The Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989 -

China’s Shattered Enlightenment

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Individual Paper
Mao’s communist revolution was a product of the collective efforts of the peasants and workers of China, in an effort to create a fairer and more just society. During the Mao era, however, attempts to implement communism led to famine, and the devastation of the Cultural Revolution. After Mao’s death, Deng Xiaoping’s new economic policies brought a better life to the people, and gave them hope that economic freedom could soon translate to western-style democratic freedoms. Their hope for political reforms to accompany economic growth manifested themselves in the Tiananmen protests of 1989, in which they expressed their dissatisfaction with the authoritarian regime, and demanded democracy as a solution to the increasing corruption in the government. Students felt this was a necessary step to help better the development of the nation. However, the government feared that they would lose power altogether, and that civil war could occur. They decided to crack down on the demonstrations, which not only prolonged the political suppression of Chinese society through tightened security and conservative purges, but led to a continuation of many of the problems that the students had been fighting. The Tiananmen Square Protest of 1989 was a student-led movement that embodied the people's political hopes entering China’s period of reform. However, the Communist Party's refusal to recognize the movement as patriotic permanently impeded political reform and allowed the growth of corruption and social inequality.

The 1980s were a pivotal time in the development of modern China and represented a continuation of the common people’s struggle to gain control of their future. When the Communist party, led by Mao Zedong, took control of China, the support of the peasants was key to their victory (The Chinese Revolution of 1949). The farmers and civilians saw the communist cause as a better future for themselves than the increasingly corrupt and unpopular Nationalist government. However, Mao’s over-ambitious policies during the Great Leap Forward
resulted in an economic and political disaster that caused famine to sweep the country. Afraid of losing power because of his mistakes, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution, encouraging the nation’s youth to criticize and destroy anyone with a privileged life (Chinese History: Maoism). He used the nation’s chaos to purge the successful politicians that he saw as a threat to his own power, while neglecting the wellbeing of the common people. After this episode of violence and ruin, it was apparent that reform was needed in the communist government to establish a sound future for the people. Consequently, Deng Xiaoping, after gaining control of the Party in 1976, put in place sweeping economic policy changes, leading the country to a market economy through the creation of special economic zones and the privatization of industry (China Profile). During the 80s, the nation experienced unprecedented growth, and the lives of the people improved significantly. However, the government was still an authoritarian regime, and the benefits of economic reform often went disproportionately to government officials. Many university students felt that it was time to strive towards greater political freedoms as well, in order to secure a better future in the long term, and to combat social problems that were arising (Tiananmen Square Declaration of Human Rights). Dr. Tong, currently an engineer living in America, was a participant in the protests as a graduate student at a university in Beijing and suffered severe gunshot wounds during the crackdown. During a recent interview, he said: “The students all wanted to make the country better: to get rid of corruption, and increase citizens’ freedoms… nearly everyone in the nation supported the movement except those who were benefiting from the corruption.” (Tong)
Huge crowds of protesters gather in Tiananmen Square. In the background is the Statue of the Goddess of Liberty (Tiananmen Square Massacre).

During the spring of 1989, driven by both the hope for a better future, and the imminent problem of corruption, students and citizens in Beijing took to the streets demanding democracy, as well as a true fulfillment of the rights promised in the People’s Republic of China’s 1982 constitution: freedom of speech, press, association, demonstration, and criticism of the government (Constitution of the PRC). On April 22nd, 1989, over 100,000 students in Beijing gathered in Tiananmen Square for the memorial service of Hu Yaobang, a progressive leader who had been a symbol of political reform before being forced out of office three years earlier (Timeline: The Tiananmen Protests). For students, this event triggered a desire for what Hu had stood for: press freedom, democratic rights, and the end of corruption. The rise in dissatisfaction was largely due to the profiteering of government officials in China, where the economy had out-
grown regulations. Because the government was transitioning between state-owned and privatized industry, officials were the only ones still able to buy goods and food at fixed government prices. They then sold it for profit on the free market where the prices had risen, which worsened inflation (Schaeffer). In Beijing, a poll taken showed that corruption was regarded by 84 percent of residents as the most disturbing social problem. The nation’s rapid urbanization had led to a rise in unemployment among workers as well, who wanted to have a greater say in government. As petitions began and demonstrations took hold, Party leaders published an editorial in the People’s Daily denouncing the protests as a plot to undermine government authority. This angered the students, and the protests intensified. By May 15th, the number of students and workers in and around the square swelled to nearly one million, and thousands began participating in a hunger strike, pressuring the government to respond to their demands (Timeline of Tiananmen). However, the Party refused to recognize the movement as patriotic. Meanwhile, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s visit drew global media coverage of the movement and caused an embarrassment for the government, who had planned to welcome him in the square. As protests spread throughout the major cities of China, the movement gained almost universal support. The party was in paralysis: reformist general secretary Zhao Ziyang argued that the party should recognize the movement as patriotic and open dialogue with the students, while the other leaders, mostly with military backgrounds, feared that a movement with the support of the masses could ultimately cost the power of the party (Military). Finally, under the mounting pressure of the situation, Deng Xiaoping decided to declare martial law and send the fully armed People’s Liberation Army into the city. After numerous threats, he ordered the military to clear the square with force on June 4th. The brutal crackdown resulted in what the Chinese Red Cross initially estimated as 2,600 deaths before withdrawing the figure under
pressure from the government (Timeline of Tiananmen). Afterwards, Deng said in a June 9th speech that the movement’s goals were “to topple the Communist government,” and “to overthrow the socialist system” (Deng Xiaoping June 9 Speech). Students, however, felt that the chaos was caused by the crackdown, not the protests, and that anarchy would never have occurred if the government had taken a softer approach (Tong).

