



# **Regime Resilience and Civil Resistance in Post-Tiananmen China**

**Yang Jianli and Han Lianchao**

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### About the Authors



**Yang Jianli** is a scholar and human rights activist, a world-renowned leader for China's democracy. Yang was born in Shandong Province, China. A rising star in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the 1980's, he quickly became disenchanted and left China to pursue a career in Mathematics at U.C. Berkeley in 1986. In 1989, he went back to Beijing in support of counterparts in China who were demonstrating for democracy in Tiananmen Square. There, he witnessed the massacre of thousands by the CCP army. He narrowly escaped capture, and returned to the United States to study democracy and continue his activism.

In 2002, after completing his Doctorate in Political Economy at Harvard (earlier he received a PH.D. in Mathematics from UC Berkeley), Yang returned to China to help the labor movement with non-violent struggle strategies. He was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison. Yang was freed in April of 2007. Immediately following his return to the U.S., he formed Initiatives for China/Citizen Power, a pro-democracy movement committed to a peaceful transition to democracy in China. Over the years, Yang has helped design, launch, and lead numerous China's major citizen initiatives. Yang is a frequent contributor to and interviewee by the international media, panelist at hearings held by U.S. Congress, European Parliament, UK Parliament and Taiwan Legislative Yuan, and speaker on various international forums.



**Han Lianchao** is a long-time pro-democracy activist. He began his advocacy in the late 1970s in China as a student leader in Hunan, and was one of the organizers of the early student protests for free elections in China. Han worked in the Chinese Foreign Ministry after graduating from law school. He later left China to study in the U.S.

After the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, Han was one of the founders and the first vice president of the Independent Federation of Chinese Students and Scholars, the largest overseas pro-democracy organization. He worked in the U.S. Senate for 12 years, serving as legislative counsel and policy director for three active U.S. Senators. Han is a registered U.S. patent attorney and specializes in intellectual property protection strategies and innovation-related issues. Han is also an expert on China's economic and political development, and currently serves as a Visiting Fellow at the Hudson Institute. Han holds graduate degrees from China Foreign Affairs University, Yale University, George Mason University and Johns Hopkins University.

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Cover Image: A sea of student protesters gathers in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, on May 4, 1989, and the #MeToo hashtag. (Source: Peter Turnley/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images; Wolfmann/Wikimedia Commons.)

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## ***Introduction***

Since the People's Republic of China's (PRC, China) expansion into the global arena, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has upheld an illusion of strength and unity; however, there exists an increasingly notable dissonance between communist values and the free and open world order. In June of 1989, such dissonance produced an internal push for democratic values that ultimately resulted in a CCP-led massacre of Chinese civilians. The following paper will analyze *how* the Chinese communist regime was able to regain power following the Tiananmen Massacre and, furthermore, *to what extent* China's civil resistance will be successful in today's Internet age. This analysis offers the following conclusion: the CCP's repressive political system and distorted economic prosperity are not sustainable, potentially offering greater opportunity for the nation's eventual transition to democracy.

## ***The Tiananmen Square Massacre and Broader Student-led Democracy Movements***

The Tiananmen Square Massacre is only one chapter of a longer story. Though under-emphasized, the majority of Chinese student demonstrations took place three years before the Massacre, beginning in late 1986 and lasting through early 1987. It was the death of Hu Yaobang (the General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1982 - 1987) that sparked the "breathtaking seven-week eruption on the world stage" in which protesters occupied the Square, held a large-scale hunger strike, and attempted to negotiate with officials.<sup>1</sup> Even before Deng Xiaoping, Hu was seen as the reformer, which made him popular among many Chinese citizens, and unpopular among hardliners in the CCP.

While the 1989 protests were triggered by the sudden death of ex-Party chief and reformer Hu Yaobang, the underlying cause was the people's discontent with China's unsuccessful decade of modernization. From 1979 onward, Deng Xiaoping had instructed the regime to allow riches to flow to a small sum of people (允许一部分人先富起来) as it opened to the outside world.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, China adopted a dual-track economic system (双轨制), in which the government introduced certain elements of capitalism by allowing private enterprise limited access to certain sectors, all while additionally maintaining a planned economy with socialist ownership. According to Deng, the planned outcome would be a firm control of key sectors within the Chinese economy.<sup>3</sup>

This dual-track system created a huge difference between the price of production materials in planned and market economies: the state-controlled (planned) prices were much lower, while the market prices were much higher. For example, in the early 1980s, the state-controlled coal price was only 20 yuan per ton, whereas, in the free market, a ton of coal could be sold for 400 yuan. Beginning in 1985, in order to provide incentives to the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to increase production, the government allowed products to be sold at market price after the planned targets had been met. Meanwhile, government agencies controlled the supply of production materials according to its plans. Conversely, if one obtained an official document of approval (批文) for low-priced production materials, he or she could then sell said materials on the market for a much larger profit. As a result, government officials and their relatives were most often those who made a profit off the dual-track system. The practice allowed for the privileged class to become rich, at the expense of the common citizenry.

