

## **The day the Chinese People Stood up**

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(Not to be cited)

The 1989 pro-democracy movement was the largest social movement in the history of the People's Republic of China. It involved millions of participants in more than 300 cities. No movement of such a scope ever took place in a country ruled by a communist party except in 1989, when the Central and Eastern European regimes were toppled.

The policy of State amnesia enforced by the Chinese communist party has all but erased the memory of the movement in China. If commemoration by exiled activists -- especially by the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of the Beijing patriotic pro-democracy movement -- of the June 4<sup>th</sup> massacre has been held every year since 1990, the contents, the demands, the modes of organization of this huge mass movement have been forgotten, and only a very small number of Chinese people who didn't experience it know anything about it.

The contrast with say, the 1968 movement in France -- a movement that was vastly commemorated last year on its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary-- is blatant. Last year, leaders, ordinary participants, activists, policemen, and workers published innumerable books, produced innumerable movies and organized multiple exhibitions to present their versions of the movement. The French State was also an important actor of the commemorations.

In China, the 1989 pro-democracy movement is taboo, and any citizen who dares commemorate it is immediately taken "for tea" by the Public security, or, worse, sent to jail. How, in the Internet era, can such a huge event be erased? Why, thirty years after it happened, does the Chinese communist party continue to chase after any mention of its occurrence? Even the figures 6.4 are prohibited on the Internet. This is all the more ironical as the events have disappeared from public memory thanks to the Party's efforts: if nobody knows that something happened in 1989, why is it subversive to mention two figures that are only an allusion to something that nobody knows about?

The other bothering aspect is that the 1989 pro-democracy movement is always referred to (when people dare talk about it) as 6.4. I am not trying to ignore the magnitude of the tragedy represented by the massacre, and by its symbolic violence. However, since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, there have been many massacres, from the elimination of the

counter-revolutionaries in the early 1950s to the massacres that took place during the Cultural Revolution, but how many movements for democracy involving millions of people in hundreds of cities have occurred? Why commemorate the defeat of this unprecedented pro-democracy movement, and be silent on what it stood for and on the number of its participants? The present day communist party leaders and most international observers laud the stability of the Chinese regime, which has been able to “lift 400 million persons out of poverty” and bring huge changes to Chinese society, without any massive conflict. This success is supposed to show that the Chinese people long for stability, and, are willing to live under an authoritarian, even a totalitarian regime provided that it is able to deliver economic progress. However, these observers have forgotten that, at the end of the 1980s, millions of Chinese urban residents took to the street to ask for democracy and freedom, and that this “stability” is based on the violent repression of citizens’ aspirations.

This movement was not born out of nowhere. During the 1980s, Chinese citizens of all classes have pushed for democratization, and supported the party’s reformers who tried to take their voices into account. From the 1978-9 Democracy Wall to the 1986 student demonstrations through the 1980 local elections, Chinese subjects have expressed their opinions and their will to become citizens after having been subjects for decades<sup>1</sup>.

When pundits claim that the 1989 protest was doomed from the beginning because there was no solid basis for the protest as Chinese society lacked autonomy, they tend to ignore the huge changes that had taken place in the mentalities of ordinary citizens, and of part of the communist party leaders. This change is acknowledged by the fact that, when the mass movement erupted in the wake of Hu Yaobang’s demise, part of the CP leadership tried to deal with it using the methods of “legality and democracy”<sup>2</sup>.

### **A divided communist party**

One should remember that in the late 1980s, the Party was deeply divided between those who thought that in order to deepen the reform of the economy, a reform of the political system was indispensable, and those who thought that any change to the people’s democratic dictatorship would spell death for the regime. The latter thought that the economic reform which provided for a larger role for the market were threatening its stability. This division was felt in most fields, notably in the attitude towards Chinese society and intellectuals.

