

# The Impact of the June 4th Massacre on the pro-Democracy Movement

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**The Chinese pro-democracy movement crushed by the People's Liberation Army on 4 June 1989 was preceded by many protests by intellectuals. The crackdown deprived the democrats of their protectors in the Party, and forced them to change strategies. Unable to organise large-scale demonstrations, dissidents launched petitions demanding respect for human rights and reversal of the official verdict on June 4th. They were joined by the Tiananmen Mothers, who became a new force in the pro-democracy movement. Yet, China's democracy activists remain largely isolated from the rest of society.**

China's military crackdown on student demonstrators in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989 demonstrated the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) determination to wipe out any challenge to its rule. It showed that direct confrontation with the authorities would result in defeat because the forces at the Party's command could easily suppress the demonstrators. At the same time, it also highlighted the events that preceded the crackdown— efforts by various segments of the Chinese population to bring about political change. As the demonstrations moved from Tiananmen Square to other areas of Beijing and then to other cities throughout the country in the spring of 1989, they became a grass-roots, multi-class movement (341 cities according to official sources)<sup>(1)</sup> calling for political reforms, including the reform of China's Leninist political system. This was not the first time that the Party had cracked down violently on a mass movement, but it was the unprecedented events precipitating the crackdown – the emergence of a multi-class movement calling for political reforms rather than the crackdown itself – that is the major legacy of June 4th.

Previous efforts calling for political reforms in the People's Republic had been carried out primarily by intellectuals. In the early 1950s, the writer Hu Feng and his disciples protested against the increasing restraints on freedom of expression. As a result, they were denounced in 1955 as “counter-revolutionaries” and were severely punished. Yet, shortly after the campaign against Hu Feng, Mao Zedong

launched the most far-reaching liberalisation during his rule (1949-1976), the Hundred Flowers movement of 1956 and the first half of 1957, during which he briefly relaxed the Party's ideological controls and urged the expression of a variety of views.<sup>(2)</sup> In response, a number of well-known intellectuals and students demanded more freedom of speech and association and criticised the Party's repressive policies. As these demands spread and became more persistent, in June 1957 Mao abruptly crushed this brief ideological flowering with the launch of the anti-rightist campaign against intellectuals, their associates, and their families, as well as anyone whom Mao believed was conspiring against him. They were labelled “rightists” and were literally read out of society. The attacks on the rightists climaxed with the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), when Mao turned against members of his own party.

After Mao's death in September 1976, Deng Xiaoping, Mao's former Long March comrade, began to move away from his ideological policies, rehabilitated the rightists, opened China to the outside world, and developed the Chinese model of a market economy presided over by an authoritarian government. Despite the continuing political rule of the Communist Party, a number of demonstrations erupted calling for political reforms. In 1978-79, in what is

1. Zhang Liang, *The Tiananmen Papers*, New York, Public Affairs, 2001.
2. Roderick MacFarquhar, ed., *The Hundred Flowers Campaign and the Chinese Intellectuals*, New York, Praeger, 1960.

now called the “Democracy Wall” movement, former Red Guards who had been exiled to the countryside returned to the cities, where they used the techniques they had learned in the Cultural Revolution—putting up wall posters, printing news sheets, and debating on street corners—to call for political reforms.<sup>(3)</sup> In late 1986, a number of demonstrations expressing similar demands occurred at Chinese universities. The demonstrations that drew the most attention were led by the astrophysicist Fang Lizhi at the University of Science and Technology in Hefei, Anhui. As these demonstrations spread to other college campuses, the Party abruptly cracked down on the demonstrators, and Deng and the elders dismissed then CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang, who had tolerated the demonstrations and had advocated political as well as economic reforms.

It was Hu’s death of a heart attack on 15 April 1989 that sparked the most far-reaching and widespread demonstrations of the post-Mao era. They began in Tiananmen Square, the symbolical site of China’s political power, and quickly spread to major cities. What made the 1989 demonstrations different from the earlier protests was that they expanded and continued for nearly six weeks, attracting the growing participation of other classes—entrepreneurs, professionals, workers, housewives, and street vendors—until Deng ordered the military to carry out a violent crackdown in Beijing on 4 June that brought the demonstrations to an abrupt end throughout the country. The crackdown was followed by the arrest of the student leaders, the repression of their followers, and the purge of Zhao Ziyang, who had replaced Hu Yaobang as Party general secretary in 1987 and in the late 1980s had called for the political reform of separating the Party from the government.

These events are remembered by participants and their sympathisers as marking the Party’s rejection of major political reforms, with the exception of the village elections that allow 75 percent of the nation’s population, in 600,000 villages, to elect their local leaders.<sup>(4)</sup> At the same time, as China’s economy continued to grow at 9-10 percent per year and the Chinese enjoyed relative social stability, the legitimacy of the Party leadership and its authoritarian-market model of development was strengthened. Although not articulated by China’s leaders, China’s post-Mao experience dramatically refutes the Marxist theory stating that when the substructure, i.e., the economy, changes, the superstructure, i.e., the political system, will change as well. In the aftermath of 4 June 1989, the economic growth and relative stability in China for almost 20 years has demonstrated that an authoritarian market economy can be a viable model of development.

