

The Chinese Pro-Democracy Movement (1987-1989)

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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance
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Conflict Summary:

Chinese student demonstrations in late 1986 and early 1987 were inspired by widespread discontent with high-level government corruption, inflation, and growing income inequality, as well as writings such as those of astrophysicist Fang Lizhi who encouraged young people to “seize democracy from below.” Two days after the death of the reform-minded former Communist Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang on 15 April 1989, a group of about 600 young teachers and students laid a wreath for him in Tiananmen Square, the symbolic center of Chinese political power by the Tiananmen Gate (Gate of Heavenly Peace, built in 1417). This prompted others to do the same that evening and the following day. By the second day, demonstrations developed, and a list of demands was issued that included calls for officials to re-evaluate the legacy of Hu Yaobang, reveal the salaries and wealth of government officials, stop press censorship, raise the wages of intellectuals, and increase government spending on education (Zhao 2004: 148-149). Thus began a breathtaking seven-week eruption on the world stage in which thousands of students occupied the Square, held a hunger strike, and tried to negotiate with Communist Party officials, while millions of others beyond the student population engaged in solidarity actions around the countryside.

As the demonstrations progressed, strategic and ideological differences developed among the original student movement, which caused it to split into radical and moderate factions. Complicating matters further, related but separate movements of intellectuals, journalists, and workers emerged in addition to an ebb and flow of “bystanders” and other demonstrators who joined the students. This fractured nature of the movement made it difficult to coordinate strategy.

The demonstrations caused a rift within the Chinese government’s ruling elite, with hardliners pressing for escalating repression. Harsh condemnations and martial law not only failed to stem the rising tide of protest but actually backfired, especially when the students went on a hunger strike and captured the sympathy of the populace. In the end, tired of resistance and humiliation, on 4 June the regime ordered troops and hundreds of tanks and armored cars to circle the square and to open fire on unarmed demonstrators and even journalists recording the event, in order to send a clear signal to all sectors of the society that the door for democratic

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reform was shut. Many demonstrators were killed. Remaining pro-democracy groups and activists were silenced, imprisoned, or exiled, but the historic moment was not forgotten.

Political History:

Student movements have a long history in Chinese political processes; as Cheng (1990) notes, “From the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 221) to the Song (960-1280) and Qing (1644-1911), student movements championed lofty goals, ranging from national survival and territorial sovereignty to honest government and social justice.” Students also precipitated a number of major political developments in modern China, e.g., the May Fourth Movement in 1919 that protested the terms of the Versailles Treaty, mobilized Chinese nationalism, and facilitated the development of the Chinese Communist Party.

The People’s Republic of China was created in 1949 after the insurgent communists defeated the Nationalist Kuomintang, who retreated to Taiwan. The new communist government undertook a massive transformation of Chinese life, with centralized economic planning, land reform that redistributed land to the peasants, and waves of cultural change intended to purge China of traditional culture. The Great Leap Forward program, which started ten years after the Nationalists’ defeat, resulted not only in a rapid industrialization of the economy but the largest famine in human history resulting in millions of deaths (Smil 1999). The Cultural Revolution created widespread upheaval in the country for a decade beginning in 1966. Over time, the Communist Party gained solid control of the state and through it much of the economy and Chinese social and cultural organization. Deng Xiaoping, who had been humiliated during the Cultural Revolution, rose to power in the wake of Mao’s death, and initiated a number of reforms, promoting Zhao Ziyang as Premier and Hu Yaobang as secretary of the Party, although he later broke with both of them and blamed them for the rapid momentum of reforms he had initially appeared to favor.

A chronic shortfall in the state budget from 1985, soaring inflation especially in food prices (40-50 percent per year, according to Cheng 1990), and widespread corruption, clearly visible in the privileges offered to children of high-level Party officials, created a climate of dissent into which the student

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movement tapped. Although the press was tightly controlled, because of reform efforts at the top to repair the Party's image, the press began reporting on the corruption, fueling even more discontent. Chinese intellectuals, traditionally regarded as responsible for articulating grievances, began publishing articles about democracy and writing open letters to the Central Committee and the State Council (Zuo and Benford 1990).

