

The NYRB China Archive (/library/nyrb-china-archive)



(<http://www.chinafile.com/sites/default/files/assets/images/article/featured/52010891.jpg>)

Catherine Henriette/AFP/Getty Images

Beijing magistrates wearing court uniforms join workers demonstrating in city streets in support of student hunger strikers gathered at Tiananmen Square, the scene of a mass pro-democracy protest led by students against the Chinese government. The April-June 1989 movement was crushed by Chinese troops when army tanks rolled into Tiananmen Square.

The End of the Chinese Revolution

BY RODERICK MACFARQUHAR JULY 20, 1989

(/publications/new-york-review-books)

The New York Review of Books

Subscribe (<https://www.nybooks.com/subscriptions/order/>) to the New York Review of Books.

This article was first published in the July 20, 1989 (http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1989/jul/20/the-end-of-the-chinese-revolution/?pagination=false&utm_source=chinafile&utm_medium=link&utm_campaign=none) issue of *The New York Review of Books* (<http://www.nybooks.com>).

When Deng Xiaoping suppressed the Beijing Spring last month, he thought he was putting down a new Cultural Revolution. Pirated notes from a Party meeting in late April quoted him as telling his colleagues:

This is not an ordinary student movement. It is turmoil.... What they are doing now is altogether the same stuff as what the rebels did during the Cultural Revolution. All they want is to create chaos under the heavens.

As the leading living victim of those ten years of terror Deng could not tolerate chaos or a revival of mob rule. What he did not and does not comprehend is that Tiananmen Square 1989 was virtually the mirror opposite of Tiananmen Square of 1966.

The million-strong Red Guard demonstrations at the outset of the Cultural Revolution re-created the hysteria of Nazi Nuremberg; this year's protest was redolent of an urban Woodstock. The Red Guards were conjured up by the revolutionary incitement of Chairman Mao; this year's demonstrations were a genuine grass-roots protest, if one skillfully organized by student activists. The Red Guards worshiped the living Mao; the prodemocracy protesters worshiped nobody, though they sprang into action out of affectionate respect for the dead "liberal," Hu Yaobang. The Red Guards rallied to Mao's drumbeat for proletarian egalitarianism; this year's students called for universal freedom, symbolized by their styrofoam goddess of liberty. The cultural revolutionaries, fueled by hate, marched forth from Tiananmen Square to "drag out," abuse, and frequently murder "capitalist roaders." This year's would-be democrats demanded the resignations of Deng Xiaoping and Li Peng, but showed pacifist solicitude even for troops sent to suppress them.

* * *

For all these stark contrasts, both protesters and repressors of 1989 acted within the dark penumbra of the Cultural Revolution. Deng and his accomplices were obsessed with the memory of the disorder and destruction unleashed by the Red Guards in the cities of China a quarter of a century ago. The upheaval exhilarated Mao who initiated it, but still unnerves his surviving colleagues of the Long March generation, most of whom were purged and disgraced, along with virtually the entire upper echelon of the Chinese Communist party (CCP).

Mao's onetime heir apparent, head of state Liu Shaoqi, died in anonymity after a long period of medical neglect. Others were persecuted to death or committed suicide. Deng himself escaped relatively lightly, with public humiliation and exile to a menial job in south China. He was probably saved from a worse fate by three decades of loyalty to Mao as a member of his innermost circle. One of his sons, however, was thrown out of a window and crippled for life. Yang Shangkun, today China's president and Deng's hatchet man, the man who has been calling for harsh treatment of the students, was a key Central Committee official then, and one of the first to be dismissed, followed by Peng Zhen, then the mayor of Beijing, now, at eighty-seven, one of the hardest of the old warriors behind Deng.

Chinese chroniclers of the Cultural Revolution claim that 100 million people were affected by it, though that figure may have been inflated by including the entire populations of cities where the Red Guards were active. Rough estimates by foreign scholars point to a death toll of up to half a million. Whatever the numbers, for China's elite, it was a deeply traumatic experience.

* * *

It was also an institutional trauma for the Chinese Communist party. The evident disarray of China's top leaders during the weeks before the tanks rolled in and the popular disdain for the strictures of martial law were reminders that the Party has never regained the cohesion and authority of its reign before the Cultural Revolution started. Mao, in setting it off, may have wanted simply to rid himself of some senior colleagues and to transform the rest into born-again revolutionaries. But the humiliation of thousands of members of China's "new class" inevitably sapped the respect for the Party itself in the eyes of its subjects. For much of the Cultural Revolution, the Party was an empty shell. In practice, the Party consisted of a set of warring factions: a military clique, headed by Defense Minister Lin Biao; a bureaucratic faction under Premier Zhou Enlai; the radical Gang of Four; and, later, the so-called "whatever faction" of younger Mao loyalists, led by his short-lived heir, Hua Guofeng. Thirty years of unity, forged at the Yanan revolutionary base, had been shattered beyond repair.