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<sup>1</sup> Merle Goldman, *From Comrade to Citizen*, Harvard University Press, 2005

<sup>2</sup> See Zhao Ziyang’s 4 May 1989 speech to the Asian Development Bank

The reformers rallied behind Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang were convinced that only by taking on board the critical opinions of the intelligentsia and of the ordinary people was it possible to renew the legitimacy of the regime. They actually solicited these opinions by creating think tanks such as the Centre for the reform of the economic system, and the Research group for the reform of the political system. They listened to the opinions of the newly emerging group of social scientists, and were increasingly convinced that the press should be emancipated from strict party controls. Experiences such as the *Shijie jingji daobao* (World Economic Herald), *Keji bao* (Science and Technology), and *Jingjixue zhoubao* (Economic Weekly), which carried lively debates on the nature of the political regime and did not hesitate to publish unorthodox opinions, were remarkable in a communist country. So was the emergence of the salons where all sorts of political and philosophical discussions were taking place (including talks by the American Ambassador!). A kind of non-institutionalized civil society was emerging, and the Party reformers didn't take any step to do away with it, a lack of action that outraged the members of the conservative faction of the Party. Deng Xiaoping, sometimes supported the reformers, and, when he thought that they were going too far, switched to a more conservative attitude. Chinese society was modernizing and not only the intelligentsia, but also a large number of urban residents wanted to have a say in the evolution of the political regime.

The Party itself that had been trying to regain legitimacy after the terrible years of the Cultural Revolution displayed an unprecedented willingness to listen to the voices of society to adapt its rule to contemporary challenges. A sort of virtuous cycle appeared, in which reformers needed input from society in order to modernize party rule, and a large number of intellectuals and members of the economic elites were willing to provide them.

This was especially the case among students, who believed the Party's discourse according to which they represented the main force for modernization. The official propaganda insisted on the role of grey matter in the new economic revolution, and tried to co-opt students into the party apparatus. This was the period when, in order to be promoted inside the Party hierarchy, one needed a university grade.

The students themselves, when they were not obsessed with the desire to go and study abroad (the famous *tuopai*, those who prepared for the TOFL), were willing to renew with the traditional role of the *literati*, convinced as they were that they bore the main responsibility for China's future. Like the *literati*, many thought that they had a moral imperative to censor abuses by the authorities, and felt obliged to defend ordinary people, who themselves were convinced that they had a duty to protect the students who were ready to fight for their

welfare. In the rather relaxed atmosphere that prevailed in the 1980s, students were convinced that the cost of political action would not be excessively high, as had been demonstrated by the relatively low level of repression of the 1985 and 1986 demonstrations. Fear, which had been an essential component of the party rule during the previous forty years, was receding.

### **Spontaneous action rehabilitated**

The rehabilitation of the April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1976 Tiananmen incident by Deng Xiaoping in November 1978, had signalled an important change in the Party's attitude: in a way, it meant that spontaneous protest by citizens was legitimate. And, as a matter of fact, the day after Deng's declaration, posters appeared on what was to become Xidan Democracy Wall.

Nevertheless, spontaneous demonstrations had not been legalized, as many leading activists of the 1978-79 pro-democracy movement were to find out: after the Party had tolerated their free expression for a few months, they were dealt long prison terms. However, other demonstrators, such as the Shanghai rusticated youths who had organized protests in the late 70s were not repressed.

Despite numerous episodes such as the campaigns against bourgeois liberalisation (1981, 1987), against spiritual pollution (1983-84) the political atmosphere was getting increasingly relaxed, and students were keener to take to the streets to express their discontent. Therefore, when Hu Yaobang died on 15 April 1989, they did not hesitate to take their claims on the Party to Tiananmen Square. If the 1976 homage to Zhou Enlai was regarded as "revolutionary", why couldn't they pay their respect to a leader who, during his term as president and general secretary of the Party, had been instrumental in rehabilitating the victims of Maoism, and had fought for the implementation of a reform of the political system? They were convinced that by taking to the streets to demand the end of the campaign against bourgeois liberalization and the lifting of press censorship, they were actually supporting the line that had triumphed after Deng Xiaoping's return to power, the famous 3<sup>rd</sup> plenum political line.

The great majority of the students who took to the streets in the wake of Hu Yaobang's death were not opponents to the communist party rule. Hu's death was seen as weakening the reformers, who had already been dealt a serious blow by his forced resignation in 1987, and by the ensuing promotion of Li Peng to the post of Prime Minister. By expressing their grief over Hu's death and asking for his rehabilitation, they believed they were reinforcing the reformist faction, which was confronted with a conservative offensive. The attitude of the demonstrators, who were replicating their 1976 predecessors' action, their request for

dialogue that the Party Congress had legitimized in 1987, and the way they presented their petition (three students knelt on the steps of the Great Hall of the people to ask the Prime Minister to receive them) showed that they did not question the legitimacy of the regime, but were willing to support part of the leadership.

Therefore, when Party leaders refused to talk to their representatives and sent the People's Armed Police to disperse them and send them back to their campuses, they were really shocked.

