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# China Since Tiananmen

## THE MASSACRE'S LONG SHADOW

*Jean-Philippe Béja*

*Jean-Philippe Béja, a senior researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and the Center for International Studies and Research (Sciences-Po) in Paris, is currently based at the French Center for the Study of Contemporary China in Hong Kong. His publications include A la recherche d'une ombre chinoise: Le mouvement pour la démocratie en Chine, 1919–2004 (2004).*

“Kill two-hundred thousand to obtain twenty years of peace.” Twenty years after the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 4 June 1989, this quote attributed to Deng Xiaoping appears to have been off by a great deal. It took only one-thousand to two-thousand dead for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to gain its wished-for two decades of quiet. Beneath the stable surface, however, the massacre still deeply affects the behavior of China’s rulers and their opposition alike. The nervousness with which CCP leaders addressed the approach of Tiananmen’s twentieth anniversary shows that, despite all efforts to erase this event from official histories and popular memory, the Party remains haunted by it.<sup>1</sup>

When tanks of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) rolled into downtown Beijing on June 4 to force out the students who—with help from citizens working to block troop movements—had been occupying Tiananmen Square since mid-May, the CCP and its top leader Deng Xiaoping were suddenly cast in a harsh new light. Since consolidating his power in the late 1980s, Deng had come to seem a hero to most Chinese. He had rehabilitated many of Mao’s victims, allowed youths whom the late Chairman had consigned to the countryside to come back to the cities, relaxed controls over the rural economy and daily life, and thus earned much support from farmers, intellectuals, and young people. He was regarded as a pragmatist who stood up to the neo-Maoists and wanted to improve the average citizen’s standard of living. His handpicked CCP secretary-general Zhao Ziyang had been talking about greater dialogue with society and even separating the Party from the government. Citizens at large were

feeling freer to express discontent, while students and intellectuals were discussing prospects for increased democratization. Student demonstrations in 1986 had met with a mild official reaction that seemed one more piece of evidence for the notion that the Party had changed and was led by figures far less allergic to dissent than the Great Helmsman had been. The shootings of June 4 and the crackdown that followed shockingly reversed these impressions and expectations of regime leniency.

In the aftermath of the June 4 incident, Deng expressed grief only for the soldiers and police officers who had died,<sup>2</sup> while the students and local citizens who had resisted the PLA were condemned as “rioters.” The contrast between this discourse and reality was so striking that it dealt a serious blow to the legitimacy of the CCP, whose basic nature seemed unchanged despite all the reforms of the 1980s. The long prison terms or death sentences meted out to the “rioters” and others who had dared to resist the army; the application of strict press controls; and the dissolution of all the civil society groups that had emerged during the 1980s showed the Party’s willingness to impose its rule by force. Expression of dissent was out of the question, and the mere mention of the crackdown could land one in jail.

The main lesson that Deng drew from the “turmoil” or “storm” of 1989 was the need to reassert the so-called Four Cardinal Principles: socialism, Marxism–Leninism–Maozedong-thought, people’s democratic dictatorship, and CCP leadership. For Deng, a Leninist, the breakup of the CCP had been and remained the gravest threat. Zhao Ziyang, in keeping with his belief in greater dialogue with society, had wanted to open talks with student demonstrators even after Deng had written in an April 26 *People’s Daily* editorial that they were nothing more than “a handful of counter-revolutionaries.”<sup>3</sup> When Deng decided to proclaim martial law on May 20, Zhao resigned in protest (two PLA marshals opposed martial law as well), causing Deng serious worry about a split in higher Party ranks. Zhao’s refusal to engage in self-criticism over his actions led him to be placed under house arrest till his death in 2005.<sup>4</sup> His name has since been expunged from official media, including history texts.

Before Tiananmen, there was competition between the reformers who rallied around Deng and the Party conservatives headed by Chen Yun. Since then, the premium has been on maintaining unity within the CCP at all costs. Various senior leaders have obviously diverged over various policies, but matters have never been allowed to reach the point of a “struggle between two lines.” The CCP’s urge to close ranks and stay united is among the key legacies of 4 June 1989.