## The antecedents to China’s 1989 democracy movement

The Spring 1989 Tiananmen Movement of students and intellectuals calling for political reforms was not a unique event in China. Throughout Chinese history, intellectuals have publicly demanded political reforms. During the imperial era, Confucian literati spoke out on matters of public concern, believing it was their responsibility to criticise officials and even the Emperor when they diverged from the Confucian ideals of morality and fairness. In the late Qing dynasty, intellectuals advocated transformative political reforms during the Hundred Days of Reform in 1898 and helped to bring about the fall of the dynastic system in the 1911 Revolution. During the May Fourth movement of 1919, intellectuals and students, with the support of China’s workers and part of the rising bourgeoisie, called for “Science and Democracy.” Although during the period of Kuomintang government (1927-49) Chiang Kai-shek attempted to stifle demands for political reforms, the government was too weak to silence the intellectuals and students who continued to criticise repressive officials and policies. They also called for new political institutions and engaged with others in political protests.

Even during the repressive policies and totalitarian controls of the Mao Zedong era, intellectuals continued to dissent.<sup>(5)</sup> As noted above, despite the campaign against the writer Hu Feng and his associates in 1955, when Mao launched the Hundred Flowers campaign in 1956 and the first half of 1957, intellectuals and others did what Mao had urged them to do—express their views and criticise party policies. He then launched a campaign against the critics, whom he called “rightists.”

These campaigns, climaxing with the Cultural Revolution, had a transformative impact on the participants. Mao had mobilised the youth — the Red Guards — to carry out further revolution and to overthrow people in authority, but when their attacks caused indiscriminate chaos in the cities, he sent them down to the countryside to learn from the peasants. While in the countryside, however, some former Red Guards were surprised to discover that the lives of the peasants had not been transformed by Mao’s revolution as they had been indoctrinated to believe; the peasants were still living in abject poverty. Thus, even during the later years of the

3. Victor Sidane, *Le Printemps de Pékin*, Paris, Gallimard, Coll., “Archives,” 1980.

4. Kevin J. O’Brien and Rongbin Han, “Path to Democracy? Assessing Village Elections in China,” unpublished paper, January 2009.

Cultural Revolution, demands for political reforms started to appear on city walls. For instance, in November 1974, Li Yizhe, a collective pseudonym for a group of disaffected students in Guangzhou, called for “democracy and legality under socialism.”<sup>(6)</sup> Two years later, on 5 April 1976, demonstrations erupted in Tiananmen Square denouncing the dictatorship of Mao Zedong and the Gang of Four and calling for change.

After Mao’s death in September 1976, when most former Red Guards had returned to the cities, they subsequently launched the Democracy Wall movement of late 1978-early 1979, using the methods they had learned as Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution to demand political reform. They formed their own organisations, put up posters on city walls in Beijing and other major cities, published pamphlets, debated on street corners, mobilised supporters, and carried out protests. Known as the “Democracy Wall” activists, they called for democracy, human rights, rule of law, and freedom of speech. In Beijing and other major cities, crowds gathered daily to read the posters, air views, listen to debates, and purchase pamphlets printed by the activists. Although they were using techniques that they had learned during the Cultural Revolution, the goals of the Democracy Wall activists were very different from those of the Red Guards. Rather than seeking to overthrow those in authority, they called for a variety of reforms. Some demanded revisions of ideology, while others urged the establishment of democratic procedures as well as economic reforms. They hoped that political institutions and legal procedures would prevent the occurrence of another Cultural Revolution and would guarantee protection of rights.<sup>(7)</sup>

Because they had been indoctrinated in Marxism-Leninism, the activists initially urged ideological revisions and engaged in Confucian-style remonstrations with officials. But as they encountered increasing rebuffs from the post-Mao leadership, a number of the Democracy Wall participants began to call for political reforms, increasingly emphasising the need to establish institutions and laws that would sustain the cultural, ideological, and political pluralism they were advocating.<sup>(8)</sup> They echoed views that had earlier been expressed by students and intellectuals during the Hundred Flowers movement, such as the idea that the law is not only a weapon in the hands of the ruling class, but can also help protect the rights of citizens. This idea had figured prominently in the 1957 defence of Hu Feng by Lin Xiling, a student Party member at People’s University.<sup>(9)</sup>

But it was not so much the ideas expressed by the Democracy Wall participants as their concrete actions that

so disturbed the authorities. In the early months of 1979, some of the Democracy Wall activists helped organise peasant protests. When protestors from the countryside, who were mostly intellectuals who had been sent there during the Cultural Revolution, subsequently travelled to Beijing and other areas to express their grievances, Deng Xiaoping and his supporters ordered a crackdown. They no longer needed the activists in their effort to oust the remaining Maoists in the leadership, whose power was already in decline, and they feared the consequences of an alliance between intellectuals and other classes. At the same time, as the Party cracked down on the protestors from the countryside, the former rightists and recently rehabilitated intellectuals did not move to help the protestors. They were unable or unwilling to draw lessons from the past repressions. Their inaction also demonstrated the difficulty of different generations of oppositionists working together. In fact, most of the former rightists did not sympathise with the Democracy Wall activists, whom they regarded as Red Guard extremists who risked provoking a return to the Maoist methods that had just been rejected by Deng.