The erosion of Party authority had its corollary in an invigoration of people-power. At first, in 1966, students spoke out, as they had in the brief blooming of the Hundred Flowers in 1957, because Mao had licensed and encouraged them. But eventually they began to act autonomously, if mindlessly. Yesterday's Red Guards are now a generation of thirty-five- to forty-five-year-olds who cannot have forgotten the heady experience of challenging authority, taking initiatives, and relying on their own resources. Mao's admonitions to "dare to think, dare to speak, dare to act" because "to rebel is justified" resonated long after 1968 when the Red Guards' internecine warfare led the Chairman to consign them to the countryside. It also produced a redefinition of the relations between subsequent generations of students and the state.

Toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, on April 5, 1976, there was truly spontaneous combustion in Tiananmen Square when students and citizens exploded in wrath over the removal of the wreaths they had brought there to mourn the recently deceased Premier Zhou Enlai. The demonstrators were severely beaten by police and militia for defying the Gang of Four. Mao was also an implicit target of their anger and Deng Xiaoping was their implicit hero, as the man who had just been deprived of the succession to Zhou and was most likely to have ruled in the same pragmatic style. When Deng returned to power after his second disgrace, he insisted that the Tiananmen incident of 1976 be redefined as a popular uprising rather than a counterrevolutionary event. Thus he added his imprimatur to Mao's on the legitimacy of mass protest, even in the heart of the capital.

Deng benefited from spontaneous mass action again two years later with the emergence of the Democracy Wall movement. There were few determined dissidents among the activists of 1978. Most simply wanted a more relaxed political atmosphere, and they saw Deng's return to power as the way to ensure that. They created a pro-Deng bandwagon that undoubtedly helped him triumph over the last Maoist holdouts at the decisive meeting of the third plenum of the eleventh Central Committee in December 1978. But three months later, the Democracy Wall was closed down, and a few outspoken activists like Wei Jingsheng were later sentenced to long periods in jail. To this day, it is unclear whether Deng had simply used the movement cynically for his own ends, or whether he was persuaded to suppress it by more conservative gerontocrats as part of the price for their support. What is certain is that every time Deng has had to choose between power and democracy he has chosen power.

* * *

Guns and tanks were not required to deal with the young people who put up posters in 1978. But military men were already entrenched in top Party councils at that time as a result of Mao's earlier resort to PLA peacekeepers to subdue the Red Guards. The contradiction between army power and civilian control is an old theme in Chinese Communist history. The military establishment has always wielded more political clout in China, where it won the civil war, than in the Soviet Union, where the Red Army was created only after the Revolution. Mao struggled hard, not wholly successfully, to ensure that the Party commanded the gun. It was one of Deng's greatest achievements over the past ten years that he managed to cut army politicians down to size. His biggest success came in 1985, when he persuaded large numbers of Long March veterans to retire, reducing the proportion of PLA officers on the Central Committee—50 percent at the height of the Cultural Revolution—to under 20 percent.

But like Mao before him, Deng failed to impose full civilian control on the Party's Military Affairs Commission (MAC), which Mao chaired from 1935 until his death, and which is responsible for issuing orders to the army. The generals refused to allow the PLA to be run by a new body responsible to the National People's Congress, and they also resisted Deng's attempts to hand over his own chairmanship of the MAC to his chosen successors, Hu Yaobang and then Zhao Ziyang. When Deng retired from the Politburo at the Thirteenth Congress in 1987, the army's obduracy forced a change in the Party constitution which entitled him to continue to chair the MAC. Zhao Ziyang was made first vice-chairman, an honor never conceded to his predecessor as Party boss, Hu Yaobang, but it was the old military man Yang Shangkun who was Deng's real deputy as permanent vice-chairman.

In a revealing and hyperbolic passage in a secret speech last month, Deng underlined how the chairmanship of the MAC was more important even than the nominally top job of Party general secretary. "I have kept an eye on Zhao for quite a few years," said Deng. "He has wild ambitions. Had he become the chairman of the Military Commission, all old comrades like us would have been beheaded."

