

II. A Date to Remember: June 4th, 1989

An event that rocked China, thirteen years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, was the June 4th Tiananmen Square Pro-democracy Movement. These demonstrations culminated in a massacre of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of unarmed students, intellectuals, workers, and other civilians. Soldiers also died. Some have put the count as high as 7000. In analyzing the tragedy, the *China News Analysis* wrote, “Distress, sadness, and mourning have been the order of the day throughout China and the world for the massacre of the night of June 3 to June 4, 1989, on Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. No one will ever know how many victims died in that night or the number of secret pyres that burned the next day to dispose of the corpses!”¹

The movement was not confined to Beijing alone. There were major demonstrations in Chengdu, Shanghai and Lanzhou.

Official government accounts, however, still maintain that only about 300 people died, and of these only 23 were students; the rest were soldiers. Without stating any category or giving any specific numbers for those who died, Amnesty International estimates that of the 2,000 people still in prison for counter-revolutionary crimes in China, many were participants in the pro-democracy demonstrations ten years ago. China’s government has always insisted that its military action was justified. They maintained it was necessary for the stability of the country.¹

A chronology of events

1989

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| Mid-April | University students begin their street protests. They call for a faster pace of reform, freedom of the press, and an anti-corruption, anti-privileged government. |
| April 23 | The original demands are presented to the authorities on bent knees and to the sound of the National anthem on the afternoon of Hu Yaobang’s funeral. The <i>People’s Daily</i> (editorial April 26) chose to qualify the students’ action as “upheaval.” |
| May 13 | No response from the government. The students decide to escalate their protest. |

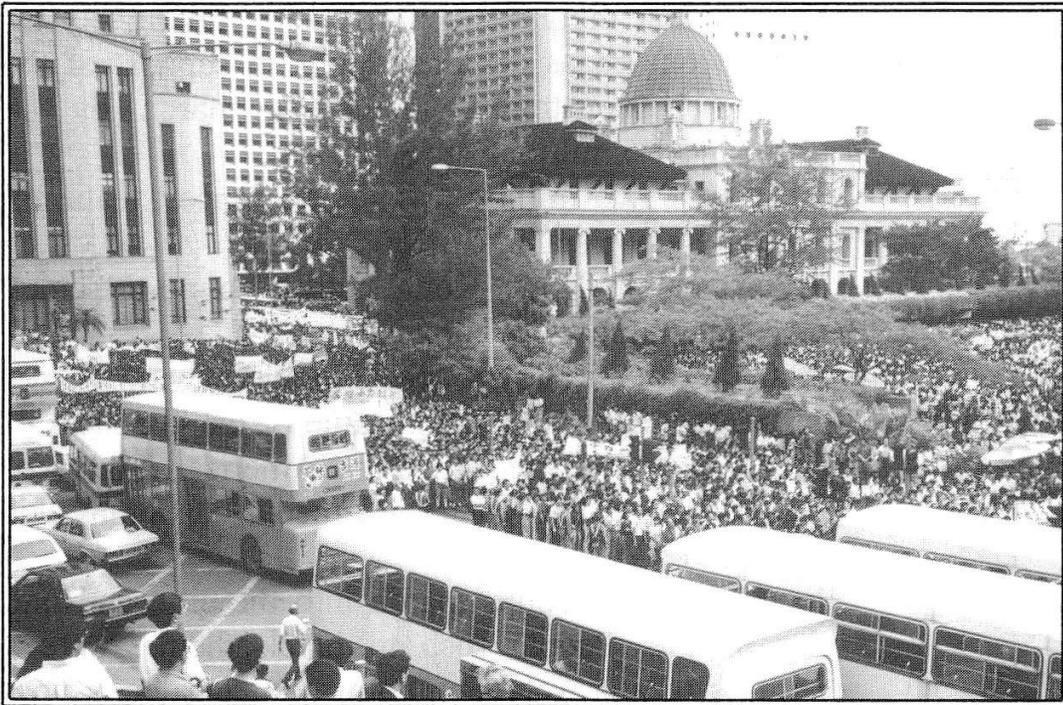
- May 15 Zhao Ziyang, recognizing the students' patriotic intent, tries to assuage them on his return from his visit to North Korea.
- May 18 Li Peng meets with the students. He enrages them by his style and his complete refusal to discuss the matter.
- May 19 The government imposes martial law in Beijing. Media workers and academics are the first to join the students. Civil servants, workers, and a vast number of the general population soon join in.
Zhao Ziyang uses the bull horn to plead with the students to leave the Square and to let him take the blame for the problems in the Party.
- May 21 Events in China awaken a sense of national identity with the Chinese in Hong Kong. One million Hong Kong people mobilize to show their solidarity.
- May 28 Hong Kong mass demonstrations in support of the Beijing demonstrators include a march by an estimated 1.5 million.
HK raises 12.5 million from a pop concert featuring Cantonese pop stars.
Protestants in Hong Kong hold a round-the-clock vigil in a number of churches.
40,000 Catholics hold a special prayer meeting.
- May 29 Students in Beijing erect a statue of the "goddess of democracy" modeled after the American Statue of Liberty. The State controlled media condemns this action.
- June 3 In the evening troops march into the city, and into the Square. People rush to block them. An eye witness recalls watching from a hotel balcony with binoculars. He sees people gunned down, knocked down by armored trucks and tanks moving at high speed.² Thousands die.
- June 9 Deng Xiaoping on television praises the military for "passing the test" of loyalty.³
- Mid-June By mid-June more than a thousand have been arrested.
- 1999 Some may still be in prison today.⁴