### Legitimacy Through Elite Cooptation

Not long after Tiananmen, the breakup of the USSR and the economic woes that rocked its successor states gave the CCP’s leaders a

splendid chance to regain the initiative. Had not Mikhail Gorbachev's disastrous *glasnost* (openness) policy broken the once-mighty Soviet Union into shards and driven the Communist Party from power? Had the CCP done as Zhao wished and given in to the democracy movement, would not Tibet and Xinjiang have seceded, the Party fallen from power, and a dismembered China found itself sliding backward into dire poverty? Would not the dream of a China "strong and prosperous"—a dream shared not only by CCP leaders but by generations of Chinese intellectuals going back to the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century—have been crushed? Had not Deng's resolve in the face of the dangerous prodemocracy agitation kept China united and saved it from dubious Western machinations?

Such rhetoric aside, Deng knew well that a major reason for the Soviet Union's collapse had been its economic failure, and that the redoubling of dictatorial controls would not by itself solve China's problems. Hence he overcame the reluctance of his conservative (orthodox Marxist) partners and launched a new wave of economic reforms in 1992.<sup>5</sup> Insisting that the CCP's main task was to make China strong and wealthy, he added that questions about whether a given policy was "capitalist" or "socialist" were beside the point, since "development is the most important thing." In order to achieve it, Deng stressed the importance of opening the economy, embracing globalization, and allowing entrepreneurs to get rich. To the intelligentsia, which had played such a large role in the 1989 protests, he offered what amounted to a new social contract. He may have morally rehabilitated intellectuals by declaring them part of the working class back in 1978, but this did nothing for them materially. After his southern tour in 1992, he allowed them to become entrepreneurs and to accumulate wealth. Many seized this opportunity and got busy creating high-tech and services enterprises. Those who remained in academia were allowed to join the international scientific community, and their pay, benefits, opportunities, and working conditions improved dramatically.

In short, the Party had decided to coopt the most problematic social categories, the ones that had been at the forefront of the democracy movement. Whereas in the 1980s students had been reluctant to join the Party, by the close of the 1990s more than 80 percent of them were applying for CCP membership. The Party, as Jiang Zemin put it, would, in addition to standing for China's vast masses, also represent its most advanced productive forces (entrepreneurs, engineers, and the like) and its most advanced cultural forces (intellectuals who would agree not to question CCP rule). The so-called Three Represents approach worked—in tandem with resolute efforts to prevent the emergence of any autonomous entities that might challenge Party rule—and the CCP gained support among the cognitive and economic elites who embraced what dissident and literary scholar Liu Xiaobo has called the "philosophy of the pig."<sup>6</sup>

As the new elite-friendly development policies were put in place, they began to irk workers in state-owned enterprises and peasants pinched by falling farm prices. In order to prevent the discontent that bubbled among these marginalized classes from crystallizing into a movement similar to the one that had spawned the 1989 ferment, Party leaders used carrots and sticks. Attempts to create autonomous unions or even discussion circles met with the latter in the form of instant suppression. Nothing like the salons, semiautonomous research centers, and semiautonomous media that had flourished in the late 1980s was allowed to reemerge. When activists tried to found the China Democracy Party in 1998, Jiang Zemin gave the order to “nip [it] in the bud.” Even innocuous “reflection circles” such as the New Youth Study Group, which had all of eight members, became targets of heavy repression.<sup>7</sup> Intellectuals who try to help workers and peasants articulate their grievances, always a nightmare for the Party, receive special attention from the internal-security apparatus. The formation of unauthorized links or contacts between villages or work units is strongly forbidden.

Carrots have included concessions to the discontented. The stress placed on the “rule of law” as a safety valve since 2000 serves as a case in point. Victims of abusive officials are encouraged to press court cases against them. This allows the system to publicly redress grievances while atomizing citizens’ claims and addressing them piecemeal, as individual complaints rather than as the stuff of social movements. The very recourse to courts involves acknowledgment of the regime’s legitimacy.