But this shock reached its climax with the publication of the April 26<sup>th</sup> *People's Daily* editorial.

### **The April 27<sup>th</sup> Demonstration**

The April 27<sup>th</sup> demonstration that followed the publication of the editorial represents the first large-scale spontaneous street protest against a decision by the Communist Party supreme leader **after** it has been made public in an editorial published by the organ of the Central committee, and read on the radio before that.

The first Tiananmen incident on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1976 had also been a large-scale spontaneous demonstration, but it had taken place before the highest authorities in the Party had expressed their opinion (*biaotai*). It is only two days later (on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1976) that the *People's Daily* published an editorial labelling it "counter-revolutionary". This is a huge difference. In 1989, people who took to the streets knew clearly they were opposing the highest authority and did it deliberately.

As a matter of fact, the students were quite aware of the danger involved in launching a protest after the editorial, as many dramatically wrote their wills before taking to the streets.

As emphasized by Bao Zunxin in his memoirs:

"Take to the streets to demonstrate? It was no joke. The April 26th editorial had been written according to a directive from Deng Xiaoping. (That same afternoon, every *danwei* had passed on Deng's speech to Party members). " (Bao, p. 69)

To many, the editorial language was a Great Leap Backward. It reminded its readers of the April 7th, 1976 *People's Daily* editorial that had followed the Great Tiananmen demonstration in homage to Zhou Enlai. " When the editorial was passed on in every *danwei*, it caused unceasing laughter. "Inside the Party, the idea that using the discourse of the 50s and 60s to solve the questions of the 80s was absurd, was widespread. "Many party members were saying: "it looks that the

Cultural Revolution has come back” “it is the language and mode of action of the past movements” (Zhang, p.72)

But to the students who had been protesting for days, it was a terrible shock as Chen Xiaoya, then a teacher at a university in Beijing, noted in her memoir.

“52 universities posted 860 *dazibao*, protesting the April 26<sup>th</sup> editorial”. Until very late in the evening, various groups discussed to decide what were the best ways to reply to this “aggression”. They decided to launch a protest. “In the evening of the 25<sup>th</sup>, the Beijing Provisional Union of Schools of higher education summoned a meeting and decided to launch a demonstration on the 27<sup>th</sup>.” In its advice, it said: “on the 27<sup>th</sup>, there will be a united demonstration of the whole city, gathering at Tiananmen, to protest against the April 26<sup>th</sup> editorial” (Chen, p.152)

10 slogans were agreed upon:

- 1) Support the CP, support socialism.
- 2) Long live democracy!
- 3) Oppose bureaucratism, corruption, privileges!
- 4) support the constitution!
- 5) Patriotism isn't a crime!
- 6) The press must tell the truth, resist calumn!
- 7) Long live the people!
- 8) Stability of the prices!
- 9) Everyone has a responsibility when the State is threatened.
- 10) The people's policemen protect the people. (Chen, p.153).

But the students were aware that such a demonstration was different from the previous ones as it was taking place after the leadership had clearly expressed its judgement. Aware of the danger, some elected representatives started wavering. Afraid that the demonstration would meet with harsh repression from the authorities, Ma Shaofang and Wuerkaixi changed their minds and said they were cancelling the protest (Zhou Langxiao, Gu Puying, p.67).

Students were not alone in expressing doubts. When they heard about the students meeting, some intellectuals tried to convince them to remain in their campus to protest. In his memoir, Bao Zunxin, who was later to play an important role in the foundation of the Beijing Intellectuals autonomous union, remembers:

“I called to ask what was the situation like, asked to convey my warning to the people who organized the demonstration, and tell them to call me an hour later.... I was really nervous”. Bao then went home and got a call from Gan Yang who described the situation in the universities and asked him if he could do something to prevent the students from demonstrating. He said he was getting ready to go to Beida, but Gan replied: “this is useless, now professors from many universities are blocking the gates, if we go, it will only mean that there are a few more people. The most

important is to be able to let some person at the top (*shangmian*) come out and say something”

It made sense. “Having thought it over, I thought of Tao Siliang. She was the vice-bureau chief of the United Front newly founded bureau for intellectuals; she had many friends among young intellectuals. The most important was that she could reflect the situation to the above echelons.”...”I said: now in the name of more than 100 people from the intelligentsia I express this request to you: please convey our feelings (*xinqing*) to the above echelons; we must at all costs find a way to convince the students not to take to the streets. If they really do, we hope that the concerned parties will be moderate (*kezhi*). This is my appeal! I also said: if, during the demonstration, a bloody event happens, I will immediately proclaim I resign from the Party.”

