’ll give our Movement a bad name!”

The elder Wang seemed to care nothing for these various reactions, however. As soon as he had finished speaking he left the terrace, walking off with his son, disappearing among the students camped at the foot of the Monument.

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Baoyu went off at four o’clock to do his dancer’s exercises, leaving Margaret with an itch of remorse—she had not done her voice exercises for more than a month. Soon after Baoyu’s departure there was a strong rumor that the troops in the suburbs were trying to move forward. This caused a great bustle. A large mixed group of workers and students announced that they were going to build barricades, and set off to the northwest. A few minutes after this, Xiaohong came running back from the south side of the Monument, where the student leaders were.

“We need some volunteers to go and talk to the soldiers,” she called out. “Persuade them not to advance. Volunteers!”

Norbu had his hand in the air before she had finished speaking. “We’ll go! Where are they?”

Margaret swallowed hard, swallowing her fear. *You’re crazy!* she wanted to say. *Go and talk to the soldiers? What if they shoot us?* But of course could not say these things after keeping him from the Square the day before. If her fears were to come between them, she would have no more fears. She was in it to the end. In it with him—both of them, in this business to the end. She took his hand, and they headed over to the south side of the Monument.

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The most dangerous part of the enterprise was, in fact, the journey to the suburbs. A minibus had been arranged, and was waiting for them by the screened-off area in front of the Museum, where the toilets were. The stink here was so awful Margaret was glad when the bus, packed with students, finally got started. She was not glad for long. The driver was a student, too—one with very little experience of driving, it seemed. He swayed and swerved at sixty miles an hour through streets crowded with cyclists and pedestrians, slowing down to fifty when it was necessary—as it was three or four times—to dodge around the barricades being built across the main roads.

There were at least twice as many students in the bus as seats. Margaret sat on Norbu's lap, with one of his hands on her waist to steady her, the other on her knee. They held on to each other in this way for the whole trip, the bus lurching and swaying, Margaret foraging in her small stock of prayers.

In the dwindling light of early evening they arrived at a great crowd of people blocking a street in the northeast of the city. From inside the minibus there was nothing to see but the people, who were mostly facing away from them; but when they emerged from the bus Margaret could make out, over the heads of the people, the tarpaulin covers of army trucks stretching back along the street.

"Students!" someone shouted. "Here are the students!"

People at the back of the crowd turned. The leader of Margaret's group was a young man from Beijing University. She knew his name: Lu Fengyin. She had seen him making a speech at the Monument a few days before. He was well-dressed and would have been very handsome but for a large black mole on his upper lip. Now he called out to the people.

"Let us through! Let us through! We want to talk to the soldiers!"

The crowd parted, people shuffling back. Everyone seemed to be in a good humor. Some people applauded as the students pushed through.

The first soldier Margaret saw was standing by the lead truck. He was thirty or so, standing with one arm across his chest, left hand cupping the right elbow, right hand holding a cigarette. A stooped, gray-haired

man of at least seventy was haranguing him, but the soldier seemed to be paying no attention. He just stood there, coolly smoking, staring off into the distance while the old fellow croaked away at him.

“Comrade!” The student leader walked right up to him. The soldier turned and regarded him expressionlessly. “Comrade! We want to talk to your men! On behalf of the hunger strikers in the Square. We’ve just come from there, and they asked us to speak for them. Comrade, if you have no objection, we’d like to speak to your men.”

The soldier—Margaret now realized he must be an officer—just stared at the boy for a few seconds, then took a long drag on his cigarette and turned away, walking to the rear of the column. The students applauded. The little party shoved its way through to the rear of the truck. Here there were several citizens already, calling up at the soldiers inside the truck. In the failing light, Margaret could see clearly only the two rearmost soldiers. Both were leaning forward, their elbows on their knees. Both were very young. But what struck her most was the expression on their faces: it was as clear as could be that they were *scared*. As the boy with the mole started addressing them, another soldier pushed through the crowd toward them. He stopped dead when he saw the students, and flicked his eyes from one to another of them like a cornered rabbit.

“E’s bin to take a leak,” explained a citizen at Margaret’s elbow. “Poor kids! Bin ’ere near twenty-four hours now, nobody come to feed ’em nor nuffink. Some o’ the citizens ’ere bin givin’ ’em grub, lettin’ ’em use the ’ouses to wash ’emselves an’ take a leak. The fuckin’ orficers don’t like it though. Not a bit! They don’t want the common sodgers to talk to us at all. *We* can talk to *them*, but *they* en’t allowed to talk to *us*. Shit!”

The squaddie just stood there, looking confused. The student leader noticed him, and called out: “Comrade! It’s all right! We are from the Beijing Students Union Dialogue Representatives Group. We love the People’s Liberation Army! The people love the Army, the Army loves the people!”

He led the students in a round of applause. One or two of the citizens joined in. The man at Margaret’s elbow did not. “We’d love ’em better if

they'd go back to guardin' the fuckin' borders, an' leave us alone!" he said, rather loud. Some people behind him laughed.

The soldier said something; but he said it so low nobody heard.

"What?" Lu Fengyin stepped forward. "What is it, comrade? We'll help you if we can."

"It's just . . . Oi en't sure this 'ere is moi lorry," the boy mumbled.

"Hey, Fugui, this is yours all right. Come on!" This was one of the soldiers in the truck.

"Let us help you up, comrade!" With two students pushing, the boy was hoisted up over the tailboard, and disappeared into the truck. Led by Lu Fengyin, the students all applauded again.

