

The New Tiananmen Papers

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Last stand: protesting in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, June 1989
Manuel Vimenet / Agence VU / Redux

On April 15, 1989, the popular Chinese leader Hu Yaobang died of a heart attack in Beijing. Two years earlier, Hu had been cashiered from his post as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party for being too liberal. Now, in the days after his death, thousands of students from Beijing campuses gathered in Tiananmen Square, in central Beijing, to demand that the party give him a proper sendoff. By honoring Hu, the students expressed their dissatisfaction with the corruption and inflation that had developed during the ten years of “reform and opening” under the country’s senior leader, Deng Xiaoping, and their disappointment with the absence of political liberalization. Over the next seven weeks, the party leaders debated among themselves how to respond to the protests, and they issued mixed signals to the public. In the meantime, the number of demonstrators increased to perhaps as many as a million, including citizens from many walks of life. The students occupying the square declared a hunger strike, their demands grew more radical, and demonstrations spread to hundreds of other cities around the country. Deng decided to declare martial law, to take effect on May 20.

But the demonstrators dug in, and Deng ordered the use of force to commence on the night of June 3. Over the next 24 hours, hundreds were killed, if not more; the precise death toll is still unknown. The violence provoked widespread revulsion throughout Chinese society and led to international condemnation, as the G-7 democracies imposed economic sanctions on China. Zhao Ziyang, the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, had advocated a conciliatory approach and had refused to accept the decision to use force. Deng ousted him from his position, and Zhao was placed under house arrest—an imprisonment that ended only when he died, in 2005.

A little over two weeks later, on June 19–21, the party’s top decision-making body, the Politburo, convened what it termed an “enlarged” meeting, one that included the regime’s most influential retired elders. The purpose of the gathering was to unify the divided party elite around Deng’s decisions to use force and to remove Zhao from office. The party’s response to the 1989 crisis has shaped the course of Chinese history for three decades, and the Politburo’s enlarged meeting shaped that response. But what was said during the meeting has never been revealed—until now.

On the 30th anniversary of the violent June 4 crackdown, New Century Press, a Hong Kong–based publisher, will publish *Zuihou de mimi: Zhonggong shisanjie sizhong quanhui “liusi” jielun wengao* (The Last Secret: The Final Documents From the June Fourth Crackdown), a group of speeches that top officials delivered at the gathering. New Century obtained the transcripts (and two sets of written remarks) from a party official who managed to make copies at the time. In 2001, this magazine published excerpts from *The Tiananmen Papers*, a series of official reports and meeting minutes that had been secretly spirited out of China and that documented the fierce debates and contentious decision-making that unfolded as the party reacted to the protests in the spring of 1989. Now, these newly leaked speeches shed light on what happened after the crackdown, making clear the lessons party leaders drew from the Tiananmen crisis: first, that the Chinese Communist Party is under permanent siege from enemies at home colluding with enemies abroad; second, that economic reform must take a back seat to ideological discipline and social control; and third, that the party will fall to its enemies if it allows itself to be internally divided.



Chinese students during a demonstration in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China, May 1989

Stringer / Reuters

The speeches offer a remarkable behind-the-scenes look at authoritarian political culture in action—and a sign of what was to come in China as, in later decades, the party resorted to ever more sophisticated and intrusive forms of control to combat the forces of liberalization. Reading the transcripts, one can see serving officials closing ranks with the elderly retired officials who still held great sway in the early post-Mao period. Those who had long feared that Deng's reforms were too liberal welcomed the crackdown, and those who had long favored liberal reforms fell into line.

The speeches also make clear how the lessons taken from Tiananmen continue to guide Chinese leadership today: one can draw a direct line connecting the ideas and sentiments expressed at the June 1989 Politburo meeting to the hard-line approach to reform and dissent that President Xi Jinping is following today. The rest of the world may be marking the 30-year anniversary of the Tiananmen crisis as a crucial episode in China's recent past. For the Chinese government, however, Tiananmen remains a frightening portent. Even though the regime has wiped the events of June 4 from the memories of most of China's people, they are still living in the aftermath.