She said that by all means she would tell the above echelons our opinion. It was already after midnight. (Bao, p.69).

But these efforts were fruitless and after a period of hesitation, which didn’t last long, the students decided to ignore the elders’ advices. In Beida, as (or because?) the University radio was calling for restraint, 2 to 3000 students went to the campus gates from where they could see the military police. Some students gave impassioned speeches:

“From May Fourth to today Beida’s history has engraved one truth in our hearts: without the communist party, there would be no new China. We may be young, but we are more faithful to the CCP than those who calumniate us as anti-Party. We oppose the corrupt officials, and these corrupt officials are the real anti-party, anti-socialist elements.”(Zhou, Gu, p.69).

At this point, the students still did not oppose the communist party rule, and feigned to ignore that a *People’s Daily* editorial represented the opinion of the leadership. But the simple fact that they dared take to the streets after such a decision was regarded as an unbearable challenge by Deng Xiaoping.

The Demonstration lasted from 8 AM till 11 PM, and involved several hundred thousand people. From Haidian, the university quarter, it went to central Beijing and back, covering 30km. All along the way, the demonstrators cleared their way with a mixture of physical pressure and negotiation. When the procession arrived near Tiananmen Square, the situation became tense.

“At 6 PM, in front of Tiananmen Square, a student shouted in a loudspeaker: ‘ I give you some good news: when the People’ s University procession arrived at Tiananmen, a company of the 38<sup>th</sup> Army left on a military truck. Therefore, we have temporarily decided to leave some leeway to the government, and not enter the square, but go back (to campus) through Jianguomen, and to continue the strike tomorrow until the final victory’ .” (Zhang, 76)

The concessions allied to firmness showed that the demonstrators were mature, and that they were able to use all sorts of tactics to reach their objectives.

I won't delve into the details of the demonstration, but a few elements should be remembered:

- **The demonstration was peaceful**, and despite some tense moments, there were no clashes with the military police that had been mobilized *en masse*.
- **The show of force by the Party did not dissuade the students** from taking to the streets, and, in the absence of clear orders (due to divergences inside the apparatus?) the police did not use violence to prevent the demonstration.
- **The slogans were not anti party**: Support socialism, oppose corruption, dialogue, were actually a show of support for the pursuit of reforms. The students were trying to enlist the support of the police, with the slogans: “The people’s police love the people”
- Despite the fact that the students did everything possible to prevent any stranger from entering their ranks, **the role of the “masses”**, the ordinary Beijing residents, was central: “One to two thousand members of the masses stood between the students and the officers, shouting ‘Let them go through!’ . The students were also shouting ‘the people’s police loves the people!’ . People were as tightly as in a bus, some lost their shoes. All the people were pushed forward unwillingly. The policemen were resisting the flow ... (until they) released their arms, and the flow of people went through”(Zhou, Gu, p.69).
- **Demands for the respect of basic freedoms** was not so easily acceptable by the Party, whether by the reformers or the conservative. Denunciation of the official press indicated that the students wanted real democracy, which was incompatible with the continuing dictatorship of the Party. “Around 6 , they arrived at the headquarters of the *Beijing ribao*: “北京日报，胡说八道！” (The *Beijing Daily* is bullshit) “人民日报，欺骗人民！ (The *People’s Daily* misleads the people) “中央电台，颠倒黑白！” (Radio Beijing, reverses black and white) “工人日报，为民开道！” (The *Workers’ Daily* clears the way for the people) “向科技日报致敬！” Salute to the *Science and Technology Daily*) (Zhou,

Gu, p. 80). This announced the journalists' protest that took place on 4 May.

- **The student movement became a mass movement:** From the beginning to the end, **people** were massed on the streets, bringing food, soft drinks and lollypops to the demonstrators, and showing support in all sorts of ways. They were actually supporting spontaneous political participation, and freedom of demonstration.

Thirty years later, a few students' leaders reflected on the importance of the demonstration.

Wuerkaixi

It is one day that I think we will remember with such festive feelings. Everybody was giving us a V sign and then it became a symbolic gesture of 1989 student movement too.

Shen Tong

It was such a triumph. We broke human walls formed by Police – the feared armed Police did not block us – and it was such a carnival !