Yet, despite the Party’s repression and imprisonment of the leaders of the Democracy Wall movement, by the mid-1980s others began to echo their ideological and political demands. In 1986, student protests erupted on college campuses across China. These protests not only dealt with local issues, such as calling for better food in dormitories and independent student organisations and student newspapers, but also demanded freedom of speech and association. As similar demonstrations moved from campus to campus and city to city, they became a coherent movement calling for political reform.<sup>(10)</sup> Once again, these protests provoked Deng Xiaoping not only to crack down on the student demonstrators but also to purge their supposed patrons, then Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang and members of his intellectual network who had supported the political reforms.

Nevertheless, demands for political reforms continued with Hu Yaobang’s successor, Zhao Ziyang. Although Zhao had

5. Jean-Philippe Béja, *À la recherche d’une ombre chinoise. Le mouvement pour la démocratie en Chine (1919-2004)*, Paris, Seuil, 2004, p.19.
6. Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen, and Jonathan Unger, eds., *On Socialist Democracy and the Chinese Legal System: The Li Yizhe Debates*, Armonk, NY, M.E. Sharpe, 1985.
7. *Ibid*; Roger Garside, *China after Mao*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1981, pp. 212-39.
8. Wei Jingsheng, *The Courage to Stand Alone: Letters from Prison and Other Writings*, New York, Viking, 1997.
9. Lin Xiling, *Lin Xiling xuanji* (Selections of the writings of Lin Xiling), Hong Kong, Shunjing shuju, 1985.
10. Benedict Stavis, *China’s Political Reforms: An Interim Report*, New York, Praeger, 1988; Richard Baum, *Burying Mao*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 189-205.

emphasised economic reforms, his proposal in the late 1980s to separate the Party from government would have meant a diminution of the Party's power. He also repeatedly urged engagement in dialogue with society.<sup>(11)</sup> At the same time, in the late 1980s there were calls for the establishment of specific institutions and laws to implement the human rights stipulated in China's Constitution, such as the freedom of speech and association mandated in Article 35. In addition, intellectuals began to organise politically and publicly by establishing semi-autonomous journals and organisations outside the Party's jurisdiction. They were aided by Party reformers who used these ideas to legitimise their struggle against neo-Maoists who, though much weakened, still had some power in the Party apparatus and advocated a return to the system of the early 1950s. Although the activities of critical intellectuals such as the writer Wang Ruowang, the physicist Fang Lizhi, and the journalist Liu Binyan did not develop into an unofficial movement comparable to Democracy Wall, a semi-autonomous sphere began to emerge in the second half of the 1980s.

Equally significant, China's move to the market during this time made it possible for individuals and groups, specifically members of the Red Guard generation, to establish non-governmental publishing houses and journals. They also began to set up their own unofficial think tanks and polling organisations as alternatives to Party institutions. Among the most successful was the Social and Economic Research Institute founded by former Democracy Wall participants Wang Juntao and Chen Ziming.<sup>(12)</sup> It was not so much what they advocated as what they did by founding these institutions and organisations independent of the Party that was unprecedented in the People's Republic. In addition, coalitions of intellectuals joined with other social groups—business people, rural entrepreneurs, and workers—to participate in their activities. In addition to publishing journals and conducting surveys without official sanction, these groups also coordinated activities and defended one another when they encountered trouble from the authorities.

At the same time, the thaw in the Soviet Union that began after Stalin's death in 1953, and especially the reform movements in Eastern Europe beginning in the 1970s, became as important as the May Fourth legacy in stimulating interest in and demands for political reforms during the post-Mao era. Many of the Chinese participants were inspired by the Charter 77 movement in Czechoslovakia, led by the well-known playwright Vaclav Havel, and by the Solidarity movement in Poland, in which an alliance of intellectuals and workers challenged the Communist

regime from below. By the late 1980s, Chinese students and reformist officials were particularly enthusiastic about Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union and urged China's leaders to follow his example. They were also influenced by the political reforms in the post-Confucian countries of East Asia—Japan, South Korea, and significantly Hong Kong and Taiwan—that had not only developed dynamic economies, but were also beginning to establish democratic institutions.

In addition, there was a shift in emphasis among China's politically-oriented intellectuals away from revising the ideology toward establishing new institutions. Some recommended that the small, supposedly “democratic” parties under the CCP leadership be granted organisational independence so they could act as a form of “checks and balances.” An article in *People's Daily*, for example, declared that Marxism had become stagnant because it was not challenged by different views and because it was not allowed to be debated.<sup>(13)</sup> Moreover, discussions of political reforms were not confined to the intellectual elite and the universities. Wide open debates and the expression of a range of pluralistic views on political reforms were held all over the country in youth groups, social gatherings, tea houses, and even the national media. Among the most outspoken in calling for political reforms was the astrophysicist Fang Lizhi at the University of Science and Technology in Hefei and the journalist Liu Binyan, who, among others, would later be charged with provoking the 1986 student demonstrations.