THE PARTY LINE

Participants in the enlarged Politburo meeting were not convened to debate the wisdom of Deng's decisions. Rather, they were summoned to perform a loyalty ritual, in which each speaker affirmed his support by endorsing two documents: a speech that Deng

gave on June 9 to express gratitude to the troops who had carried out the crackdown and a report prepared by Zhao's hard-line rival, Premier Li Peng, detailing Zhao's errors in handling the crisis. (Those two documents have long been publicly available.)

It is not clear who, exactly, attended the Politburo meeting. But at least 17 people spoke, and each began his remarks with the words "I completely agree with" or "I completely support," referring to Deng's speech and Li's report. All agreed that the student demonstrations had started as a "disturbance" (often translated as "turmoil"). They agreed that only when the demonstrators resisted the entry of troops into Beijing on June 2 did the situation turn into a "counterrevolutionary riot" that had to be put down by force. Each speech added personal insights, which served to demonstrate the sincerity of the speaker's support for Deng's line. Through this ceremony of affirmation, a divided party sought to turn the page and reassert control over a sullen society.

In analyzing why a "disturbance" had occurred in the first place, and why it evolved into a riot, the speakers revealed a profound paranoia about domestic and foreign enemies. Xu Xiangqian, a retired marshal in the People's Liberation Army, stated:

The facts prove that the turmoil of the past month and more, which finally developed into a counterrevolutionary riot, was the result of the linkup of domestic and foreign counterrevolutionary forces, the result of the long-term flourishing of bourgeois liberalization. . . . Their goal was a wild plan to overturn the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, to topple the socialist People's Republic of China, and to establish a bourgeois republic that would be anticommunist, antisocialist, and in complete vassalage to the Western powers.

Peng Zhen, the former chair of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, echoed those sentiments:

For some time, an extremely small group of people who stubbornly promoted bourgeois liberalization cooperated with foreign hostile forces to call for revising our constitution, schemed to destroy [Deng's] Four Cardinal Principles [for upholding socialism and Communist Party rule] and to tear down the cornerstones of our country; they schemed to change . . . our country's basic political system and to promote in its place an American-style separation of three powers; they schemed to change our People's Republic of democratic centralism led by the working class and based on the worker-peasant alliance into a totally westernized state of capitalist dictatorship.

Others put an even finer point on this theme, evoking the early days of the Cold War to warn of American subversion. "Forty years ago, [U.S. Secretary of State John Foster] Dulles said that the hope for the restoration [of capitalism] in China rested on the third or fourth [postcommunist] generation," railed Song Renqiong, the vice chair of the party's Central Advisory Commission. "Now, the state of political ideology among a portion of the youth is worrisome. We must not let Dulles' prediction come true."

THE FALL GUY

Many speakers contended that ideological rot had set in under Hu, Zhao's predecessor. Hu had served as general secretary from 1982 to 1987, when Deng's reform policy began to introduce foreign trade and investment, private enterprise, and elements of market pricing. Along with these reforms, China had seen an influx of pro-Western ideas among journalists, writers, academics, students, the newly emerging class of private entrepreneurs, and even the general public. The conservatives who had prevailed on Deng to remove Hu from office had blamed Hu for failing to stem this trend. They had hoped that Zhao would do better. Instead, they charged, Zhao did not pay sufficient attention to ideological discipline, and the party lost control over public opinion.



Former Communist Party chief Zhao Ziyang in the garden of his home in central Beijing, China,
June 1998
Reuters File Photo

The speakers at the Politburo meeting believed that most of the people who had joined in the demonstrations were misguided but not hostile to the regime. They had been manipulated by “an extremely small number of bad people,” as one put it. Song Ping, an economic planner and Politburo member, even claimed that Zhao and his reformist allies had hatched a nefarious plot to split the party, overthrow Deng, and democratize China. Several other speakers supported this idea, without offering proof.