In turn, these rampant, profiteering activities by the princelings and other government officials triggered high inflation for many necessity goods. The consumer price index (CPI) soared, while the net income of the working class dropped significantly. However, because of China's one-party political system, all government officials are appointed by the Chinese Communist Party through the Organization Department. Such consolidation allows the Party to preside over both the Chinese state and law apparatus; there is no accountability mechanism. Before the 1989 protests, the CCP's top leadership failed to acknowledge the people's discontent. Beijing students rose to call for anti-corruption, anti-profiteering, and anti-inflation, as well as to demand political reforms, such as the disclosure of CCP leaders' and CCP leaders' family members' annual incomes. Their calls resonated among the Chinese people, and even among many within the Communist regime who suffered through the Cultural Revolution and believed political reforms could prevent a one-man dictatorship.

It's important to note that the desire for democracy and freedom was not a narrow-minded vision upheld by several Chinese radicals; it was the common dream of the Chinese people. Even those who did not participate in the movement sympathized with the students, especially upon the outset of their hunger strike. And so, the Chinese people took to Tiananmen:

*“In the heart of the ancient nation,” these protesters set up “their own world within the world, complete with a daily newspaper, a broadcasting tent, even a 30-ft. plaster-covered statue they called the Goddess of Democracy.”<sup>4</sup>*

## *A Brief Reflection of the Tiananmen Square Massacre*

Thirty years ago, citizens around the world witnessed the largest pro-democracy movement in Chinese [PRC] history.<sup>5</sup> The demonstrations quickly gained momentum as Beijing's Tiananmen Square, alone, filled with more than one million Chinese protesters.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the growing attention was not well received by the government, and the largest pro-democracy movement became the largest contemporary, internal massacre. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989, the international community once more witnessed a climax in Chinese history as the government ordered the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to forcefully retake the Square in Beijing. They indiscriminately butchered unarmed students and citizens who had set up camp for weeks.<sup>7</sup> The CCP's violent reaction crushed the people's peaceful dream for democracy, and aggressively shut the door on reform.

The worst began on May 20<sup>th</sup>, as Beijing declared martial law. While the troops were forbidden to fire on anyone, it was, nonetheless, a threat to protesters in the Square. Eventually, the CCP grew tired of sustained resistance and became fearful of humiliation. It was at that time that the Party ordered 50 tanks and up to 10,000 soldiers to clear the Square.<sup>8</sup> Troops stormed through student barricades and indiscriminately fired at unarmed protesters; tanks ran over tents — many with people still inside them; soldiers crushed the statue of the Goddess of Democracy.

By the morning of June 5<sup>th</sup>, the PLA had gained complete control of Beijing. Though protesters were silenced, and the city was still reeling in shock, the world witnessed another act of defiance: as a column of tanks moved down Chang'an Boulevard that afternoon, one man — unarmed, in civilian attire, and carrying shopping bags — stepped in front of the tanks. Immortalized as the “Tank Man,” this unknown hero spoke in a universal language to all who watched. Since then, he has stood as a symbol of courage and defiance, and as an affirmation that any common individual still holds power.

No one knows exactly how many people died between the night of June 3<sup>rd</sup> and the morning of June 4<sup>th</sup>, but estimates run in the thousands. One widely used figure is that announced by the Red Cross Society of China early on June 4<sup>th</sup>, which estimated 2,700 dead.<sup>9</sup> In December of 2017, the British government declassified a document sent by Alan Donald (the British Ambassador in Beijing at the time) to his government. The document revealed that a member of the Chinese State Council reported the death toll had reached over 10,000.<sup>10</sup> This more accurately reflects the 2014 *Next Magazine* report on White House declassified files, which estimated that 10,454 were killed, and 40,000 were injured. According to the report, this information was based on internal Chinese

central government files that were passed to the Americans via sources in the martial law troops.<sup>11</sup>

In 2011, Wikileaks also obtained and leaked a classified cable, which claims Chinese soldiers were ordered to fire at the protesters in Tiananmen on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989. The cable, sent by the U.S. Consulate General in Shanghai, cited that a PLA soldier from the 38th Army fired into the crowd after the top ranks tricked them into believing 100 of their fellow soldiers were killed by the students. Thus, when ordered to shoot into the crowd, the soldiers used machine guns to open fire on the wall of humans that stood before them. At least one thousand dead bodies lined the streets. The soldiers then lit the dead on fire, and flew out any remains by helicopter.<sup>12</sup>

Those who survived the Massacre were silenced, imprisoned, or exiled by the government for their participation. The internal crackdown on communications regarding the event was not as sophisticated as the billion-dollar infrastructure used by the present-day CCP, but the threat of detainment or torture allowed officials to control the spread of information. Whatever small protests that followed the Tiananmen Square Massacre were easily suppressed, and, as time went on, Chinese citizens began to view the movement as a civil war, rather than as a government-sanctioned massacre. Nevertheless, this moment in history was not forgotten.