The December 1986 demonstrations differed from the 1989 demonstrations in that they did not gain the support or participation of urban residents and workers. In fact, the students purposely kept the workers at arm's length for strategic reasons. They knew that Party leaders greatly feared any alliance with workers such as those that had occurred in Eastern Europe. Moreover, unlike during the 1989 demonstrations, the Party's order for the students to return to classes resulted in their peaceful dispersal in late 1986. After they returned to the universities, however, they were subjected to long sessions of political education.

11. See Zhao Ziyang, “Advance Along the Road of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” report to the Thirteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, 25 October 1987.
12. “A New Kind of Intellectual Activist,” in Merle Goldman, *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1994, chap. 12, pp. 338-60.
13. See Zhang Xianyang and Wang Guixiu, “Master Marxist Theory in Light of New Realities,” *Renmin ribao*, 1 November 1985, p. 5, translated in FBIS, 8 November 1985, pp. K10-11.

## The 1989 movement: A multi-class protest

The conjunction of student political activism and the urban discontent sparked by the lifting of price controls in the late 1980s, which resulted in a surge in inflation, provided the socio-economic environment and popular urban support that the students had lacked in 1986. When Hu Yaobang's death on 15 April triggered the Tiananmen demonstrations, ordinary urban residents were ready to call for an end to official corruption and to support the students' calls for democracy and freedom. Intellectuals, who had been reticent at the beginning of the student demonstrations for fear that calls for political reforms might destroy the fragile institutions they had created during the latter half of the 1980s under the patronage of Party reformers, joined the movement after Deng's declaration of martial law in Beijing on 19 May. At the same time, the vast majority of the urban population rallied behind the students.

Famous writers, journalists, and intellectuals began to visit Tiananmen Square to lend their support to the student demonstrators. Two well-known intellectuals who had occupied high positions in the official establishment due to the patronage of Hu Yaobang, Yan Jiaqi, director of the Institute of Political Science at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and Bao Zunxin, an historian at the Institute of Modern History of the Academy and one of the founders of the liberal book series collection "Marching toward the Future" (*Zou xiang weilai*), along with seven other intellectuals, issued an open declaration vowing "never to betray the struggle for democracy... never to surrender to dictatorship; and never acknowledge the present last emperor of China as our lord and master."<sup>(14)</sup> Along with other intellectuals of Hu Yaobang's network, they founded the Beijing Autonomous Association of Intellectuals.

In an attempt to organise a multi-class front to support the students' demands for democracy, former Democracy Wall activists Chen Ziming and Wang Juntao organised the Association of All Circles of the Capital. They demanded a dialogue with the authorities based on the premise that civil society should play a role in political matters. At the same time, when many of the protesting students became ill during the hunger strike they had staged to force the government to engage in dialogue, thousands of urban citizens—workers, entrepreneurs, secretaries, street vendors, and housewives—sought to help them. For a few days in late May, an embryo of organised civil society appeared to be taking shape in Tiananmen Square. But this civil society was

short-lived. On the night of 3 and 4 June, army tanks ploughed down the demonstrators and their supporters, ending any hope of dialogue with the leadership. The violent crackdown brought an abrupt end to efforts to bring about political reform.

The debate within the Party between those favouring dialogue with the demonstrators and those opposed ended with Deng Xiaoping's decision to use violence to suppress the Tiananmen Movement. General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, who had refused to go along with the Party's decision for a military crackdown, was to remain under house arrest until his death in January 2005. The purge of Zhao and the reformers who had sought to engage the Tiananmen participants deprived the pro-democracy forces of their patrons within the political leadership. The strategies of those seeking reforms during the 1980s by creating semi-autonomous institutions under the unofficial protection of a liberal faction within the leadership were no longer viable. During the two decades that followed June 4th, the party leadership went to great lengths to prevent the emergence of any autonomous, politically-engaged organisations, thus ending the People's Republic multi-class movement for political reform.

## The Tiananmen participants in exile

In the immediate aftermath of June 4th, when activists were either imprisoned, exiled, or in hiding, it was difficult for them to draw any lessons from the failure of the movement. It was not until the mid-1990s that the participants began to reflect on and debate their earlier strategies. For the most part, those in exile urged their counterparts in China to make a clean break with the Party and to remain outside the political system, which they considered "unreformable." The collapse of the Leninist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe strengthened their arguments. In September 1989, the Federation for Democracy in China, founded in Paris, sought to unify all generations of the opposition abroad and create an example for their counterparts within China. Conflicts, however, soon developed between the student leaders and their elders – notably the former rightists, such as Liu Binyan – as well as between the members of Hu Yaobang's network (for example Ruan Ming) and the partisans of Zhao Ziyang (for example Chen Yizi). Zhao's par-

14. Han Minzhu, ed., *Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 310.

15. Joseph Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 44-71.



People Liberation Army soldiers leap over a barrier on Tiananmen Square in central Beijing on June 4th 1989 during heavy clashes with students and residents. © AFP

tisans were accused of weakening the reformist faction in the Party by allowing the Maoists to purge Hu Yaobang. These factional struggles became even more acute during the 1990s due to the Party's strategy of sending the most famous dissidents into exile. The arrival of new strong personalities further fuelled the factional battles within the exile opposition. The contradictions between generations and personalities and the difficulties in communicating with their allies back in China fatally weakened the exile movement.