The 1989 democracy movement

Leaders in China had on occasions asked the people to register their opinions to the government. This had been the case with the Hundred Flowers campaign and the Democracy Wall of 1978-79. The 1989 demonstrations were different. They were not in response to the mandate of a leader, but they were rather a widespread spontaneous movement that included students, intellectuals, workers in state-owned institutions, private entrepreneurs, and ordinary civilians.⁵

Origins of the movement

Students were looking for a clear ideological direction. They looked to the Party for moral authority, but the fact that the Party had been in crisis and in a power struggle for some twenty years made *Over*



Over one million people in Hong Kong march in support of the Beijing pro democracy demonstrations.

this impossible. Yet they were not saying that the Communist system was bankrupt. They had no designs for overthrowing the system and substituting another. They were registering their dissatisfaction with the quality of the leadership and their concern that needed reforms had come to a standstill. They sought reform and not revolution.⁶

The students lacked the necessary knowledge of democratic procedure. It is not at all clear what they understood by democracy, but what is clear is that their concept of democracy was seriously flawed and fuzzy. They did not understand that there is no democracy without compromise.

They were unstable and conflicted, and seemed unable to give the government a united position. As a result, their behavior was often counter-productive. To make matters worse, in the power struggle for control within the Party, both the Li and Zhao factions were using the students for their own ends and advantage.

Lacking trust in their leaders, the students operated in a fear laden atmosphere. In the universities they were only legally able to form organizations under the sponsorship and oversight of the Party that had dominated the country for 40 years.⁷

Who is to blame for the tragedy of Tiananmen? The students certainly had their shortcomings, but it was without doubt the political atmosphere and environment in which the students had to operate that rendered the movement a failure before it even began.⁸

Like the Cultural Revolution, the Pro-Democracy Movement that began in the spring of 1989 has left wounds on the Chinese community in China and in the diaspora. These wounds are not easily healed.

Perhaps it is possible, now after ten years, to take a more objective look at this event and try to understand what this tragedy has meant for China and for the Tiananmen generation. In analyzing the situation at the five-year mark, Anthony Cheung wrote:

“There are a number of ways to look at Tiananmen. The simplest and most straightforward is to see it as a flagrant example of repression by the Communist regime of the democratic aspirations of its own people. This view sees Tiananmen as part of the on-going struggle between the forces of democracy and totalitarianism. Given this kind of diagnosis, the remedy is then quite simple. You just have to eliminate Communism and replace it with Democracy...but I tend towards a more historical perspective.”⁹

Use of force

The students certainly miscalculated what the government would do. The government miscalculated the world's reaction to their use of force. Obviously, there were dark forces at work within

the government. It is legitimate to ask why the government would use such force to crush what at the onset was a peaceful movement. Some have wondered why the government did not simply clear the Square with water and tear gas? The constitution of the People's Republic gave the leaders ample opportunity to deal with the student unrest peacefully. Clearly, the government felt threatened. They could see no option other than force. Feeling seriously threatened, the Party could only see the protests as a full-scale counter-revolutionary movement and judged it a serious challenge to absolute Party rule. With this frame of mind, no negotiation was possible. The government had no other way to deal with the situation except to crush the movement completely.



Hongkongers gather to mourn the events taking place in Ttiananmen.

“By ordering the massacre, the central leaders have transgressed two very basic values of Chinese culture. Chinese culture may not have a strong concept of the individual or of individual rights, but it does place a high value on patriotism, and the student movement was widely seen as patriotic. Secondly, the duty of the State in China's traditional political culture is to govern benevolently. This ideal of benevolent government is something that the Chinese Communist Party has capitalized on in its propaganda to

raise its prestige over the last forty years; it will no longer be able to do so.”¹⁰

Where is the June 4th generation today?

At the beginning of this article, we stated that it is highly probable that many who participated in the Tiananmen movement remain in prisons in China today. What about the others? In his article, “The ‘June 4th’ Generation Today,” Yuan Zhiming tells us that many of the participants were able to flee China. Initially, most of these went to Paris. Later they went to the United States. Others unwillingly have remained in Hong Kong. Many of those who went to the United States joined the Overseas Democratic Movement. As time passed, however, most of them redirected their efforts to follow their own personal goals. Some went on for higher education, got their degrees; others became visiting scholars and professors. Some are engaged in research and in writing. Still others have started businesses of their own. The families of many of these people have since come to the United States. Very few are still interested in the Overseas Democratic Movement.

There is an interesting phenomenon, however. A number of these people came into contact with Christianity for the first time when they arrived in the West. Since then a number have been baptized. Others not baptized call themselves cultural Christians. “These Chinese people have discovered that the values found in Western democracy, including freedom and human rights, have undeniable connections with the Christian faith.”¹¹

Ten years on, the June 4th incident can still bring crowds of 50,000 to Hong Kong’s Victoria Park to pause to remember what China could have done, and to remember those who acting in favor of their country were cut down in the prime of their lives. The world will long remember what happened on that fateful night between June 3 and 4, 1989 in China.

Many were overly optimistic before Tiananmen during the exhilarating weeks before the crackdown. They thought that democracy would come suddenly. Since the crackdown, some of us have been particularly pessimistic. Tiananmen is a part of China’s history that will always pose more questions than answers¹² People studying the history of China of this period will no doubt pause and ask, what if...?