Deng's inability to bring the military to heel was only the most obvious proof of his failure to revamp China's political system. Yet the economic reform program which he masterminded beginning in 1979 demanded a more flexible political structure, one that could respond to new pressures from the outspoken groups within an increasingly autonomous, self-confident, and compartmentalized society. These included farm families liberated by decollectivization; private entrepreneurs and industrialists providing much-needed services and employment; international traders confronting their foreign opposite numbers with increasing sophistication; and students and intellectuals fired up by access to the new ideas that filtered in through China's newly opened door. Instead of the radical restructuring of the polity which these new interest groups required, the old system was retained but put under unsustainable stresses.

* * *

Ideological certainty, already eroded by cultural revolutionary overkill, was further weakened by Deng Xiaoping's marginal interest in ideology though Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong Thought was still enshrined as one of the four sacrosanct national principles. More importantly, Party cadres were told, in Deng's famous motto, that practice was the sole criterion of truth and furthermore that technical competence was to be a condition of employment. For the 19 million Party members recruited during the Cultural Revolution, many for their skills as political agitators, this was a threat to their careers. For the Party as an institution it was delegitimizing. If its claim to power rested on getting the economy right, this was a very shaky foundation indeed.

With their traditional role as guardians of orthodoxy undermined, Party cadres were forced to work in a newly commercial social setting. The old Maoist ideal of "serve the people" had been replaced by the Dengist injunction "to get rich is glorious." For officials sorely tempted by the opportunities of Deng's brave new world, the thin line between indulging in personal corruption and taking shortcuts on behalf of a collective unit became blurred. The blatant misuse of political connections by the "princes' party"—children of top brass and the Party elite—to gain wealth and power encouraged cynicism and emulation lower down. Gradually corruption became endemic, with *baksheesh* demanded for every official service. A few courageous journalists like Liu Binyan, now in the United States, became national heroes for their muckraking exposés. Contempt for the Party grew, but to no avail.

For all his talk of legality and democratization, Deng took no decisive institutional steps to alter the formal relationships between state and society. Lawyers were trained, but mainly to cut better deals with foreign firms, not to risk their careers fighting for the little man against the state. Democratization meant a few hopeful experiments in multiple-choice candidacies in local elections, and a few negative votes in the National People's Congress, but nobody at the top had Gorbachev's understanding of the potential value for rulers of electoral mandates, let alone a genuine commitment to pluralism.

The result was the worst of all worlds. Deng allowed some relaxation of political controls because he knew it was necessary for the economic reform program. This encouraged intellectuals and students to speak out with increasing boldness, but they felt frustrated because their voices went unheard. Deng was occasionally suborned by the conservatives into cracking the ideological whip, as in the campaign against spiritual pollution at the end of 1983. But when reformists like Zhao Ziyang argued that ideological campaigns were damaging the economy, Deng called a halt. Only when he believed that there was a serious threat to law and order, as in the student demonstrations of 1986 and 1987, did he take a drastic step and dismiss his first chosen heir, the Party general secretary, Hu Yaobang.

* * *

Economically too the reform program was running into trouble. Last summer, after price rises had set off a run on China's shops, Li Peng and his conservative allies emerged victorious from a conflict with Zhao Ziyang's reformers and proclaimed a two-year freeze on price reform and cuts in capital investment. By the beginning of this year three out of four million workers in the private construction industry were out of jobs and many of them turned to crime. Another 20 million workers in unprofitable rural industry were potential additions to the ranks of the

unemployed. Inflation had hit 30 percent in the towns, perhaps 50 percent for food products. The government had insufficient cash to pay the peasants for their crops and palmed them off with IOUs; some government officials collecting state grain quotas asked to be accompanied by police.

Deng had watched Poland and Hungary struggle through their reforms and did not rule out similar urban unrest in China. He started taking precautions as early as 1983 when he reestablished a 400,000-man national armed police force which gradually took over the internal security functions performed by the PLA during the Cultural Revolution. This force is currently supervised by the least known member of the Politburo Standing Committee, Qiao Shi, who appears to have replaced Zhao Ziyang as Party general secretary. More recently, an anti-riot force was created within the armed police, trained by Poles and Austrians, skilled also in martial arts, and equipped with American helicopters, Yugoslav tear gas, and German electronic gear. But Deng and Qiao Shi were looking in the wrong direction; they anticipated trouble on the streets from strikers and the *lumpen* unemployed, not from college campuses.