At the same time, incapable of setting up opposition networks within China because of the Party's strong repression of such efforts, and isolated from the political forces in the foreign countries where they had settled, the dissidents were unable to develop a political program for change in China. Their only feasible strategies were to inform international opinion about the violations of human rights in their motherland and to try to convince foreign governments, especially the American government, to raise the issue of political prisoners and human rights in meetings with Chinese leaders. Since they were cut off from China's political life, they could not help the opposition forces at home devise new strategies. Even in the second half of the 1990s, when some former activists were able to travel abroad, the exiles were unable to recruit them into a united organisation. By the end

of the century, the attempts to create an organised opposition in exile had failed. There would be no Sun Yat-sen to emerge from the group of refugees who had led the 1989 demonstrations. This did not mean, however, that the exiles had no influence over their counterparts in China. Still, they were only able to exert influence through personal contacts and private telephone conversations. Consequently, the opposition that remained in China could not count on help from their exiled comrades.

## The resumption of the movement for political reform

After the lifting of martial law in January 1990, and especially after Deng Xiaoping reaffirmed his commitment to economic reforms during his tour of South China in 1992, the majority of those who had been active in the 1989 movement abandoned the fight for democracy. Some returned to their universities and research centres, while others set up private businesses (*xiaohai*). Despite continued harassment by the police, especially in the provinces, a small minority managed to continue their political activities. Their efforts, however, were dwarfed by Deng's renewed emphasis on developing the economy, which he declared should be car-

Bao Zunxin and Wang Dan

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ried out by any means possible (*fazhan shi ying daoli*).<sup>(15)</sup> Consequently, a new mood permeated Chinese society in which all sectors became absorbed in trying to make money. Calls for democracy and political reforms were muted and in most places ignored as the urban residents who had supported the student movement in 1989 sought to take advantage of the new opportunities opened up by Deng's reenergised economic emphasis. In addition, the police remained vigilant, ready to prevent any attempt at organised political protests by discontented citizens. Harsh prison sentences were meted out throughout the 1990s to anyone who sought to keep the struggle for democracy alive. Moreover, the leaders of the various factions within the Party that had supported political reforms had either been expelled from the Party or were silenced. Zhao Ziyang's personal secretary, Bao Tong, for example, who had headed the Centre for Political Reform prior to June 4th, was imprisoned until 1996 and remained under house arrest thereafter. Bao Zunxin and other intellectuals were imprisoned, and Yan Jiaqi fled abroad.

There was no one, therefore, within the political system, who could publicly voice demands for political reform and attract others to the cause. The strategy of the 1980s was no longer viable. Furthermore, the overwhelming police presence made it impossible to set up relatively independent political or civic organisations like those that had been established in the 1980s. The toughening of political controls, coupled with economic hardship, made it impossible for the remaining activists to engage in any overt political activities. Every year during the so-called "*min'gan shiqi*" (sensitive period) from 15 April to 4 June, Tiananmen Square was occupied by the police. On June 4th, the police would check anyone attempting to commemorate the victims. The more prominent activists would be sent "for a vacation" outside Beijing during this period. Thus, it was absolutely impossible to commemorate the victims of June 4th or to rally allies and sympathisers in large-scale demonstrations. Most importantly, the June 4th military crackdown, in which ordinary citizens had paid the highest price of the repression with death sentences and long prison terms, deterred others from participating in political activities. The fear of punishment had created a new social environment in which most people focused only on making money.

At the same time, the elite strategy prior to June 4th of establishing autonomous research centres or media outlets under the protection of Party reformers was no longer possible. After June 4th, no one inside the Party was able to grant the kind of protection that had existed in the 1980s. Police surveillance made it difficult for former political

activists to keep in touch with one another. Although released from prison, their writings remained banned from publication in the official media. Many intellectuals published their works overseas or in Hong Kong in the hopes that they would make their way back into China. International solidarity, especially that of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China (*Zhilianhui*), helped ensure their intellectual and material survival. Also, some former activists who had set up their own companies continued to provide financial aid to their activist colleagues. But many were not content with mere economic survival. With the move to the market, some sought to open their own publishing outlets. For example, former student leader Ma Shaofang started a private publishing house and traded book numbers to publish a number of works on the political evolution of Eastern Europe and the democratisation of Latin American countries. But these ventures were risky and lacked long-term viability. Eventually, the police intervened and disbanded the publishing houses.<sup>(16)</sup>