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It was nearly midnight when they got back to the Square. There had been several scares and counterscares in their absence. Thousands of soldiers had arrived by train at the city's main railway station. Students and citizens had surrounded them, and they were no more able to move than their comrades in the suburbs. Then there had been an announcement on the TV news in the name of some senior Army leaders, to the effect that no force would be used against the students. That had lifted everyone's spirits; then someone had spotted troops on the roof of the Great Hall, at the west side of the Square. Everyone knew there were secret tunnels under the Hall, connecting it to the places where the leaders lived. A rumor went around that the Hall was full of soldiers waiting to burst out and attack the Square. The TV announcement had just been a trick, the rumor said.

Margaret and Norbu arrived back at the Square just as this rumor had taken hold. Peanut Wang had returned from escorting his father out of the Square, and brought them up to date.

"They've been telling us to make masks," he said excitedly. "In case the soldiers use tear-gas. You just get a piece of cotton rag and soak it in water. Then you hold it over your face. See, that's what they're doing over there. Xiaohong's gone to get some cotton for our group."

It all seemed far-fetched to Margaret. She had spent her entire evening

among soldiers. The idea of those poor dejected creatures having the spirit to launch a teargas attack seemed ridiculous.

“I shouldn’t worry,” she said to Peanut Wang. “I don’t think the soldiers will attack us. Where’s your father?”

“He left. Back to his hotel. But we’re going to stay here all night.”

“So are we,” said Norbu, a little too firmly.

“But we have no food left,” said Margaret. “The food we brought in the backpack, we gave it all to the soldiers.”

“You can get food,” said Peanut. “Xiaohong has some. We all stocked up earlier, when the food vendors began to go home.”

Xiaohong had moved them to a point southeast of the Monument. Here the other students from the Institute were all sitting on the square flagstones. There was a large cardboard box filled with food: Western-style bread, dried fish snacks, cakes and apples. Beside it were some plastic soda bottles filled with water. Norbu took two cakes and two apples, and went to sit at the fringe of the group. Margaret sat with him, and they ate. When Margaret was halfway through her apple, Xiaohong—she seemed to be the very soul of organizational efficiency—came over with two surgical masks for them.

“In case of tear gas,” she explained. “Keep them damp.”

Margaret finished her apple, then lay down with her head on Norbu’s lap. The stone beneath her was hard and quite surprisingly cold. She shifted restlessly for a while, then dozed.

When she woke, the quality of the sound in the Square was different. Everyone was very quiet, listening to a speech on the student loudspeakers. Looking up, she saw that the speaker was Erkin, the Turkish boy from the Education Institute, who was supposed to be so militant. He was standing at the upper level on the south side of the Monument, speaking into a microphone. Now it seemed he had changed his line and was arguing for withdrawal—for tactical reasons, not from fear. Withdrawing from the Square would remove the rationale for martial law, he said.

Unable either to sleep properly or to stay awake, Margaret twisted from side to side on the cold flagstones. When next she looked up the boy with the mole, Lu Fengyin, was speaking.

“. . . serious split in the leadership. Maybe in the Army. Until that’s

resolved, they won't do anything. You know what our leaders are like. They can't even move their bowels until they've had a hundred meetings and got a unanimous vote on it." The students laughed at this. "As long as we show our resolution, they won't harm us. But if we start to weaken, then they'll all say: This is the right moment to act. Then they'll come."

Margaret dozed again. The next time she woke Norbu was shaking her, whispering: "Vote! Vote!" in her ear. She came upright and raised her hand in the air.

"What am I voting for?"

"To stay in the Square. Erkin wants to evacuate. Lu Fengyin wants to stay. We're voting for Lu Fengyin."

"Oh." With her free hand, Margaret rubbed her eyes. "I have to go to the toilet."

"All right. I'll take you. Wait."

The vote was to stay in the Square. There was applause, and a ragged *Internationale*. Before it had finished Margaret was starting to nod off again. Norbu put his hands to her waist and lifted her to her feet. Hand in hand they picked their way among the students who were sitting and lying on every square inch of ground near the Monument. They headed east, to the toilets by the Museum. On the way Norbu tried to explain the various factions in the student leadership to her, but Margaret couldn't fix her mind on what he was saying. She noticed that a Red Cross tent had been set up behind the bushes in front of the Museum.

The toilets were just a series of holes in the ground surrounded by rough canvas screens. They had been created by simply removing the paving stones that covered a sewer pipe, then opening the pipe. The stink was astounding. As Margaret crouched over the hole she quite suddenly found herself throwing up. Dizzily, concentrating as best she could on staying upright, she retched and retched.

Norbu was waiting for her outside. "Now tell the truth." He peered at her in the gloom, all mock-earnest inquiry. "Did you ever smell anything like this in Tibet?"

Margaret was holding her stomach. "Made me throw up."

Soothing, crooning, he took her up in his arms and carried her back to their place by the Monument. There he set her down gently, packed his

jacket and the empty backpack under her, and fetched an apple from the box.

“Eat it. It will clean your mouth.”

The *Internationale* again, sung this time with great gusto. Margaret opened her eyes. Her right hip, which had been pressed against the ground, ached horribly. She lurched up into a sitting position. Many of the students nearby were standing now. Some had their hands in the air, making V signs. Some were hugging each other. A few yards away she saw Peanut Wang jumping up and down, waving his arms.

“What? What is it?”

Norbu turned, put his arm round her waist, and grinned at her. He seemed not at all tired, and there was now no trace of his earlier bitterness.

“Announcement on the government loudspeakers. We can stay in the Square, so long as we keep order. The soldiers will withdraw.”

“Perhaps it’s a trick.”

“Perhaps. But I don’t think so. We’ve won, little nightingale.” He squeezed her waist. “We’ve won.” Most of the students were on their feet now. Thank Heaven, thought Margaret; now we can go home.