* * *

One dissident intellectual was predicting the imposition of martial law as far back as last February. He saw a gathering confrontation between rulers and ruled, with nobody in the leadership capable of defusing it. Well before the first protesters moved into Tiananmen Square, the credibility of China's self-selected leaders was already in doubt. Even the most committed reformers had failed to create channels for legitimate protest or alternatives to repression. During his six-year tenure as Party boss, Hu Yaobang had pleased intellectuals with his tolerance of dissent, but he never articulated a broad-based program of democratization.

His successor, Zhao, endorsed democracy in order to facilitate economic reform, but did nothing to promote pluralism. Indeed, after his defeat in the reform debate last summer he tried an opposite tack. His braintrusters began to advocate a "new authoritarianism," citing Taiwan and South Korea as proof that China would modernize better and faster with a strong, centralized government and a powerful hand at the tiller. Ironically, Zhao seemed to be hoping for army support, in the belief that martial law might be the only way of forcing through price reforms. Zhao could no longer rely on Deng to defend the reform program and was progressively losing ground to the economic conservatives, Li Peng and Yao Yilin. In recent months, instead of redoubling his efforts, Zhao seemed to lose heart and his young Turks began running for cover, seeking other jobs or going abroad.

When the demonstrations began in mid-April, there was no Chinese leader to whom the students could turn and no institutions through which they could channel their frustrations. In this vacuum Deng remained the ultimate arbiter. Both reformers and conservatives had long relied on him as a bulwark against the potential excesses of the other faction. Despite Deng's genuine efforts to avoid playing a Mao-like role, it seemed that the Chinese polity still demanded the linchpin of the maximum leader. But he was showing signs of wear and tear. He had heart trouble and his eyesight and memory were failing. His speech was sometimes difficult to understand and he had taken to communicating with colleagues through an intermediary, alarmingly like Mao in his dying days.

* * *

As the critical seventieth anniversary of the patriotic movement of May 4, 1919, approached, the regime worriedly issued plans for commemorations, all of which omitted one of its two original slogans, "democracy," and mentioned only the other, "science." Students were planning their own celebrations. Then Hu Yaobang had his heart attack at a Politburo meeting, reportedly after losing his cool in an argument. His death on April 15 sparked the prairie fire of the student mass movement culminating in the now infamous Tiananmen massacre.

The indiscriminate slaughter of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of fellow citizens by troops of the PLA in the heart of the capital was a tragic act of monumental folly. The subsequent arrest by Qiao Shi's armed police of thousands of students, intellectuals, and others recalled 1950s campaigns against counterrevolutionaries which Deng had long since proclaimed a thing of the past. In the last analysis Deng and his aged supporters had learned the wrong lessons, both from the Cultural Revolution and from perestroika in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Divided at the top, the Chinese Communist party could no longer cope with the multiple pressures upon it and finally cracked. While Premier Li Peng acted as the hard-faced front man, it is clear that decisions were ultimately taken not by his State Council, or by the Politburo, nor even by its five-man Standing Committee, but by the duumvirate in charge of the Military Affairs Commission, Deng Xiaoping and President Yang Shangkun, cheered on by a fire-eating group of aged revolutionaries. No attempt appears to have been made to summon the Party's supposedly supreme organ, the Central Committee, even though the crisis had lasted six weeks before its bloody denouement; perhaps Deng feared that the 285-member Central Committee included too many softies from Hu Yaobang's stable. When Deng finally reappeared in public to commend the PLA on its repression, he was flanked almost exclusively by octogenarians against a backdrop of generals. As in Poland in 1981 after the crackdown against Solidarity, China had collapsed into military rule.

Since the massacre, vigorous attempts are being made to bring senior opponents into line. Party discipline and fear will probably ensure a large measure of success. Then Deng and Yang will be able to move publicly against Zhao and Hu Qili, the only other member of the Politburo Standing Committee who appears to have supported Zhao at least part of the time. They will claim that the opponents of a crackdown were only an anti-Party minority within an otherwise united leadership. Central bastions of support for the protesters will be cleaned out: the *People's Daily*, the Academy of Social Sciences, which is already occupied by troops, and Zhao Ziyang's Systems Reform Committee. The intellectual powerhouses of Deng's reform will be emasculated.

However satisfying to the conservative victors, none of these measures will solve the problem of army power. The generals have once again saved the Party leadership. Once again they will demand their pound of flesh. They could legitimately argue that politics is too important to be left to politicians; if the civilian leadership is incapable of handling political problems except by the extensive use of military force against

its own citizens, then the generals can surely demand the right to participate in the decision-making process that precedes the shooting.