(A sea of student protesters gathers in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, on May 4, 1989. Source: Peter Turnley/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images.)

### *The Countrywide Democracy Movement: Tiananmen Extended*

Although many regard the events at Tiananmen as the “Beijing Spring,” the movement was not limited to Beijing; it was nationwide.<sup>13</sup> Away from the press-accessible Beijing, hundreds of protests sprang up in rural provinces across China in the days after Tiananmen, spurred by the same ideological battleground of Beijing.

Following the events of June 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, hundreds of thousands of people in Guangzhou, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Nanjing marched in protest against the government. In southern Hunan, high school students and factory workers took to the streets with metal washbasins, clanging pots and shouting, “there’s been a massacre!” Across the country, protesters wore black armbands, sang dirges, laid wreaths, and built coffins in remembrance of those who lost their lives in Beijing. Due to the ongoing development of China’s urban economy, many memories of the rural protests have been lost, and have been compounded with the adaptive strategies of the CCP to selectively disable communication. As a result, many activists and academics fear that the larger, nationwide democracy movements of the time will continue to be boiled down to a singular Beijing-centric protest.

From June 5<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup>, “Tiananmen-inspired, funeral-tinged” demonstrations took place in 181 cities across China.<sup>14</sup> Some were inspired by the universal values espoused by the students in Beijing, while others were triggered by distinctly local concerns.

### *Recent Accusations*

The “Tank Man” image continues to be an icon of peaceful protest, as well as a symbol of one individual’s defiance of state violence. For thirty years, there have been no reliable clues confirming the “Tank Man’s” identity or his fate. Immediately after the incident, there were unconfirmed speculations that his name was Wang Weilin, but the information could not be verified.<sup>15</sup> According to a recent July 2017 report from the Hong Kong-based newspaper *Apple Daily*, however, there is a new rumor that the “Tank Man” is alive and still in prison. The *Apple Daily* alleges that his name is Zhang Weimin, and that he was imprisoned twice after the Tiananmen Massacre.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, one must consider the similarity between the names: ‘Zhang Weimin’ and ‘Wang Weilin.’

A witness of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, Wu Haibo, stated in a recent TV interview that he saw the PLA tanks running back and forth, firing at innocent protesters who remained in the Square, while military helicopters rushed in and out to transport the victims’ bodies away from the scene. Wu took tens of thousands of photos



to record the atrocity.<sup>17</sup> Song Shuyuan, another witness of the Massacre, also mentioned in his memoirs that on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup>, he saw helicopters and large military convoys transporting—and later burying—unknown packages in the western mountains of Beijing.<sup>18</sup>

On the condition of anonymity, a former Zhongnanhai official recently revealed to Initiatives for China/Citizen Power that many protesters' bodies were hastily buried in the parks nearby Tiananmen Square during the Massacre.

To find out how many people were killed, an independent committee must be established to investigate the Massacre. The international community has an obligation to continue advocating for justice by holding the CCP regime accountable. Only the truth can give the victims' families a sense of well-deserved closure.

### ***Opportunities Lost: How Authorities Avoided Domestic Uproar and International Pressure Post-Tiananmen Square Massacre***

The regime responded to the protesters' moderate demands in Tiananmen Square with tanks and machine guns, costing China another golden opportunity to transition toward rule of law through a democratic system.

Though Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese Communist Party suppressed the pro-democracy movement, reports of its violent end spread across the world. The June 4<sup>th</sup> actions, and subsequent international condemnation, fractured the ruling powers just at the height of a consolidated Deng Xiaoping regime. An enormous socio-political shift within the Soviet Union caused the international communist front lines to crumble. Democracy advocates further gained hope for China as scholars and political experts forecasted the country would follow the fathers of Marxism, and fall like autocratic dominoes.