When a protest erupts in a factory or village, the authorities may negotiate or they may send in the police (if not the *hei shehui*, local mafia thugs often linked to the local government). In no case, however, will officials do anything but strain mightily to prevent any protest from spreading. When workers at a plant in Liaoyang sought to recruit workers from the town’s other factories for a demonstration in 2003, the protest organizers quickly found themselves in jail.<sup>8</sup> The absence over the last two decades of any large-scale social movement comparable to the democracy movement of the late 1980s is in no small part a testament to the effectiveness of the regime’s dogged protest-containment efforts.

## Exiles and Dissidents

For the opposition, one of the first consequences of the Tiananmen Massacre was the flight abroad of a large number of activists. In September 1989, for the first time since the foundation of the People’s Republic forty years earlier, leaders of a Chinese mass movement gathered outside China. On this occasion they met in France, and their goal was to create an opposition organization in exile, the Federation for a Democratic China (FDC). The FDC was an attempt to gather various

generations of oppositionists, some of whom had been abroad for a few years. Young students, former rightists, and Party cadres from Hu Yaobang's and Zhao Ziyang's networks met to design a strategy to fight the CCP. Finding a basis for cooperation proved difficult, however, and the FDC's status as an exile group unavoidably left it cut off from ground-level Chinese realities. Debates among its members were abstract and had no impact on developments in China. Competition for the support of foreign political forces provoked fierce inner struggles, and the dream of the emergence of a new Sun Yat-sen evaporated. After a few years, leading personalities began shunning the FDC and it slowly died out. The exiles' greatest achievements have been to help keep the memory of the 1989 movement alive and to inform foreign governments, publics, and media outlets about violations of human rights in China. In fact, organizations focused on the latter topic, such as Human Rights in China, Chinese Human Rights Defenders, and the China Labour Bulletin (which specializes in publicizing attacks on workers' rights), have been the most effective and enjoy significant influence in Western government circles.<sup>9</sup>

Yet for the exile community as a whole, the broadest avenue for affecting life in China is not a formal political organization or the attention of foreign governments, but rather person-to-person contacts with the numerous educated Chinese who, especially since the mid-1990s, have been going abroad to study, teach, conduct research, or take part in scholarly gatherings. As little as Beijing's state-security services may like it, these traveling Chinese intellectuals do meet their colleagues in exile, and they discuss the future of China with them.

After martial law was lifted in January 1990, and especially after Deng Xiaoping reaffirmed his commitment to economic reform during his 1992 swing through South China, the active ranks of the prodemocracy movement became much thinner. Yet a small minority of activists pushed on, despite an environment made hostile by more than just the omnipresence of the police. After Deng restated his commitment to capitalism, Chinese-style, a new mood of concern with moneymaking overtook all sectors of the populace. Demand for democracy and political reform fell, particularly among the city folk who had supported the student movement in 1989 and who were now busy trying to take advantage of the opportunities that Deng's new policy had opened up for them.

This is not to suggest that conditions were otherwise favorable when people became distracted by visions of personal enrichment. In the wake of Tiananmen, antigovernment demonstrations were strictly forbidden, the police were everywhere, and the fear of repression was overwhelming. Students were obliged to submit to military exercises under army supervision, and most of the leaders who embodied the spirit of '89 were in exile, in hiding, or in jail. Any push for democratization based on sup-

port among the elite was doomed because, after 4 June 1989, the leaders who had shielded and nurtured the democracy movement were purged from positions of power.

There was therefore almost no space for the expression of dissent. Nevertheless, some activists, especially those who had been sent to prison in the post-Tiananmen crackdown, refused to abandon the struggle for democracy. Once freed, they found themselves expelled from their respective work units (often universities or research institutes), banned by the police from starting private enterprises, under strict surveillance, and isolated from the rest of society. Their situation was reminiscent of what Czechoslovak dissidents had faced after Soviet tanks crushed the Prague Spring in 1968. So were their reactions. Like their Central European spiritual forebears, many of the Chinese dissidents resolved to “live in the truth” by speaking out against Communist Party abuses at every opportunity. They published political commentaries in the Hong Kong or international media, and later on the Internet. They tried to establish informal networks and protested in the foreign media (the only media open to them) when one of their number suffered police harassment or detention. They kept up demands for the reappraisal of June 4 by the authorities and called for the instauration of democracy.