* * *

The military problem will be posed in its most acute form when Deng dies or becomes incapacitated. The imperial political structure of China, so ably re clothed in Leninist-Maoist garb by the CCP, is crumbling, the bureaucracy is delegitimized, and the Communist ideology discredited. Its last remaining institutional bulwark is the imperial chairmanship. But to be effective, it requires a truly imperial chairman, and none is in sight after Deng. The People's Republic of China has so far had two and a quarter leaders—Mao, Deng, and Hua Guofeng—but it has dispensed with six heirs apparent, including Hua, ample testimony to the difficulty of filling all the expectations placed on the role.

Like Mao before him, Deng has disposed of his hand-picked successors. Who can credibly pass muster in the time left before the eighty-four-year-old Deng departs? Li Peng has never been widely respected and he will clearly be a liability once the regime feels secure enough to seek reconciliation. Qiao Shi's power base in the internal security system is not nearly as strong as that of the head of the Soviet KGB and, such as it is, may make him suspect in the eyes of the military. A gerontocrat, most likely President Yang, will probably have to hold the ring until a credible successor emerges.

But Yang's only real power base is the PLA, in which his brother and several other relatives hold key posts. This would once again pose the threat of a Bonapartist takeover. China only narrowly averted that outcome during Lin Biao's ascendancy because Mao and Zhou Enlai were there to fight him. This time the obstacles are far less formidable. The potential contenders for power are also less impressive; there are no nationally known revolutionary heroes among today's generals. Moreover, the institutional power of the PLA is divided among the seven great military regions, so much will depend on regional commanders and their personal ties, which are scarcely known outside China. Perhaps this looming threat of military power will finally force the Party to institute Gorbachev-type institutional reforms in an attempt to achieve a new mandate.

But the crisis brought on by the events of June 3 and 4 is deeper even than the question of whether China will effectively become a military dictatorship. On that night Deng Xiaoping and Yang Shangkun destroyed the last shreds of legitimacy possessed by the Communist regime, proclaimed so proudly by Mao Zedong in that same Tiananmen Square four decades before. During the past forty years, the CCP has visited far greater disasters upon its long-suffering people: the campaigns of the early 1950s resulted in at least 800,000 executions; the Great Leap Forward caused up to 28 million deaths; the Cultural Revolution, perhaps another half million. By those standards, the Tiananmen massacre may seem a minor mishap. But it was the first time that the regime turned its guns on peacefully demonstrating people in Beijing with the world and the rest of China looking on. As one China scholar has put it, the attack represents the Tibetanization of the Han heartland.

Repression may bring cowed compliance for now, but that offense will never be forgiven; and one day a general may insist on a reassessment of the orders for the Tiananmen massacre so that the PLA, reportedly renamed the People's Liquidation Army by frightened Beijing residents, can remove this stain from its honor.

* * *

How the Chinese people will respond and how long they will take to act cannot be known. But for the first time, it appears more likely than not that the Communist regime will not long outlive its first generation. In the long trajectory of Chinese history, the PRC is beginning to look like one of the great founding dynasties which have left indelible marks upon the polity, but imposed such terrible hardships upon the Chinese people that they were tolerated only for a few decades. The Qin dynasty (221–206 BC), to whose founder Mao was often compared by his colleagues, created the first unified Chinese state, and left behind the Great Wall, which kept out the barbarians but claimed the lives of thousands of workers. The Sui dynasty (AD 589–617) reunited the empire after long centuries of division, conferring upon China a cohesion lost in Europe after the collapse of the Roman Empire. It built the Grand Canal, a vital project linking north and south China, but again one that claimed many lives.

The Communists under Mao and Deng transformed China from a backward-looking agrarian society into a nation imbued with the Promethean concept of change and the possibility of progress. They too have demanded excessive sacrifice: the Great Leap will be their greatest shame. But if the regime one day disappears, the Tiananmen massacre may prove to have been the last straw.

Topics: [Politics \(/topic/politics\)](#)

Keywords: [Deng Xiaoping \(/keyword/deng-xiaoping\)](#), [Hu Yaobang \(/keyword/hu-yaobang\)](#), [Tiananmen Protests \(/keyword/tiananmen-protests\)](#), [Chinese Communist Party \(/keyword/chinese-communist-party\)](#)

[Reporting & Opinion \(/reporting-opinion\)](#)

[Conversation \(/conversation\)](#)

[Library \(/library\)](#)

[Multimedia \(/multimedia\)](#)

[About \(/about\)](#)