The speakers also railed against foreign enemies who they alleged had colluded to worsen the crisis. According to Song, “During the student movement, the United States stuck its hands in, in many ways. The Voice of America spread rumors and incitement every day, trying to make sure that China would stay in chaos.” Vice President Wang Zhen expressed a widely shared view that Washington’s interference was just the latest move in a decades-long plot to overthrow communism:

After the October Revolution [of 1917], 14 imperialist countries intervened militarily in the newborn Soviet regime, and Hitler attacked in 1941. After World War II, U.S. imperialists supported Chiang Kai-shek in the Chinese Civil War and then invaded Korea and Vietnam. Now they’d like to achieve their goal the easy way, by using “peaceful evolution”: . . . buying people with money, cultural and ideological subversion, sending spies, stealing intelligence, producing rumors, stimulating turmoil, supporting our internal hostile forces, everything short of direct invasion.

By demonizing domestic critics and exaggerating the role of foreign forces, the victorious conservatives revealed their blindness to the real problems affecting their regime. Prime among them was the alienation that the party’s atavistic methods of political control had produced in students, intellectuals, and the rising middle class. Instead, they blamed the reforms. The party’s now ascendant conservative faction had been worried about Deng’s policies all along, as Zhao recounted in his secretly composed and posthumously published memoir, *Prisoner of the State*. He had battled conservative critics throughout his tenure as premier (from 1980 to 1987), when he served as the chief implementer of Deng’s vision, and Deng had often been forced to compromise on his ambitions in order to placate hard-liners.

The conservatives who condemned Zhao at the Politburo meeting often did so by attacking policies that were actually Deng’s. Wang, for example, warned that economic reforms were leading China into a convergence with the West, but he pretended that these reform ideas were Zhao’s, not Deng’s. (He and others referred to Zhao as “comrade” because Zhao was still a party member.) Wang said:

We need to acknowledge that the reform and opening that Comrade Xiaoping talked about was different in its essence from the reform and opening that Comrade Zhao Ziyang talked about. Comrade Xiaoping’s reform and opening aimed to uphold national sovereignty and ethnic respect, uphold the socialist road, uphold the combination of planned economy and market regulation, continue to protect the creative spirit of bitter struggle and to direct investment toward basic industries and agriculture. Comrade Zhao Ziyang’s reform and opening was to take the capitalist road, increase consumption, generate waste and corruption. Comrade Zhao Ziyang was definitely not the implementer of Comrade Xiaoping’s reform-and-opening policy but the distorter and destroyer of it.

Speakers also pilloried Zhao for failing to adequately support the People’s Liberation Army, even though military affairs had been under Deng’s control. Marshal Nie Rongzhen defended the military’s centrality to the stability of the state in stark terms:

In recent years, with the relaxation of the international situation and under the influence of the bourgeois liberal thought trend, our awareness of the need for dictatorship [that is, armed force as a guarantee of regime stability] weakened, political thought work became lax, and some comrades mistakenly thought that the military was not important and lashed out at military personnel. There were some conflicts between military units and local authorities in places where they were stationed. At the same time, some of our comrades in the military were not at ease in their work and wanted to be demobilized and return home, where they thought they had better prospects. All this is extremely wrong. I think these comrades' thinking is clear now, thanks to the bloody lesson we have just had: the barrel of the gun cannot be thrown down!

Although policy disagreements among the party's leadership had paved the way for the Tiananmen crisis, the armed crackdown did nothing to set a clear path forward. Indeed, the Politburo speeches betrayed the lack of solutions that the party leadership was able to offer for China's problems, as members fell back on hollow slogans, with calls to "strengthen party spirit and wipe out factionalism" and to "unify the masses, revitalize the national spirit, and promote patriotic thought." Owing to this paucity of genuine policy thinking, the consensus that formed in the wake of Tiananmen was fragile from the start.

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A few days after the Politburo meeting, the party gathered its full 175-person Central Committee, together with alternates, members of the Central Advisory Commission, and high-ranking observers, for the Fourth Plenum of the 13th Central Committee. Zhao's successor as general secretary, Jiang Zemin, delivered a speech in which he tried to fudge the differences between Deng and the conservatives. He claimed that Deng had never wanted to loosen ideological discipline: "From 1979 to 1989, Comrade Xiaoping has repeatedly insisted on the need to expand the education and the struggle to firmly support the Four Cardinal Principles and oppose bourgeois liberalization. But these important views of Comrade Xiaoping were not thoroughly implemented." Jiang pledged to unify the party and to seek advice from "the old generation of revolutionaries."