Yet, despite the risks involved, a small number of political activists continued to express criticism of the regime and organised study groups to discuss their political views. One of the most prominent was the "New Youth Study Group." Its eight members, mostly students from Peking University, met regularly to discuss ways to democratise the political system. Its name, which was inspired by the famous May Fourth journal that became an organ of the Communist Party in the early 1920s, was indicative of how far its members were from being anti-Communist. They did not put forth a specific political platform, but "they all believed that the Chinese people were suffering, that the Party's limits on speech prevented discussion of pressing problems, and that democratic reform was necessary." The group, however, was infiltrated by the Ministry of State Security, and four of its members were given prison sentences of eight to ten years for supposed state subversion.<sup>(17)</sup>

Others dismayed by the Party's monopoly on information, and convinced that a modern country needed a well-informed citizenry, sought to expand information on the Internet. The journalist Shi Tao, for example, emailed to an overseas pro-democracy website the contents of a report detailing how the

16. Jean-Philippe Béja, *op. cit.*

17. Philip Pan, "A Study Group Is Crushed in China's Grip," *Washington Post*, 23 April 2004.

authorities intended to prevent the commemoration of the fifteenth anniversary of the Tiananmen crackdown in 2004.<sup>(18)</sup> As a result, he was sentenced to ten years in prison for supposedly revealing state secrets. Still others, such as the political essayist Du Daobin, posted articles on the Internet critical of Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin. Du was arrested and sentenced to three years with reprieve.

In 2002, Peking University psychology student Liu Di (whose Internet pseudonym was “Stainless Steel Rat”) posted satirical and critical essays on the Internet. In her defence of the writer Huang Qi, who had been jailed because his website made reference to June 4th, she wrote :

*People like us, subversives who have posted a huge number of reactionary speeches and writings on the Web, cannot bear the thought that we remain at large while others suffer in jail. So we have decided to turn ourselves in en masse and see justice done. Here is our proposal: at a specified time on a certain date all those in China who have posted subversive messages on the Internet will go to the police and turn themselves in.*<sup>(19)</sup>

For this article, Liu was arrested on 7 November 2002 and spent more than a year in prison. The police ransacked her apartment, where among the things they confiscated was a book on the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations and the prison letters of Wei Jingsheng, one of the leaders of the Democracy Wall demonstrations. Clearly, the 1989 demonstrations had had a profound impact on Liu’s thinking and actions. Upon her release from prison in November 2003, Liu Di joined with dissident intellectuals in signing petitions calling for political reforms. Despite harsh treatment and repression, like a number of other political dissidents, she did not abandon her efforts towards Chinese political reform.

## The reverberations from the 1989 Tiananmen Movement

Although such terms as “pro-democracy movement” or “opposition movement” have been used to describe the 1989 protests, they are meant to facilitate expression rather than describe the political movement. They refer to the scattered individuals and groups interested in political reforms who attempted to establish informal networks of like-minded counterparts. In the closing years of the twentieth century, some space opened up in which people who had been pushed outside of the political system or had served prison terms and were victims of police harassment were able to

meet periodically. The Wansheng Bookstore, for example, founded by Gan Qi and Liu Suli, the latter of whom had spent a year in prison after June 4th, became a popular meeting place. But they remained under surveillance and were not able to engage in organised political activities. The relatively few intellectuals and former student leaders still advocating political reform remained isolated from the population at large.

Nevertheless, as a new generation of students founded study groups and wrote criticisms of Party policies on the Internet, they were assisted by the new generation of journalists, professors, and intellectuals working both inside and outside the system. Those advocating political reforms after June 4th were a heterogeneous group who expressed diverse political views. Political scientist Liu Junning, for example, who had been expelled from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences because of views that had antagonised General Secretary Jiang Zemin, was able to find a position at the Ministry of Culture, where he joined an informal group of reformist intellectuals that had formed around members of Hu Yaobang’s network.

Paradoxically, one could say that the Party selected members of the pro-democracy movement by sacking them from their official positions. This is what happened, for example, to Jiao Guobiao, a Peking University professor who was sacked after writing a denunciation of the Central Propaganda Department, and to Li Datong, the editor of *Bingdian* (Freezing Point), the supplement of the *Zhongguo qingnian bao* (China Youth Daily), who lost his job after publishing an article that diverged from the official version of the Boxer Rebellion. These former insiders began to relate to members of other generations and people with other organisational origins and social classes, thus overcoming the Party-imposed barriers preventing such inter-organizational, inter-generational, and multi-class communications.

## The Tiananmen Mothers: The struggle for historical truth about June 4th<sup>(20)</sup>

The most persistent and dedicated of these groups consists of relatives of the victims of June 4th. Since 1989 they have

18. <http://www.amnestyusa.org/individuals-at-risk/priority-cases/shitao/page.do?id=1101243>.

19. Excerpts from Liu Di’s articles are translated in “The Powerful Voice of a Mouse,” *Washington Post*, 7 December 2008.

20. Merle Goldman, *From Comrade to Citizen: The Struggle for Political Rights in China*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2005, pp. 70-78.

attempted to keep alive the memories of their victimised loved ones by drawing public attention to the events of June 4th. They have continued to insist that the Party acknowledge its responsibilities and compensate victims' families. At the same time, some of them have also become strong advocates of the political reforms their loved ones had tried to achieve in the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations.