Thirty years later, the Chinese Communist Party has not only remained in power, but has reached unprecedented levels of global power and influence. Since the time of Deng Xiaoping, China has realized “the China Miracle” by exclusively focusing on economic reform as a means to pursue its vision of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Perhaps more surprising is the fact that aside from economic reforms, China has seen no realignment—or even softening—of its political system. Furthermore, recent events have shown that the Communist Party has become increasingly more

dictatorial internally, and has abandoned the strategy of “biding time” on the international stage; instead, China is openly, and confidently, asserting its power.<sup>19</sup>

### *Deng Xiaoping and the Party: Avoiding the Fall*

First, Deng used the regime’s authoritarian tools, including the PLA, the police, the judicial system, and the propaganda apparatus, to vehemently crackdown on dissidents and purge internal rivalry. What’s more, the regime learned from the 1989 pro-democracy movement, and from the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the USSR, to become more adaptive with diversified and modern governance means, resulting in greater control of state power. Second, Deng curtailed—at least temporarily—the princelings’ profiteering activities to quell public anger. Third, Deng re-directed China to continue the implementation of economic reforms and an accelerated-growth policy through his “Southern Tour” to reassert the regime’s legitimacy, justify the bloody massacre, and perpetuate China’s one-party rule. Fourth, trade and economic development were carried out as a matter of deliberate state policy; unlike the U.S. and the UK, the fast growth did not give rise to a politically-independent middle class, but instead allowed the existing ruling structure to absorb the most talented and ambitious members of the business elite into the Party’s own ranks. The CCP’s 16th National Congress, for example, published a new Party Charter that welcomed capitalists as Party members.<sup>20</sup> Fifth, given China’s government-market relations, the middle class owed its success to their privileged relations with the state. Such a state-dependent class would not make the bold political reforms that many world politicians and scholars had predicted.

### *A Strengthened Dictatorship Left No Political Space*

According to Deng Xiaoping, “we [the Party] must do something to be held accountable for the people.” He named two things: 1). the reorganization of CCP leadership, and 2). the establishment and promulgation of anti-corruption policies.<sup>21</sup>

Post-Tiananmen Massacre, Deng instructed the regime that “stability overrides everything.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the government focused their efforts on new strategies that would maintain the overall stability of the regime, and that would prevent the formation of any opposition. In doing so, the CCP spent a large amount of hard currency to import anti-riot technology and management techniques from the West, significantly building up armed-police capabilities, and developing the resources needed to administer propaganda. The new strategies were quickly deemed successful as citizens became coerced into submission under the new Chinese police-state.

Today, the tools of “stability maintenance” (維穩) are more adaptive and flexible, with tactics such as: "carrot-and-stick" (胡蘿蔔加大棒), "divide-and-conquer" (分而治之), "kill-the-chicken-to-scare-the-monkey" (殺雞儆猴), "nip-in-the-bud" (消滅於萌芽狀態), "settle-scores-at-an-opportune-moment" (秋後算賬), etc. The introduction of soft measures (i.e. monetary payments to resolve disputes) has proved to be most effective. In fact, even though tens of thousands of massive protests occur in China each year, they have failed to trigger nationwide social movements that could threaten the regime's security.

### *The Anti-Corruption Campaign Quells Public Anger*

After June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989, Deng Xiaoping and the CCP regime also realized that the princelings' and government officials' profiteering activities angered the people. In an attempt to counteract the people's dissatisfaction, Deng made clear to the new leaders of the regime:

*“We must do a few things in a down-to-earth manner to show that we truly oppose corruption and that we are not fake. ... We can easily rally our people with serious corruption cases but we often won't go through with them. This will make people lose heart in us and they would think we were covering up corruption. We must overcome this obstacle... and we must gain back the trust of the people. We must prosecute a dozen or so cases on corruption, embezzlement, and bribery—some at province-level, some country-level. We must do this vigorously and resolutely in accordance with the law, and publicize all cases; for all those who deserve punishment, no matter who they are, they will be punished.”<sup>23</sup>*

Based on Deng's instruction, the regime took measures in the months following the Tiananmen Massacre to target several notorious companies owned by the princelings. Additionally, the CCP continued to suppress pro-democracy protesters and launched a political campaign to purge any remaining sympathizers throughout the country. A month after the Massacre, the Chinese regime issued an order to take seven measures to address the Chinese people's concerns. The measures included: a campaign to restructure princeling-owned companies; the forbidding of high-ranking party officials' family members from participating in business dealings; and the serious investigation and prosecution of large-scale corruption, bribery, and/or speculation cases. The regime leaders' privileges were also reduced.<sup>24</sup>

On August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1989, the National Audit Administration announced regulatory violations committed by five of China's largest companies—Kanghua Development Corporation, China International Trust and Investment Corporation (CITIC), China Everbright Limited, Industrial and Commercial Development Corporation, and China Agriculture Development Trust Investment Corporation (CADTIC)—and imposed monetary penalties against them.<sup>25</sup>