Despite Jiang's promises, the former Politburo member Bo Yibo worried that the new leadership would continue to face opposition. "We cannot afford another occurrence" of division, he warned. "In my view, history will not allow us to go through [a leadership purge] again."

After 1989, the conservatives remained ascendant for three years, until the aging Deng made his attention-getting "trip to the South" in 1992. By visiting "special economic zones" (places where the government allowed foreign-invested, export-oriented enterprises to operate) and issuing statements such as "whoever is against reform must

leave office,” Deng forced Jiang and his colleagues to resume economic liberalization. This was Deng’s last political act. It helped usher in rapid economic growth but did nothing to revive political liberalization.

CORE BELIEFS

After coming to power in the wake of the Tiananmen crisis, Jiang spent more than a dozen years as general secretary, from 1989 to 2002. But like Zhao, he was never able to achieve complete control over the party. Indeed, none of Zhao’s successors was able to do so—until Xi. Zhao’s failure on this count was discussed at the enlarged Politburo meeting in a way that reveals why the Chinese system tends toward one-man rule, despite the costs and risks of concentrated power.

The words of President Yang Shangkun are especially interesting because he was Deng’s most trusted lieutenant and personal representative and in that capacity had participated as an observer and mediator in a series of crucial Politburo Standing Committee meetings during the Tiananmen crisis. He also served as Deng’s emissary to the military during the crackdown. Yang faulted Zhao for failing to make himself what would later be called a “core” (*hexin*) leader—that is, for failing to build a working consensus among all the other senior acting and retired leaders, even though many of them fundamentally disagreed with him. Zhao, he complained, “did not accept the opinions raised by others, nor did he perform any serious self-criticism. On the contrary, he kept the other members at a distance and did things by himself, which pushed the work of the Standing Committee into a situation where there was only a practical division of labor and not a collective leadership. This was a serious violation of the supreme organizational principle of collective leadership of the party.”

What does it mean to establish an effective collective leadership? Peng, the former chair of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, explained how it worked as an ideal:

In the party, . . . we should and must implement complete, true, high-level democracy. In discussing issues, every opinion can be voiced, whoever is correct should be obeyed, everyone is equal before the truth. It is forbidden to report only good news and not bad news, to refuse to listen to differing opinions. If a discussion does not lead to full unanimity, what to do? The minority must follow the majority. Only in this way can the Four Cardinal Principles be upheld, the entire party unified, the people unified.

But the party has seldom, if ever, achieved this ideal. Zhao, his critics agreed, never found a way to work with those who disagreed with him and instead listened to the wrong people. “He took advice only from his own familiar group of advisers,” Song Ping charged. “[We should not] lightly trust ill-considered advice to make wholesale use of Western theories put forward by people whose Marxist training is superficial, whose expertise is infirm, and who don’t have a deep understanding of China’s national conditions.”

Zhao's detractors complained that instead of trying to persuade them, Zhao would turn to Deng for support. Wan Li, chair of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, complained that at a meeting in December 1988, Zhao ignored critical comments. "Worse," Wan declared, "he went and reported to Comrade Xiaoping what [the critics] had said, and then . . . bragged about how Comrade Xiaoping supported him. Isn't this using Comrade Xiaoping to suppress democracy?"

THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD

These vivid portrayals of life at the top—rife with factionalism and backstabbing—demonstrate the dilemma created by the party's leadership doctrine. The leader must solve problems decisively while also accepting, and even inviting, criticism and dissent from a host of elders and rivals who, given the complexity of China's problems, are bound to have different ideas about what to do. Mao Zedong did not do so (he purged a long series of rivals instead), and neither did Deng, who contended with powerful equals who frequently forced him to rein in his reform ideas. Deng devised the idea of a core leader after the Tiananmen crisis to encapsulate this demand, reflecting his and other senior leaders' anxiety that an inability to work together would cripple the leading group going forward, as it had done in the recent crisis.