Initially, this movement of the parents of those killed on June 4th began in reaction to the Party's efforts to repress the memory of the military crackdown on the peaceful student demonstrators. It sought a reassessment of the events and urged that those responsible for the killings be held accountable. This movement was led by Ding Zilin, a professor at People's University, whose only son had been killed on his way to Tiananmen Square. Defying government harassment, Ding launched a one-woman campaign to document the names of all those killed on June 4th, establish the truth of what happened, and determine who should be held responsible. Professor Ding was gradually joined by others who had lost relatives and ordinary citizens seeking justice. Despite escalating repression, the members of Ding's group did not relent in their efforts.

Whereas the majority of the families of the victims obeyed the authorities' order requiring that they never mention the circumstances under which their relatives had been killed, they steadily refused to behave as if they were guilty, and they tirelessly demanded that the "truth" about June 4th be established. Their fight was reminiscent of the campaign by the mothers of the victims of Argentina's 1980s "dirty war," the *locas de mayo*, the "crazy women of May," who dared to demonstrate every week in Buenos Aires's May 1<sup>st</sup> Square, demanding that the junta free their loved ones. And just as the *locas de Mayo* over time became closer to becoming an opposition, some of the Tiananmen Mothers have also become public advocates of the political causes of the victims. Despite repeated Party efforts to suppress their activities, a few dozen relatives of those killed met annually on 4 June throughout the 1990s. On the seventh anniversary of June 4th in 1996, a group of relatives and sympathisers jointly sent a petition to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, demanding the formation of a special committee to conduct an independent investigation of what had occurred on 4 June 1989.<sup>(21)</sup>

In September 1998, the Tiananmen Mothers, led by Ding Zilin and her husband Jiang Peikun, circulated two declarations as China was about to sign the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in October 1998. The first declaration detailed how individual rights were suppressed in China,

and the second described the growing official corruption that had accompanied China's emerging market economy. These declarations were unprecedented in the Tiananmen Mothers' movement in that rather than focusing only on the events of June 4th, they called on all Chinese citizens to take the initiative to realise their fundamental freedoms and rights. They also urged that China's current legal system be amended to bring it into compliance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which the Chinese government was already a signatory.

As the mothers' demands moved closer to those expressed by dissident intellectuals and June 4th veterans, the mothers gradually began to participate in activities calling for political reforms and the rule of law. Because of the absence of a Party response to the Tiananmen Mothers' demands for an official accounting of what occurred on June 4th, the involvement of the mothers deepened as they extended their fight to the larger domain of human rights. Professor Ding Zilin, for example, who until June 4th had been a strong supporter of the prevailing political system, became one of its fiercest critics. She signed a number of petitions requesting that the authorities respect human rights. In December 2008, she also signed the Charter 08 manifesto, a multi-class effort based on the Czech Charter 77 movement led by Czechoslovakia's playwright and later president, Vaclav Havel, calling for political reforms. China's Charter 08, like Charter 77, urged the government to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and China's own Constitution, which includes stipulations calling for freedom of speech and association. Although Charter 08 began as an effort by a small number of dissident intellectuals, by the time its website was closed down by the authorities, more than 8,000 people from all walks of life had signed their names.<sup>(22)</sup>

## Campaigns to free prisoners of conscience

Beginning early in the twenty-first century, a number of pro-democracy activists of various generations, including student leaders of the 1989 movement and dissident intellectuals, launched efforts to obtain the release of people who had been imprisoned for the expression of their views. Internet essayist Du Daobin, writer Liu Xiaobo, and Professor Ding

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

22. Ariana Eunjung Cha, "In China, a Grass-Roots Rebellion: Rights Manifesto Slowly Gains Ground Despite Government's Efforts to Quash It," *Washington Post*, 29 January 2009; "Charter' Democrats in China," *Wall Street Journal*, 31 March 2009.

Liu Xiaobo and Bao Zunxin  
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Zilin, well-known pro-democracy activists, launched a petition in November 2003 calling for the release of “Stainless-steel Rat” Liu Di.<sup>(23)</sup> Although Liu Di was released on 1 December 2003 and thereafter joined the ranks of the movement,<sup>(24)</sup> Du Daobin, who had been active in the campaign to release her, was arrested in October 2003. Petitions to obtain Du’s release were then launched by fellow activists, including Liu Di. These joint protests against the persecution of colleagues and friends for political crimes, and efforts to win their release, are a new phenomenon in the People’s Republic. During the Mao era, those accused of political crimes had few supporters even among their own families, who feared being persecuted themselves. In June 2004, nine months after his arrest, Du was sentenced to three years in jail with reprieve and was released ten days later.<sup>(25)</sup> This unusual decision by the authorities confirmed to the pro-democracy activists that their protests had been effective.

Even though the 1989 Tiananmen Movement, like the Charter 08 movement, garnered the support of professionals, workers, street vendors, and housewives, as well as defence lawyers and public intellectuals, the strategy of those seeking political reform in China remains largely elite-centred. The short-lived alliance with workers and ordinary citizens (*shimin*) that occurred during the Spring 1989 movement has not been replicated. Those advocating political change remain primarily intellectuals who do not have close relations with ordinary workers. This separation has been reinforced by the segmentation of Chinese society, in which the various social strata have few contacts with one another. Furthermore, the legacy of the Maoist era campaigns, from the anti-Hu Feng and the anti-rightist campaigns of the 1950s to the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76, in which intellectuals were treated like pariahs and workers and peasants were symbolically placed at the top of the social hierarchy, made it difficult for the various classes to join in combined political efforts.