The most active dissidents tended to be student leaders such as Wang Dan, or intellectuals such as Bao Zunxin and Liu Xiaobo, the latter of whom had left behind a teaching career in the United States in order to join the democracy movement in his homeland, and then did jail time after the Tiananmen Massacre. He and those like him refused to compromise with the government and acted as the conscience of society by reaffirming the principles that had been at the center of the democracy movement. They established good relations with the disaffected intellectuals and old Party cadres from Hu Yaobang’s and Zhao Ziyang’s networks who had become very hostile to the CCP leadership after the Massacre.<sup>10</sup>

Over the last two decades, they have written dozens of collective letters denouncing acts of repression against human-rights activists, defending workers victimized by heartless policies, demanding reversal of the official verdict on the events of June 4, and criticizing attacks on national minorities, especially Tibetans. Tight press controls have too often meant that these cries of protest have gone largely unheard within China, though the Internet has helped the “generation of ’89” dissidents to reach a larger group of younger militants whose participation in democratic dissent dates from after 1989.

On the face-to-face level, older activists with roots in the 1989 democracy movement have been able to meet with younger people in private homes or, since the mid-1990s, in tea houses and bookstores opened by fellow activists of the ’89 generation. The Wansheng bookstore in Beijing, founded by Gan Qi and Liu Suli, who himself spent a year in

jail after the Massacre, was one of these places, and so has been the Sanwei bookstore, which continues to organize conferences on current affairs and on philosophical and legal subjects (known dissidents are not invited). The police watch such places, of course, and have often been known to ban Sanwei conferences. Yet personal gatherings continue to play an important role in the structuring of the would-be opposition.

### Critiquing the System and Its Top Officials

Among the small minority of students and professional intellectuals who have continued to criticize the regime from a democratic point of view, several subgroups can be discerned. The first consists of professors or researchers who have expressed their doubts about some policies in public. Jiao Guobiao, a professor at Peking University, published an article denouncing the Central Propaganda Department. Subsequently barred from teaching and supervising doctoral students, he was later allowed to go abroad, and when he came home he drew closer to the dissident community.

The case of Li Datong is also of interest. A veteran journalist, he was the editor-in-chief of *Bingdian* (Freezing Point), a supplement to *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao* (China Youth Daily) and was dismissed for having published an article on the Boxer Uprising that differed from the official version. His firing provoked an uproar, and for the first time since 1949, journalists (in this case a hundred of them) publicly petitioned the authorities to reverse an official decision.<sup>11</sup> Li was kept on but in a lesser job, and banned from publishing in the *China Youth Daily*. He still places articles on the Internet and in Hong Kong papers, and he too has grown closer to the dissidents and signs their petitions.

Some Chinese too young to have taken part in the 1989 democracy movement have nonetheless drawn inspiration from the courage of their elders and shown themselves unafraid to criticize the regime's shortcomings. The CCP's grip on information in general and on teaching and research in the social sciences is among their prime targets. Yu Jie was a doctoral candidate in literature at Peking University when he began penning allegorical essays skewering the ethos that prevailed after 4 June 1989. Upon graduation, the Chinese Writers' Association withdrew its job offer, so Yu became an independent intellectual and a prominent dissident.

The expansion of the Internet has favored the emergence of a new generation of young oppositionists. Most start with online satire. This is how Liu Di, who used the pen name "Stainless Steel Rat," became famous. The authorities did not appreciate her humor, and she was imprisoned without trial. Dissidents launched petitions, and she was freed after almost a year in jail.<sup>12</sup> Upon her release, she too could find no job and grew closer to the dissident community.