One of the companies that dissolved under this clean-up campaign was Kanghua Development Corporation, headed by Deng's eldest son Deng Pufang. Deng Pufang founded the company and recruited many high-ranking party cadres and government officials to his management team—a majority of whom were princelings. Yu Zhengsheng (later a powerful Standing Committee member of the regime) administered daily affairs of the company. They used their powerful political connections, and connections with responsible ministries, to illegally obtain and sell the company's official documents of approval (批文) and permits. Within a very short period of time, the company accumulated a large amount of wealth. Many suspected serious corruption taking place within the companies run by the princelings. Indeed, the 1989 protesters demanded thorough investigations of the profiteering activities conducted by the companies owned by princelings such as Deng Pufang.

On February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1989, the State Council issued an order to officially dissolve the Kanghua Corporation.<sup>26</sup> Not long after, the Chinese government also dissolved the Industrial and Commercial Development Corporation. CADTIC—managed by Wang Qishan (current Vice President of the PRC), the son-in-law of a top Chinese economic official—was ordered to merge into China Agricultural Investment Corporation. Later in 1991, the company was put under the State Planning Commission and eventually dissolved for illegal activities in 1997.<sup>27</sup> Although these steps toward anti-corruption failed to address the root cause of the problem, they did succeed in quelling the people's anger to some degree.

### *Sustained Economic Growth Saved the Regime*

Rapid economic growth and economic policies implemented post-Tiananmen Massacre were, perhaps, the most important factors allowing the regime to avoid collapse.

Directly after the Massacre, many Western countries imposed economic sanctions against the Chinese regime. The flow of foreign investment stopped, and a multitude of nations withdrew from the country due to obvious political risks. Meanwhile, the CCP Central Committee became divided on whether they ought to

continue economic reform, or expand into the global arena. To ensure a cohesive decision, the Party's reform-minded General Secretary, Zhao Ziyang, was forced to step down from his role and placed under house arrest. Soon after, Jiang Zemin and his socialist ideologies took leadership of the Party. The new leadership became increasingly concerned with the sequential collapse of communism in the Eastern Bloc and the USSR, which followed shortly after the June 4<sup>th</sup> Massacre. The hardline ideologues in the Party blamed China's open-door policy and economic reforms, and moved to stop or even reverse Deng's economic policies. They insisted that the Party's new, main mission was to oppose the West's conspiracy to change the regime through peaceful development.

All of these factors put China into a period of economic stagnation that drained exports due to a lack of production; this in turn shrunk tourism and weakened the entire market. Deng Xiaoping realized the economic downturn could potentially threaten the regime's security and believed that sustained economic growth was the Party's last, best hope to ensure its grip on power. He began to repeatedly warn the Party about the importance of "[paying] particular attention to the issue of the economic slowdown," and, even more so, about the necessity of doubling China's economy within the next ten years. Deng stopped the internal argument regarding the nature of economic reform pertaining to 'C' (Capitalism) or 'S' (Socialism), and insisted that the only criteria for reform should be measured by its conduciveness to raise productivity, to enhance the state's comprehensive power as a socialist country, and to raise the living standards of the people.<sup>28</sup> He also repeatedly stated that "[economic] development is the last word, and we should take advantage of the favorable opportunity to focus on achieving an economic construction upswing."<sup>29</sup> To drive his point home, Deng Xiaoping embarked on a "Southern Tour" in 1992, in which he launched a media campaign proclaiming "*Whoever doesn't reform will have to step down!*" His campaign forced Party leaders to commit to his economic reform and high-growth policy.<sup>30</sup> His reasoning was simple: "failure to adhere to socialism, to develop the economy, and to improve people's livelihood, means death to us [the CCP]."<sup>31</sup>

The subsequent economic liberalization ushered in a long-lasting economic boom that accelerated China's move toward state-capitalism. The policy gave the Chinese people more economic options, and the reform dividends improved people's livelihoods. However, Deng broke his 1980 promise of "reforming the system to ensure the democratization of the political life of the party and state," and instead vowed to continue "to rely on the proletariat dictatorship to safeguard the socialist system."<sup>32</sup> In essence, Deng Xiaoping condoned the use of force to crush any political opposition, with the intention to perpetuate China's one-party rule.

In less than three decades, the global scales shifted in favor of the so-called “China Model.” As socialist economies like Venezuela and Cuba continue to falter, China has become the first outwardly Marxist-Leninist government to display long-term economic success. China achieved this by serving as the “factory of the world.” The Party’s industrial policies have posed a major challenge for global democracies, made no less difficult by the current, wavering international reputation of the United States and other Western powers. Arguably, the Tiananmen Square Massacre led to two key outcomes, ending China’s budding pro-democracy initiatives, and placing the country’s economic development on a significantly more aggressive path.