The Tiananmen Square demonstrations were thus part of a larger "Democracy Movement" or even multiple movements (see Chong 1990) situated at the intersection of several anniversaries in 1989: the bicentennial anniversary of the French Revolution, and 70th anniversary of the May 4th movement, and 40th anniversary of the republic's founding (Guthrie 1995). This movement was rather unique in communist China, where dissent was routinely suppressed, in that it gathered rapid momentum mobilizing students and to some extent other Chinese citizens across the country, but especially in the capital city.

Deng Xiaoping, who had earlier denounced Hu Yaobang, broke with Zhao Ziyang because of his leniency toward the demonstrators, and took a hard line against the Tiananmen demonstrations. According to smuggled Party documents, Deng became increasingly hardened against the students over time, telling fellow Politburo members on May 13, just two days before the arrival of Soviet President Gorbachev, "We can't be led around by the nose. This movement's dragged on too long, almost a month now" (Nathan 2001: 13).

Strategic Actions:

The students reported that they chose nonviolent means because they were no match for the army and they anticipated excuses for government repression if they did not; moreover, the movement did not seek an overthrow of the government and felt that the contradictions they were attempting to address could not be solved by violence (Sharp and Jenkins 1989: 3).

Nonviolent conflict theorist Gene Sharp and Bruce Jenkins (1989: 4), who were present in Beijing during the demonstrations, received contradictory

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responses from participants when they inquired about strategy and concluded that “It was difficult to ascertain any significant degree of strategic thinking” within the movement. Students that Sharp and Jenkins (1989) interviewed had some familiarity with past nonviolent resistance, but did not appear to have formal understanding of the theoretical and strategic dimensions of how nonviolent struggle works.

As another first-hand observer, Frank Niming (1990: 84), wrote: “the student activists, novices at movement mobilization, faced two key strategic problems: first, how to remain independent from an ongoing factional struggle within the Chinese Communist Party and second, to avoid criticism of the political system itself, which would inevitably have resulted in their immediate suppression. Through social networks, organizations, and the media, movement participants constructed and disseminated injustice frames first to other students and then to the broader public (see Zuo and Benford 1995). In general, however, the movement was mobilized and acted through small groups and individuals rather than through any general coordination. Leadership was often informal and changed hands frequently during the course of the short movement and proposals for longer-term strategic action rather than short-term dramatic tactics were often marginalized (Zhao 2006).

Through the course of the conflict, the Tiananmen demonstrators faced escalating official repression, on the one hand, and public support on the other. The sequence of strategic actions began with public memorials to Hu Yaobang, followed by the growth of bystander support for student demonstrators, journalist demonstrations, a protest with 10,000 bicycle riders that converged in the Square (see Cunningham 2009), and finally a hunger strike timed to coincide with the state visit of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. The hunger strike was followed by a wave of popular support for the strikers whose actions struck a chord with a broad section of the population (Niming 1990). At each stage, students worked to overcome organizational weaknesses and a lack of positive or sympathetic domestic state-run media coverage by framing their cause in a way that resonated with ordinary people’s grievances and experiences as well as traditional Chinese narratives from Confucian, nationalist, and even communist sources (Zuo and Benford 1995).

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At each stage in its development, Communist Party officials tried to suppress the movement while also handling the Party's own internal divisions and ambivalence about reforms, and also being fully conscious of growing public support for the movement and fearful of "turmoil," as leaked official minutes of their meetings reveal (Nathan 2001).

Hu's death presented a somewhat neutral occasion for expressing grievances and began tentatively with relatively relaxed gatherings in the Square, where students carried a memorial wreath and a banner promoting a "Democratic Spirit" (minzhu hun) in honor of Hu Yaobang (Niming 1990: 87). They began composing a list of modest demands to be presented to the Party representatives meeting in the adjacent Great Hall of the People.