![A lone protester known as the “Tank Man” stands in front of tanks as they advance into Beijing.](image)

The Tiananmen Protests of 1989, though they represented a time of hope, led to an outcome that not only wasted the potential for progress, but was a setback to the reform process. In Zhao Ziyang’s final appeal to the students, he vowed that the government would never close the door on dialogue; and that they would be able to find solutions to the problems in the long term (Timeline: The Tiananmen Protests). His efforts, however, were in vain. Zhao was expelled
from his position, and the crackdown ensued. After being put under house arrest for his split with the party leadership, Zhao later wrote in his book *Prisoner of the State*: “most people were only asking us to correct our flaws, not to overthrow our political system” (Zhao). However, the hardliners like Premier Li Peng, through the process of the crackdown, did more than just ignore the requests for reform. They managed to purge the reformists like Zhao, and firmly establish the Party’s refusal to accept political reform, a stance that would be impossible to reverse in the years to come. The hard-liners even used Zhao’s dismissal as leverage against the continuation of Deng’s economic reforms as well, because Zhao had been the one put in place to implement them (Miles, 34). Looking back, Dr. Tong said: “The students were naive, and didn’t foresee that the conservatives would gain power, which made both economic and political reform even harder than before” (Tong). For three years after the crackdown, economic reforms were brought to a snail’s crawl (The Chinese Economic Reform). Student leaders were either jailed or forced to leave the country. Most importantly, any government official suspected of being sympathetic to the protests was forced either to leave or to be fully repentant of their stance (Miles, 28). Such a scale of bloodshed and purges would not be easy to go back on.

Zhao Ziyang makes his final appeal to the students in the square (Zhao Ziyang).
A few years after the crackdown, the transition from a government owned economy to an open market resumed without the accompanying political reform widely thought to be necessary, leading to the unchecked growth of corruption. In August 1993, deputy attorney general Lian Guoqing admitted openly: “Crimes of graft and bribery now involve larger sums of money and more party and government officials than previously... [Corruption] has spread into the party, government administrations, and every part of society, including politics, economy, ideology, and culture” (Miles, 165). The Communist Party entered the 90’s with a model in mind: keeps the economy growing, and people will forget about the politics. For a large part, the Party’s new focus on a free economy as well as their retained centralization of power allowed them to quickly muscle their way into the world economy to the point where nations such as the U.S. dropped their sanctions in favor of more productive trade policies (Naughton). On the other hand, as power and resources stayed largely in the hands of the government, officials began finding newer and larger scale ways to tap into their connections for personal gain. By 1994, 1,450 officials at or above the level of county chief were being investigated for corruption, showing a marked increase from previous years (Miles, 165). Various forms of nepotism and rent-seeking spread throughout the government, and the poorly defined boundary between government-owned and private industry has led to questionable cases of regulation over the years. Several large-scale scandals emerged, such as that of Wang Baosen, the deputy mayor of Beijing who shot himself just before authorities discovered that he had embezzled and diverted millions of dollars of public funds to himself and family members (Miles, 151). A few weeks later, Party Secretary Chen Xitong resigned, and was said to have borne “unshirkable responsibilities” in Wang’s embezzlement. Instead of convincing the public that efforts were being taken to root out
corruption, however, this occurrence was attributed to a political struggle and made people suspect that Politburo members were aware of Wang’s case for years. Cases like these, instead of comforting the public, have led to the conclusion that the anti-corruption cause within the party is merely a weapon used to oust political rivals, not a real effort to improve officials, who are almost all corrupt (Zhang). Meanwhile, attempts at forming labor union in an area where closed government industries left workers unemployed and corruption rampant are quickly shut down by the government, in fear of unrest (Miles, 201). Recently, Harvard Professor Gary King said that the Chinese government is engaged in “the largest effort ever to selectively censor human expression” (Vedantam). Although they don’t block all criticisms of the government for purposes of monitoring sources of unrest, they censor any attempt whatsoever to gather or mobilize people to avoid what occurred in 1989. According to King, the people of China are “individually free but collectively in chains” (Stanford Daily | China Censors to Prevent Collective Action, King Says). The Party is locked in an endless and futile struggle to root out corruption by itself, while opportunities to exploit government positions in China’s growing economy are multiplying. As Dr. Tong said, “Some of the problems we were fighting, like corruption, have become much more serious today… if the government had started reforming more openly during 1989, the situation could be much better now.” (Tong)