Public sentiment was so badly crushed as a result of the Tiananmen Massacre that the Party’s agenda pertaining to economic liberalization lacked even the most basic public participation or supervision. Ultimately, it devolved into a competitive wealth grab by those in power. In particular, princelings and officials became involved in unrestrained asset-stripping in the name of “economic reform,” turning what belonged to the general population into their own personal property.

Interestingly, these so-called “market economy” reforms, while morally corrupt, were a means for the rapid transformation of China into a seemingly free market economic system. However, the state essentially maintained control over the means of production and market access. Though some sectors and private entrepreneurs were allowed more market freedoms, such entrepreneurs often had to attach themselves to political connections to succeed. Therefore, the perceived rise of a Chinese middle class created from private entrepreneurship is a socialist facade that was not formed under a true free market or through a natural democratic process. In fact, most members of the middle class today are the family members, relatives, or friends of the ruling elite, at all levels of the regime’s hierarchy. Their interests are consistent with those of the ruling class, and, unsurprisingly, these citizens have no political demands for democracy.

Deng’s economic policies did, indeed, prevent an economic slowdown and ensure high growth, but it was achieved at the expense of those without a voice in politics, and resulted in severe environmental pollution. China’s industrial policies benefited from globalization. It encouraged massive amounts of international capital and technological investments, while exploiting the low wages and conditions of its workers, further tethering economic trade to other nations of influence. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Massacre, the Party encouraged the masses to forget about politics (and their own freedoms), and dedicate themselves to financial prosperity. This ensured that the worst form of capitalist excess was delivered with the most competitive punch, all while disadvantaging the lowest-wage workers.

Once more, economic reforms failed to address the system's issues, and, instead, prioritized the success of a dual-track economic system. Such neglect resulted in a revival of rampant profiteering, almost exclusively enjoyed by princelings and government officials; this triggered even broader systemic corruption than that of the pre-Tiananmen Massacre era, turning China into a totalitarian kleptocracy.

In the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown, Party officials attempted to do damage control—both domestically and internationally—by prioritizing economic development and overhauling all political reforms. Indeed, China's quick economic growth has been one of the most important factors enabling the government's maintenance of its control over the population, despite never resolving the underlying socio-political issues.

### *Domestic Political Reforms*

At the same time, political reform initiatives such as free elections at the provincial level, a division of labor between the Party and government, and the supervision of the People's Congresses, were all cut short. The regime's interference in the market intensified, which has successfully thwarted the democratic movement. The absolute power of the Party controls and manipulates the market, entangling power with money. Additionally, with a huge amount of the country's wealth being concentrated into a handful of ruling elites, the income gap has only further polarized society. And social injustice, in turn, has caused ever-increasing social conflict. The regime never overcame this internal contradiction in theory or in practice and the dilemma remains today.

Moving forward, as China continues to rise, its global economic strategy stands to distract the minds of their own populace via the promise of rapid economic gains in a pseudo-capitalist economy.

### *Lack of an International Response*

Initially, there was widespread international support for the Tiananmen Square protest, which later manifested in global condemnation of Beijing's use of lethal force to suppress the movement. The United States, along with Japan and most European countries, placed economic sanctions and an arms embargo on China. Though overtime, and in varied responses, the private sector, international institutions, and countries, eventually downgraded or ended sanctions; instead they opted to "shape" the Chinese regime through engagement, despite the atrocities it committed. The West ultimately hoped that immersing the party-state into the international community would force it to

respect international law and, eventually, to abide by it. Unfortunately, this was a miscalculation.

CCP propaganda and well-planned diplomacy allowed the Party to violate the rule of law while appearing legitimate and prosperous to large swaths of the Chinese people and international community. The failure of Western countries to press the Chinese regime after the June 4<sup>th</sup> Massacre not only helped it regain its footing, but it also expedited China's rise as a new world power. Less than three weeks after the Tiananmen Massacre, President George Bush secretly sent National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft to meet with Deng Xiaoping, to assure China's leaders that the U.S. intended to continue normal relations with their repressive regime, evading the opportunity to even provide the slightest of concessions to the protestors, or press for the Party's atonement for their murders.<sup>33</sup> At a moment when the U.S. should have stood strong against Chinese oppression, the president chose to project weakness instead.