Although the first post-Tiananmen leader, Jiang, claimed the label of "core," he did not establish true dominance over the system, and his successor, Hu Jintao, did not even claim the label. Xi has made himself a true core and awarded himself the label in 2016, after four years in office. He achieved that position by purging all possible rivals, packing the Politburo and the Central Military Commission with people loyal to him, creating an atmosphere of fear in the party and the military with an anticorruption campaign that targeted his opponents, and moving quickly to crush any sign of dissent from lawyers, feminists, environmental campaigners, and ordinary citizens. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, the Chinese political system abhors genuine democracy and presses its leaders toward dictatorship.



At a workshop in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, China, June 2018

China Stringer Network / Reuters

Yet centralized leadership has not resolved the abiding contradiction between reform and control that generated the Tiananmen crisis 30 years ago. The more China pursues wealth and power through domestic modernization and engagement with the global economy, the more students, intellectuals, and the rising middle class become unwilling to adhere to a 1950s-style ideological conformity, and the more conservative party elites react to social change by calling for more discipline in the party and conformity in society. That tension has only worsened as Xi has raised incomes, expanded higher education, moved people to the cities, and encouraged consumption. China now has a large, prosperous middle class that is quiescent out of realistic caution but yearns for more freedom. Xi has responded by strengthening the state's grip on the Internet and other media sources, intensifying propaganda, constraining academic freedom, expanding surveillance, fiercely repressing ethnic minorities in western China, and arresting lawyers, feminists, and other activists who dare to push for the rule of law.

Marshal Nie was right when he told the post-Tiananmen Politburo meeting that “the counterrevolutionary riot has been pacified, but the thought trend of bourgeois liberalization is far from being eliminated. The battle to occupy the ideological front will remain a bitter one. We must resolve to fight a protracted battle; we must prepare for several generations to battle for several decades!” The party did indeed prepare, and the battle rages on today, with Xi counting on the power concentrated in his hands to stave off divisions within the party and opposition in society. So far, he seems to have succeeded: economic development has continued, and another episode of dissent on the scale of the Tiananmen incident seems unthinkable today.

But Xi's form of leadership creates its own dangers. Within the party, there is much private grumbling about the demand for loyalty to a vacuous ideology and what is in effect a ban on the discussion of policy. In the wider society, the intensity of control builds up psychological forces of resistance that could explode with considerable force if the regime ever falters, either in its performance or in its will to power.

What is more, Xi's placing himself in an unassailable power position, with no rivals and no limitation on his time in office—in 2018, Xi pushed through the removal of constitutional term limits on the state presidency—has created the conditions for a future succession crisis. When the question of succession arises, as it must in one form or another, according to the Chinese constitution, whoever is serving as vice president should succeed Xi as state president. But there is nothing on paper, and no informal norm or custom, that says who should succeed him as general secretary of the party or as chair of the Central Military Commission, positions that are far more powerful than that of state president. There is no evidence that Xi has designated a successor, as Mao did, and this may be because Mao's experience showed how a designated successor can become a rival waiting in the wings. On the other hand, failing to name an heir is equally problematic if one wishes to see a smooth power transition.

Had Deng sided with Zhao 30 years ago and chosen a less aggressive response to the Tiananmen demonstrations, the Chinese Communist Party might very well still be in control today, because nothing that Zhao said during the crisis, or in the several publications that reflected his views during the period of his house arrest, indicated that he wanted to open China up to multiparty political competition. Zhao claimed that the ruling party could trust the people and therefore could allow the press to report the truth (or at least more of it), could conduct dialogue with the students and other petitioners, could loosen the constraints on civil society organizations, could make the courts more independent, and could give more power to an elected legislature. He thought those changes would make the party more legitimate, not less, and would make one-party rule more stable. But China took another path. Today it has a regime that is stronger on the surface than at any time since the height of Mao's power, but also more brittle.