After the initial demonstrations, students gained the support of bystanders, although they maintained a distinction between themselves and their citizen sympathizers. These bystanders provided a significant, although often subtle, empowerment of the students by their very presence at the scene of the demonstrations, which made it more difficult for authorities to suppress the demonstrations with brute force (Adams 1996). At first, because it was difficult for non-students to demonstrate, the students presented themselves as representatives of the broader public since they had a privileged and somewhat protected position.

Some workers later engaged in formal demonstrations, motivated in part by a 26 April editorial in the state-controlled People's Daily newspaper that labelled the student movement "an act of hooliganism" and a "planned conspiracy," a position echoing a speech by Deng Xiaoping who continued to exercise power behind the scenes despite his formal retirement. Even more significant in mobilizing worker support for the students were first the imposition of martial law and then a student hunger strike. Workers were organized by work units, the locus of social and political control for the society, that marched together carrying a banner with the unit's name, which reduced the potential liability to each individual participant, and thus expanded participation beyond student, intellectual, and journalist circles. However, this organizational tactic did raise the stakes for each work unit as a whole, and therefore deterred many supervisors from organizing or allowing their unit to get involved for fear of future reprisals.

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The movement never reached into the peasantry despite their widespread concern over government corruption, declining income, and growing regional inequalities that bred discontent in the countryside (Zweig 1989). Moreover, the deliberately decentralized organization of the movement, in some ways its strength, presented obstacles to strategic planning; Zhao (2004) suggest that movement leaders or organizations were immediately marginalized when they suggested long-term strategic moves that did not seem sufficiently radical at the moment. Conflicts arose between different organizations, especially the Headquarters of Tiananmen Square and the Universities United Autonomous Student Union (referred to as the Union), although there may have been some overlapping membership between the two groups (Sharp and Jenkins 1989).

Sharp and Jenkins (1989) identified two strategic lessons from their observation of the movement and its demise. “First, a nonviolent occupation of a physical spot of whatever symbolic value is always risky for the protesters. They are easy for the opponents to remove” and the more important the space’s symbolism, the more likely the opponents will act. If they had withdrawn, as suggested by one prominent leader Wuer Kaixi on 27 May, they could have claimed victory and spread their message through Beijing and the countryside. A second strategic problem was “a failure to mobilize on a large-scale massive noncooperation with the system by the very people whose work made its continuation possible,” i.e., the civil service, military forces, police, and communications and transportation workers (ibid.: 6).

Efforts by the regime to suppress the movement begin on the first day of protests and escalated over time. Beijing University security guards tried to prevent the first student memorializations the day after Hu’s death and within a week troops from the Hebei Province were transferred to Beijing, anti riot squads were mobilized, and authorities made it clear to the press that they are not to cover the protests. On 24 April the Politburo Standing Committee met (without reform-minded Zhao Ziyang, who was on a state visit to North Korea), led by Li Peng, who referred to the movement as a “disturbance.” Two days later the People’s Daily published its harsh editorial. The same day the police cleared Tiananmen Square and prevented demonstrators from returning, although the move was only temporary.

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Under pressure to restore order, the government allowed a meeting with official student union representatives, but not the Beijing Students Autonomous Federation's Wu'er Kaixi. Although Zhao Ziyang told Asian Development Bank representatives that the "just demands of the students must be met," he was increasingly isolated and opposed by other members of the Politburo elite. His proposal to retract the 26 April People's Daily editorial was outvoted four to one and his failure to convince the students to clear the Square was spurned. A televised meeting of students with Li Peng and other officials went badly, with the government offering no concessions; two days later martial law was declared in Beijing and 250,000 troops took up positions around the city, including media offices; foreign broadcasting was halted and satellite links were cut.