During the 1992 U.S. presidential campaign, then-Governor Bill Clinton strongly criticized President Bush for "kowtowing" to China, echoing a common critique of the American response to the Tiananmen Massacre.<sup>34</sup> At the time, there was a vigorous debate over whether to continue linking China's Most Favored Nation (MFN) trade status with its human rights improvements. But just one year after assuming the presidency, President Clinton reversed his policy on the matter (which was widely supported by American corporations, columnists, pundits, and lawmakers), instead concluding that robust trade would inevitably result in prosperity, and that the growth of the Chinese middle class would, in turn, demand more political freedom.<sup>35</sup> As such, the Clinton Administration decided to lure China further into the orbit of a "responsible stakeholder" that would support the post-World War II international order.<sup>36</sup>

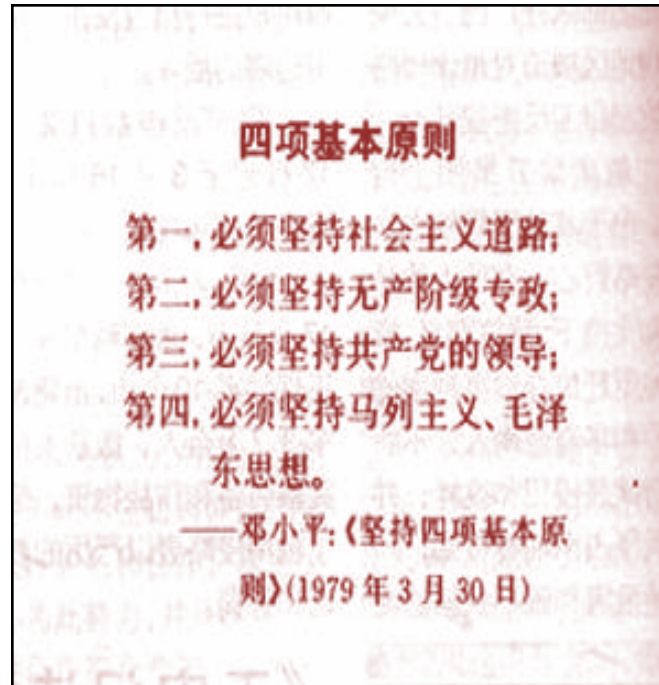
Unfortunately, even today, there are still some in the international community who believe that with further development, and with the growth of a middle class, China will gradually evolve into a liberal democracy. This long-held narrative is predicated on the assumption that China is currently moving along the right path. Conversely, China's unique mix of Western-tinged economic growth and autocratic government shows the opposite. It is important to note, though, that this is not because of choices made after the Tiananmen Massacre; it is the result of the Party's utilization of economic growth and its oppression of political and civil rights as a nationwide strategy to quell anti-CCP sentiment. As such, unfortunately, this narrative appears to persist in large swaths of Chinese society as well. According to a 2008 Pew survey, 86% of Chinese citizens reported satisfaction with the way things were going in the country, versus 48% in 2002.<sup>37</sup>



## ***The CCP's Political Evolution since the Tiananmen Protests***

After the June 4<sup>th</sup> Massacre, Deng Xiaoping designed a "two-handed strategy," under which the CCP must "do two jobs at once and attach equal importance to each in a heavy-handed manner (两手抓, 两手都要硬)." <sup>38</sup> This meant the regime must resolutely oppose Western liberalization, universal values, and democratic ideals in order to ensure the CCP holds absolute power, crushing any political opposition that dare challenge the regime, while simultaneously maintaining high economic growth. <sup>39</sup> The protests and massacre at Tiananmen Square not only shocked the world, but also shook the foundation of the Chinese regime, significantly altering the trajectory of Chinese politics. The protests could be viewed as tangible proof that the Chinese masses had the desire, the ability, and the leadership to realize democratic change. The blossoming democratic movements showed that a hidden populace, albeit educated in the age of Marxist propaganda, believed in free speech and democracy. The Massacre also confirmed fears within the Chinese regime's leadership that both domestic and foreign "threats" were capable of disturbing the stability of the Chinese Communist Party. China's democracy movement also may have successfully provoked the collapse of the USSR and the Eastern European Bloc, whose top leaders lost faith in Marxism and socialism, pushed for democratization, and allowed opportunities for the internal and external reactionary forces to undermine their repressive political systems.

In order for the CCP to eliminate internal and external threats, all generations of the regime's leadership since the Tiananmen Massacre have quickly advocated for the need to unify the Party's guiding ideology. They also dismiss all ideas of "Western" freedoms and universal values that have influenced many Chinese to demand political reforms that would aid a transition to democracy in China. The regime believes that "bourgeois liberalization (资产阶级自由主义)" stands in opposition to the "four cardinal principles (四项基本原则)" enunciated by Deng Xiaoping in 1979, the most prominent of which espouses that one must "uphold the leadership of the CCP," and negate the socialist system in favor of capitalism. <sup>40</sup> Contrary to popular belief in the West, the regime does not intend to give up one-party rule, nor will it consider a power-sharing structure while pursuing market economic liberalization.