These activists were pushed outside the system by the refusal of the authorities, acting on lessons drawn from June 4, to let them find or keep employment in a state-owned unit (*danwei*), media outlet, or university. Therefore, ironically, it is the Party that appoints the members of the opposition. After the mid-1990s, some intellectuals could be openly critical of regime practices without losing their jobs, so long as they did not comment directly on taboo topics such as the Tiananmen Massacre. Even within these constraints, such critical intellectuals could still assist the dissident movement.

Those who gravitated toward the opposition after 4 June 1989 also included people who had lost relatives to the crackdown. Inspired by groups such as the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (a group of mothers of “the disappeared”) in Argentina, a group of victims’ family members founded the Mothers of Tiananmen (Tian’anmen muqin) under the leadership of Ding Zilin, a People’s University professor whose 17-year-old son lost his life to official violence on June 4. The Mothers urged relatives of the dead to demand that the government acknowledge its responsibility for the Massacre. After June 4, the CCP had continued to exert pressure for continued silence, suggesting that those who were kin to Tiananmen protestors might even be seen as accomplices of “rioters.”

Every year on June 4, the Tiananmen Mothers remind the authorities of their duty to accept responsibility and pay compensation. They try by all peaceful means to put an end to the cloak of official silence that to this day shrouds events which, for them, were of life-shattering import. Year by year, these ordinary and once politically quiescent citizens have grown in the conviction that they will never obtain satisfaction until the regime is reformed and guarantees citizens’ rights. They now commonly join other dissidents in signing petitions demanding respect for human rights. In 1998, the Mothers wrote two open letters. One denounced human-rights violations, and the other condemned the corruption that accompanied the economic changes of that decade. The courage that the Mothers have shown in the face of police harassment is remarkable; they must be counted as one of the main currents of the opposition.

Convenient shorthand terms such as “the dissident community” or “the opposition” should not obscure the reality that we are dealing with a loose, unstructured movement that lacks a unified strategy and program. Since the Massacre and subsequent crackdown, the CCP has been careful to prevent the emergence of anything resembling an alternative political organization. On top of this, those who may rightly be called oppositionists display wide differences when it comes to their personal experiences, political views, and so on. This is not to say, however, that they cannot unite—as they did most recently in December 2008, when 303 signatories launched the nineteen-point manifesto known as Charter

08.<sup>13</sup> Its release (via the Internet) was timed to coincide with the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Charter 08 has three parts. The first describes the failure to introduce democracy in China since the first attempt at constitutional monarchy in 1898. The second registers the signatories' agreement on the basic principles of liberalism—separation of powers; free, fair, and regular elections; official accountability; and the like. The final part is more concrete, and details the steps that must be taken if China is to become a democracy. All the signatories call for an end to the one-party system, the adoption of federalism, and the creation of a reconciliation committee (modeled on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission) with powers to award compensation to relatives of the victims of the various repression campaigns that the CCP has undertaken since coming to power in 1949.

A large number of drafts had circulated online for about three years before the Charter's signing and formal publication. The signatories come from several strata of Chinese society and various sectors of the opposition. Dissident intellectuals such as Liu Xiaobo (still subject to surveillance and detention at the time of this writing) may have been the prime movers, but everyone from established professors and researchers to peasant activists had a say in shaping the end product. The Charter's very existence is a sign that, despite CCP harassment, the opposition remains capable of forming and mobilizing networks.

The authorities have been trying to suppress the Charter, yet an additional eight-thousand people (and counting) from all walks of life have now added their names to it. That is a tiny number in a country of 1.2 billion, of course, but it remains the case that since Tiananmen, no principled, systematic call for deep transformation of the regime has obtained so much open public support.

## The Civil-Rights Defense Movement

In 2004, when the CCP decided to add a human-rights amendment to China's constitution, many lawyers, legal scholars, and citizens became convinced that the new provision could be used to defend the rights of ordinary Chinese and that there was a duty to take part in this struggle. With the help of journalists, online activists, and an informal but widespread network of lawyers and legal experts, many victims of abusive officials began citing their rights under the constitution. Thanks to the Internet and other new modes of communication, the so-called civil-rights defense movement (*weiquan yundong*) can be mobilized with relative ease by people who fall victim to official bullies. Its tools include demonstrations, petitions, collective letters, class-action suits on behalf of consumers, and suits by individuals.