Equally important, the Party views any attempt by political-oriented intellectuals to ally with the “working people” (*laodong renmin*) as a major challenge to the regime that must be “nipped in the bud.”<sup>(26)</sup> Furthermore, until the end of the 1990s, the various protests by workers and peasants that had begun to develop in the mid-1990s went virtually unnoticed, not only in the official press, but also by the survivors of the pro-democracy movement. Intellectuals remained primarily focused on maintaining contact with one another and with other elites. They engaged in scattered initiatives to set up study groups, write critical essays, and pub-

lish articles in the overseas press and later on the Internet that could be reported back to China. Unlike during the several weeks of Spring 1989, few made any efforts to incorporate other social groups into their political protests.

With the establishment of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the mid-1990s that would move China in the direction of a civil society, new possibilities opened up for political activists. Some seized the opportunity to become involved in the creation of officially-recognised NGOs. This was one path out of their isolation and toward a more open society. However, only those who were not overtly targeted by the authorities were able to set up NGOs. Student leaders who had been imprisoned after June 4th and dissident intellectuals such as Liu Xiaobo, one of the authors of Charter 08, and Bao Zunxin, who had set up an independent PEN group, were not allowed to form NGOs.

The founders of nascent NGOs barred pro-democracy activists from participating in their organisations in order to ensure their survival. The strategy of the Party was to use the NGO activists to undermine the pro-democracy groups. As a result, the authorities succeeded in further isolating and preventing dissidents from participating in public actions while at the same time ensuring that the new generation of NGO activists were relatively unaware of the ideas and actions of the dissidents.

Therefore, despite the brief participation of a variety of classes in political action in the spring of 1989 and in the Charter 08 movement, China’s pro-democracy activists and veterans of June 4th remain generally isolated from the rest of Chinese society. The political activists continue to discuss social movements, such as protests by laid-off workers and by peasants whose land has been seized, but very few of them actually participate in workers’ and peasants’ protests. Veterans of June 4th publish articles in the international

23. Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, “Chinese Intellectuals Sign Open Letter Condemning Suppression of Web Dissidents,” BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific – Political, 7 November 2003.
24. Philip Pan, “China Holds 54 Over Use of Internet, Group Says,” *Washington Post*, 28 January 2004; Jim Yardley, “A Chinese Bookworm Raises her Voice in Cyberspace,” *The New York Times*, 24 July 2004, p. 4.
25. Nailene Chou Wiest, “Suspended Jail Term for Internet Dissident,” *South China Morning Post*, 12 June 2004.
26. “We need to persist in the four cardinal principles, to oppose in a clear-cut manner, and nip those factors that undermine social stability in the bud, no matter where they come from.” Speech by President Jiang Zemin to mark the twentieth anniversary of reform, China Central TV, reported by BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific – Political, 18 December 1998.

press and help inform the world about China's social conflicts. Unlike 1989, however, their activities are primarily limited to commentary, and they are more well-known abroad than they are at home. At the turn of the twenty-first century, China's pro-democracy forces, with only a few exceptions, continued to be isolated from the widespread social conflicts that had erupted during the second half of the 1990s among laid-off workers protesting their loss of jobs and non-payment of salaries, urbanites protesting increasing official corruption and environmental pollution, and peasants protesting the expropriation of their land by the authorities. Nevertheless, a new generation of intellectuals, especially defence lawyers, public intellectuals, and journalists who were in high school during the Tiananmen movement, have at the turn of the century begun to fight for the civil and political rights of victims of the economic reforms. Taking the official discourse at face value, they help ordinary citizens defend their rights by organising public opinion through collective letters or providing legal advice to peasants whose land has been confiscated without suitable compensation. These concrete actions are a new development in China's pro-democracy movement.

demands for political reforms. Even though after June 4th such politically-oriented intellectuals were isolated from the general population, the Tiananmen demonstrations helped to expand rights consciousness among the general population. The most important impact, however, was not so much the ideas espoused by the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrators, as the appeal of the movement to people from different walks of life and multi-class participation. By the beginning of the twentieth-first century, the struggle for political rights in China has expanded beyond intellectual circles. Coalitions of intellectuals and other disaffected social groups, as exemplified by the Charter 08 movement, look to the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations as an example of the strength of uniting with other groups to help bring about political reforms in China. These changing alliances and views, as exemplified in the 1989 demonstrations, may in time be regarded as the progenitor of political change in the People's Republic of China. •

## The 1989 Tiananmen legacy

Despite its repression and the Party's efforts to erase public memory, the 1989 Tiananmen Movement is remembered by its participants and onlookers as a moment when for a few weeks in the spring of 1989, China's politically-oriented students and intellectuals were joined by other social groups in