The Tiananmen Protests of 1989 came in a time when economic reforms were reshaping China, and they called for measures of political reform to complete what the people believed would become a decade of enlightenment and reform. Like during the formation of communism in China during the 1910’s and 20’s, the instigators of the movement were the educated youth, and their patriotism was something that had been enshrined in the past by China’s May 4th Youth Day. In fact, they saw themselves as the next generation of the May 4th movement, and
even created a “New May 4th Manifesto” summarizing their goals (Tiananmen Square, New May Fourth Manifesto (1989)). During the spring and summer of 1989, however, instead of fulfilling the hopes of the people, the government suppressed their voices, condemning the nation to a future without true democracy and freedom. Yet, the spirit of patriotism and freedom so boldly displayed by China’s youth in that year was far from extinguished. In June the following year, the Berlin Wall was officially dismantled, and roads connecting East and West Berlin were reopened. Rebellions erupted in the Soviet Union, culminating in its dissolution in 1991. These campaigns were in part inspired by the Tiananmen Protests, and functioned in turn as a pressure for Deng Xiaoping to continue economic reform in 1992, so as not to be at risk of a similar fate. Though they were unable to bring an end to corruption or win political rights, the protesters in 1989 played an important role in creating the economic prosperity in China today.
Bibliography (Primary Sources)


J Tong, a family friend of the author, was a participant in the Protests as a graduate student in a university in Beijing and suffered severe gunshot wounds on June 4th. In a telephone interview, he explained why he joined the protests, the goals of the students, and how they felt after the crackdown. Tong is his pseudonym.


Zhao Ziyang’s memoir was compiled from his recordings and works while he was in house arrest. Once considered Deng Xiaoping’s successor, Zhao was kicked out of his leadership position after his memorable speech to the students in the square, and became a symbol thereafter.


This student-written document proclaimed that the patriotism of the May 4th youth day that spawned new ideals during the beginning of the nineteenth century would carry on during the protests.

This primary source was simply a copy of the Constitution of the PRC, and helped provide a perspective for my paper by exposing the contradictory nature of the Communist Party’s constitution, which was adopted in the same decade that the Tiananmen Square Protests occurred in.


This online manuscript contained the speech of Deng Xiaoping a few days after the crackdown, which explained the Party’s decision and rationale in putting down the demonstration.

Bibliography (Secondary Sources)


This article about corruption in modern-day China highlights the pervasiveness of profiteering the public sentiment that almost every official is corrupt.


This timeline article contained the phases of the demonstration as well as the political implications of each event, such as the hunger strike and Gorbachev’s visit.

This timeline listed the major events leading up to the crackdown, and provided many useful statistics such as the number of deaths estimated by the Chinese red cross.


This NPR program provided an interesting perspective on the current state of censorship in China that prevents the mobilization of people and organization of any kind.


This timeline contained the major milestones in the course of China’s progression from being a socialist state to an essentially free market economy.


This government site had information about China’s communist revolution of the early 1900’s and specifically stated how the communists benefited from the support of the peasants and the unpopularity of the corrupt Nationalist government.

When researching Maoism as a background for the era of economic reform in the 1980’s, I found this educational site that provided many facts about both Mao’s philosophy and what happened in China during his leadership.


This book was one of my most important sources, and contained an in depth explanation of the situation after the Tiananmen Protests. In his argument that China is still prone to instability, Miles (who lived in and studied China for many years) incorporated details about everything from corruption, to the political workings of the Communist Party that I found very useful in my paper.


Although this research paper was very scholarly and complex, I found it contained some very useful analysis on how the course of China’s economic reform progressed in relation to the protests.


Robert Schaeffer’s article looked mainly at the causes of the event from an economic point of view, which helped me identify corruption as a universal trigger for the protests. It had several
useful facts about the problems afflicting the people at the time, including a poll for what people regarded as the most disturbing social problem in Beijing.


This secondary source outlined the studies of Gary King and provided one of his quotes emphasizing the widespread censorship instituted in China today.

Bibliography (Images)


The New York Times had an article incorporating the black and white image of the then general secretary Zhao Ziyang, making his final appearance to the protesters.


The Telegraph, a British news organization, had this picture of the crowds of protesters in Tiananmen Square in an article commemorating the event.

This is a *New York News* site that provided an iconic image of the “Tank Man,” a yet unidentified lone protester caught on tape blocking tanks on a street in Beijing.