Wang Dan:

We were also proud because it was the first time since 1949 under the Communist Party rule that the people had taken to the streets. So I think it had a profound impact on Deng Xiaoping. Of course, this is only my impression, but I think he must have felt a great inner turmoil. From that day, the government was the government, the people, the people and the government was not with the people.<sup>3</sup>

### Lessons from the demonstration

The April 27 demonstration has multiple meanings: the fact that it took place, and that it was supported by great numbers of Beijing residents shows that the April 26<sup>th</sup> editorial had shocked the people, who were not ready to obey to an irrational decision by the party leadership.

It showed that if people were united and had common claims, they could exercise effective pressure on the Party. Despite the fact that many students had written their will before they left their campuses, showing they were aware of the danger, the mere holding of the demonstration showed

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<sup>3</sup> Documentary : “The Party vs th People”, *NPR, Arte*, June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019

that discontented people, if they were in significant enough numbers, could express their opinions, and, perhaps, force the party to change attitude. From that day on, students and activists started to wonder whether the main obstacle to democracy was not party dictatorship.

It also reinforced the request for dialogue. With success as there were many attempts by the government to organize it. Some, like April 29<sup>th</sup> Yuan Mu' s dialogue with student union representatives, were fake. Others, such as May 14<sup>th</sup> Yan Mingfu' s dialogue with representatives of the Beijing autonomous union of institutions of higher education were real, but were sabotaged by the conservative. However, by accepting to hold a dialogue with freely elected representatives of a social group, the party was acknowledging the existence of an autonomous society, thus putting into question the totalitarian character of the regime.

The demonstration was also a symbol of unity between the students and various social groups who could rally behind a common agenda and common tactics: the agenda was the demand for freedoms of demonstration, of the press, and perhaps a demand of dialogue by autonomous organisations representing various social groups.

Therefore, one could state that on 27<sup>th</sup> April 1989, the Chinese people stood up: fear had receded, and free expression was taking place.

The ensuing events showed that urban residents in the whole of China were willing to express their demands for change in peaceful demonstrations.

This sense of initiative was further displayed when the people of Beijing took to the streets to block the advance of the martial law troops on May 20<sup>th</sup> .

The April 27<sup>th</sup> demonstration symbolizes the emergence of Beijing citizens' new political maturity. Unhappily, it was crushed during the night of June 3<sup>rd</sup> to June 4<sup>th</sup>.

**The End of Ordinary Citizens' Direct Political Participation ?**

No such demonstration has taken place since 1989. So, was it only a *feu de paille*? Have the Chinese people been convinced that it is useless to try express their dissatisfaction with the Party leadership by taking to the streets?

If the ways to express their demands have changed during the following three decades, some changes induced by the movement have been ingrained in people's minds. Rights awareness has resisted to the government's innumerable crackdowns.

A blow has been dealt to the legitimacy of the regime: the credibility of the press has decreased immensely, and most people now turn towards the Internet to get information. The rights defence movement has emerged, signalling the possibility of contacts and common action among various social groups. Lawyers and citizen journalists have replaced the students as leaders of this movement.

The lessons drawn by the Party are that infighting prevented the leadership from acting decisively to put an end to the movement.

The conjunction of a social movement with divisions inside the party has since been regarded as the main threat against the regime that should be avoided at all costs. After 1989, emerging autonomous organizations have been harassed by the authorities. However, as society was getting more affluent, and the country increasingly open to outside contacts, grey zones appeared which allowed grassroots civil society organizations to develop. Most of them refrained from expressing political demands on the regime in order to be able to grow bigger. The party contented itself with preventing politicisation, and the establishment of NGOs at the national level.

At the same time, development of the Internet allowed the training of a new generation of activists fighting for the protection of citizens' rights. But these forces outside the system still suffer the chronic disease of the Chinese opposition movement: the absence of memory. Enforced State amnesia has prevented activists from drawing all the lessons of the 1989

pro-democracy movement. If most of them know that the State committed a massacre against unarmed non-violent citizens, few know that, thirty years ago, the Chinese people had stood up to fight a *People's Daily* editorial. Fear has returned to society, and most activists believe that it is impossible to challenge the party in the centre of Beijing.

If, together with the commemoration of the massacre, which has to be continued, all the democrats had celebrated the memory of the April 27<sup>th</sup> demonstration, the image of the 1989 movement would be different. I hope one day it will be referred to as 4.27, and that people who try to know what really happened thirty years ago, will investigate this essential event in the history of the People's Republic of China. Paradoxically, I hope that one day, the Party will censor these three figures more than 6.4.

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