A million people showed up at the next day's demonstration in defiance of the law and a rift occurred within the armed forces, with a hundred senior military leaders sending a statement to Li Ping refusing to deploy units to "shoot the people." The National People's Congress had convened a few days earlier on the 22 April to consider the legality of martial law, which was subsequently expanded beyond Beijing as Li Peng and others accused Zhao Ziyang of supporting the students, charges that were later repeated at an enlarged meeting of the Politburo and circulated in the form of documents among the party leadership. The government escalated its crackdown, arresting some movement leaders, criticizing the Goddess of Liberty statue erected on the Square, which had become an emblem of the movement, and organizing demonstrations in favor of government policies in the Beijing suburbs. The army reportedly infiltrated the demonstrations at Tiananmen as well.¹

Within a month, the movement had garnered millions of supporters in 80 cities in an unprecedented show of insurgency (Guthrie 1995).

The range of strategic actions, which focused primarily on protest and persuasion rather than noncooperation or intervention, included the following:

Protest and Persuasion

- Democratic salons on university campuses from as early as 1988 to discuss grievances and democratic solutions;

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- Writings of Fang Lizhi, an astrophysicist, who encouraged young people to “seize democracy from below” in the mid-1980s; a letter from Fang to a Hong Kong newspaper advocating the creation of pressure groups to agitate for reform was posted on campuses in March 1988;
- A letter signed by more than 30 intellectuals was announced at a press conference for foreign correspondents (1988) urging amnesty for political prisoners, followed by a supportive letter 10 days later signed by more than 40 research fellows at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences;
- Wall posters were a major instrument of communication, because independent media was suppressed, although the posters themselves were sometimes reported in the state-run media. By 1988 wall posters at Beijing campuses called for a multiparty system and attacked the Communist Party explicitly;
- Within days after Hu’s death, posters appeared on 31 university campuses in Beijing with themes centered on free press, free association, political democracy, and official corruption. (Zhao 2004: 148);
- Poems posted on public walls and in Tiananmen Square (Anonymous and O’Connor 1993);
- A student petition of 12 points presented to the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress on 2 May calling for dialogue on equal terms, accurately publicized in the state media;
- Escalating demands starting with vague calls for democracy and science, then a repudiation of the 26 April editorial in the People’s Daily denouncing the movement, and eventually calls for the resignation of the Party leadership;
- Non-students showing signs of support without formally joining the demonstrations, such as: Gifts of money, popsicles, food, and drinks to the students (see Niming 1990);
- Persuading police and military to let students through barricades designed to prevent their passage (Guthrie);
- Demonstrating with banners of one’s work unit, college or university, a key unit of social organization in Chinese communist society;
- Demonstrations in perhaps 51 Chinese cities (Paulson 2005: 258);
- Use of a telephone information network and use of drums for communication among dispersed student groups and a loudspeaker in Tiananmen Square (Sharp and Jenkins 1989);

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- Teams of students with megaphones going through Beijing neighborhoods to inform citizens about their grievances and attempting to garner support;
- Creating a sculpture of the Goddess of Liberty, and installing it in Tiananmen Square;
- Using the press, from campus organs to the international press, to disseminate their message.
- Nonviolent Noncooperation
- Boycotts of classes by university students;
- Hunger strikes: especially a large-scale strike beginning on 13 May with 6,000 students initially participating, some refusing liquids; this was perhaps the largest hunger strike in history (Sharp and Jenkins 1989);
- An open letter from 100 retired military officers objecting to martial law (Sharp and Jenkins 1989: 6);
- Willingness of soldiers and even officers to turn around when blocked by citizens while marching to Tiananmen Square after the declaration of martial law on 20 May (ibid.; cf. Nathan 2001: 26).
- Nonviolent Intervention
- Takeovers of existing student organizations and the formation of the Beijing Universities United Autonomous Student Union and the Dialogue Delegation (Sharp and Jenkins 1989);
- Creation of the Committee of Hunger Strikers and the Committee to Protect the Hunger Strikers, followed by the Headquarters of Tiananmen Square after the hunger strike was called off;
- Occupation of Tiananmen Square, starting with demonstrations on 14 April 1989 and not ending until the military repression of the movement on 4 June; Students employed marshals that “policed” a three-foot corridor between the soldiers and demonstrators (Sharp and Jenkins 1989).