The civil-rights legal network cuts across the class lines that divide

intellectuals from workers and peasants. It differs from the organizations that intellectuals created in the 1980s.<sup>14</sup> At that time, criticism of the CCP came mostly from students and other educated types, and it focused on demands for the reform of the political system. The civil-rights defense movement, by contrast, originates with ordinary citizens who do not question the CCP's position or the nature of the regime, and who try to solve concrete problems by working through the system. These citizen-activists and the journalists and lawyers who help them are not asking for "freedom and democracy," nor are they even denouncing corruption in general. Instead, they are appealing to specific existing laws for the redress of specific grievances. This new attitude is certainly a result of the repression of the 1989 democracy movement.

The discontinuity should not be overstated, however. Many of today's civil-rights activists were very young in 1989, yet they know what the students did that year, are deeply impressed by it, and in private will readily acknowledge their debt to the generation of Tiananmen even while explaining how they differ from it. Xu Zhiyong sums it up this way:

I have respect for those who raised human-rights issues in the past, but now we hope to work in a constructive way within the space afforded by the legal system. Concrete but gradual change—I think that's what most Chinese people want.<sup>15</sup>

Not all officials seem impressed by this stress on legality. In 2007, CCP Politburo member and chief of security affairs Luo Gan declared that the civil-rights movement was receiving support from the West and "harbored forces dedicated to overthrowing the Party's rule."<sup>16</sup> A year earlier, China's national legislature had passed new restrictions on lawyers' independence and their ability to act on behalf of abuse victims. Since every lawyer must renew his or her license every year, it is easy to put civil-rights specialists—who probably represent no more than 1 percent of the profession, if that—out of business. This happened to Gao Zhisheng in December 2005, to Li Jianqiang in Shandong in July 2007, and to other lawyers in Shaanxi.<sup>17</sup> And yet the civil-rights defense movement continues, while rights awareness among the citizenry grows.

Twenty years after the 4 June 1989 massacre, the CCP seems to have reinforced its legitimacy. It has not followed the communist regimes of the Soviet bloc into oblivion. Its policies of elite cooptation, subtle response to social contradictions, and instrumental support for the "rule of law" have become major complements to its continued control over the press and the political system. It has made concessions to prevent discontent from crystallizing into social movements that might challenge its rule, and it has sent in the police to silence dissidents. Over the course of the same two decades, the opposition has had to wrestle with

the trauma of the June 4 Massacre and the huge difficulties that it has raised for anyone who would challenge the CCP's primacy. The persistence of small groups of dissidents, fed by a steady trickle of younger militants, shows that the opposition represents a force and a set of ideas that cannot be neglected. Yet the opposition is by no stretch anywhere near being able to mobilize disgruntled citizens and to organize demonstrations like those of 1989. Instead, oppositionists act as their society's conscience, voices for the basic principles of humanism in a society obsessed with materialism.

The emergence despite all obstacles of the civil-rights defense movement shows that ordinary citizens are increasingly aware of their rights and are ready to take risks to defend them. China is doubtless a post-totalitarian regime ruled by a ruthless Party. But there are signs suggesting that the Party's grip might not be as solid as it seems.

## NOTES

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3. See "Overtly Oppose the Turmoil" (Qizhi xianmingde fandui dongluan), *People's Daily* (Beijing), 26 April 1989.

4. See Zhao Ziyang, *Prisoner of the State: The Secret Journal of Zhao Ziyang*, trans. and ed. Bao Pu, Renee Chiang, and Adi Ignatius (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 29.

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10. These cadres express their criticism either through letters to the top leaders that are made public in Hong Kong, or in two journals that they are allowed to publish, the most influential being *Yanhuang Chunqiu*.

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14. On these organizations, see Jean-Philippe Béja, *A la recherche d'une ombre chinoise: Le mouvement pour la démocratie en Chine, 1919–2004* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2004).

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17. For accounts of these episodes, see <http://crd-net.org/Article/Class9/Class10/Index.html>.