Ensuing Events:

Solinger (1989: 622) contends that the violent repression of the movement was “proof of the fragility of the [Chinese] state” but also of the inability of the students to sustain a broadly-based movement that could successfully challenge it. In the end, the state seemed far from instable and seems to have weathered the global public relations storm. For some time after 4 June periodic clandestine acts of resistance popped up (such as slogans on

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university walls) and students engaged in a sort of “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy about attitudes toward the government, according to the official news agency Xinhua (Nathan 2001: 46). Several major leaders fled the country, some of them organizing resistance movements abroad such as the Federation for a Democratic China, led by Yan Jiaqi, former director of the Institute of Political Research of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a prominent supporter of the students during the movement. Some of the prominent student leaders like Wu’er Kaixi and Chai Ling transferred to American and European universities.

Party officials attempted a strategy of damage control domestically and internationally, focusing more on economic development than political reform in the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown. This strategy has enabled the authoritarian state to remain in control of the population, but tens of thousands of isolated acts of protest still take place and have increased in recent years.² Nonetheless, a Pew survey in 2008 reported remarkable satisfaction among the nation’s citizens about the direction of the country and the economy. Whereas a 2002 survey reported 48% satisfied with the way things were going in the country,³ 86% reported satisfaction in 2008, although respondents were somewhat less happy with their personal and family lives.

Recent experiments using alternative media, blogging and the Internet to protest have met with some success, but the authorities have been aggressive in efforts to thwart such efforts. Chase et al. (2002) contend that although the Chinese government’s efforts to suppress dissent through the Internet has been relatively successful even with somewhat simple means, the rapid expansion and modernization of China’s information-technology sphere “would suggest that time is eventually on the side of the regime’s opponents” (2002: xiii).

Efforts to create a formal opposition have been crushed. Although encouraged by US President Bill Clinton’s visit to China and the signing of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1998, the creation of opposition parties has been forbidden. Leaders of the unprecedented – but quickly suppressed – China Democracy Party were given 11-13-year prison sentences by the end of 1998 and the China Development Union, ostensibly an environmental association, was disbanded. Nevertheless, by the end of the

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1990s, over one million NGOs had been created (Goldman 1999; cf. World Bank 2004).

One paradox of the Chinese regime's repression was that it helped to facilitate the conditions leading to the 1989 revolutions of Eastern Europe (see Smithey and Kurtz 1995). In the months following the June 4th massacre at Tiananmen Square, the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe collapsed, with regime after regime negotiating with people power movements or allowing elections in which they were thrown out of office. One of the reasons for those historic developments culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall in November of 1989 was that the Soviets refused to send in troops to reinforce the various regimes. East German communist leader Erich Honecker advocated a "Chinese solution" to massive protests in Leipzig and East Berlin, suggesting that their troops should fire on the country's youth to restrain the escalating protests. Apparently some of Honecker's own advisors saw the futility of his strategy; the tough 82-year-old security chief Erick Mielke reportedly told Honecker, "Erich, we can't beat up hundreds of thousands of people" (New York Times correspondents 1991:219).

Mikhail Gorbachev wrote in his Memoirs (1996: 526), "Thank God, the new East German leadership had the courage and enough common sense to refrain from trying to quench the popular unrest in blood." Reforms backed by Gorbachev from the top in the Soviet Union were more modest than the student demands in Tiananmen Square and the massacre sent shockwaves throughout the communist world. The Tiananmen movement may not have transformed China in 1989, but it may have helped to facilitate nonviolent insurgencies elsewhere.

Endnotes:

1. See Saich 1990: 178; Sharp and Jenkins (1989: 8) report that a group calling itself the Autonomous Workers Union set up a station on the Square shouting for people to "kill the soldiers" and left just prior to the massacre, raising questions about whether they might have been agents provocateurs.
2. "Ten Things You Should Know About China":
<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=379#9>

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3. The survey asked: "Overall, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in our country today?"

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