(The “four cardinal principles” enunciated by Deng Xiaoping in 1979. *Source: People’s Daily.*)

When reflecting on the 1989 pro-democracy movement, Deng Xiaoping asserted that the biggest mistake the CCP made in the past decade was not advocating for Marxist-socialist ideology education, noting that “bourgeois liberalization” eroded the minds of young citizens. He said that “we must intensify the education of the four basic principles and the education of the basic Marxist theory, so that we can reverse the tendencies in a few years.”<sup>41</sup>

### *The CCP’s Political Campaigns*

Since 1989, the Chinese regime has constantly launched political campaigns to co-opt the Chinese people, particularly youths. When Xi Jinping took over the CCP in 2012, he believed the regime had lost control in all areas, particularly on the ideological front, and that the Party must do anything necessary to regain control. While the government was deepening economic reforms, Xi urged the CCP to take a clear-cut, resolute stand to oppose any Western ideals, such as universal values and constitutional democracy, that have consistently infiltrated China to “slander the socialist path” chosen by the Chinese people.<sup>42</sup> Under Xi’s reign, it is clear that the CCP must oppose all non-Marxist-Leninist thoughts and ideas.

Xi’s regime has created many of its own concepts and ideas, such as “socialist core values (社会主义核心价值观)” and the “China Dream (中国梦),” both of which share

the specific goal of countering democratic values and ideas, while also vigorously promoting Marxist-Leninism and socialism with Chinese characteristics.<sup>43</sup> Xi also coined the phrase, “a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind (人类命运共同体),” with the aim of expanding the regime’s political and economic model around the globe.<sup>44</sup>

In the past, the Chinese regime often took a defensive position against democratic values and ideas, but, today, Xi Jinping has launched a much more offensive war, with a grand strategy seeking to suppress any ideas that deviate from the CCP’s policies and to regain the Party’s total control through Marxist-Leninist ideology. Similar to the tactics used by Qin Shi Huang—the first emperor of a unified China in the Qin dynasty—of “burning books and burying the literati in pits,”<sup>45</sup> Xi’s recent suppression has become increasingly violent in order to keep every citizen’s ideology in line with that of the CCP. First, Xi targeted the country’s liberal-minded leaders, public intellectuals, and university professors. Later, Xi sought after human rights lawyers who were subsequently rounded up, detained, arrested, sentenced, tortured, forced to disappear, and sometimes even killed. At the same time, Xi launched a content clean-up campaign to remove and ban information the regime deems to be “harmful.”<sup>46</sup> As a result, Xi has largely silenced all dissenting voices in today’s China, and has focused his attention on economic development.

Like other CCP officials in the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown, Xi has continued to seek high economic growth policies since he took the helm of the Party. In 2013, Premier Li Keqiang stressed that China needed at least a 7.2% annual GDP increase, and revealed that the fundamental purpose of keeping this high growth is to ensure employment. According to the regime, China needs to create at least 10 million new jobs each year.<sup>47</sup> Xi also set out to build a “moderately prosperous society” (小康社会).<sup>48</sup> In his words, China has entered a new era in which the principal threat to Chinese society has evolved from unbalanced and inadequate development, and from the people’s ever-growing need for a better life. Xi’s new economic goals, announced at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, include the need to transform a “Made in China” economy to an “Invented by China” economy, and a focus on transitioning from rapid-growth development to “high-quality development” that is balanced and sustainable.<sup>49</sup>

While Xi Jinping has consolidated his political power, he has also focused on programs to improve the well being of the people. For example, Xi recently launched a “toilet revolution (厕所革命),” a nationwide campaign with heavy government subsidies, to modernize restrooms in households and in public.<sup>50</sup> On the eve of the 2018 New Year, Xi Jinping urged Chinese officials at all levels to always keep the common people’s

livelihoods in mind, and to remember that "employment is the greatest wellbeing of the people."<sup>51</sup> His "people's wellbeing (民生)" message has curried favor with the public, helped to legitimize the regime, and worked to justify his dictatorship.

However, although Xi's concern for people's livelihoods or wellbeing appears genuine, it is actually extremely deceptive; he is no more than a feudal patriarch. Under Xi's patriarchal feudalism, the Chinese Communist regime has deprived the Chinese people of their political freedoms and basic human rights. In exchange, the regime promises a decent life. If anyone opposes the regime's one-party rule, and demands civil rights, life will become miserable. State coercion, threats, and violence, as well as the weight of political, judicial, law enforcement, and even military power, will overwhelm any dissenter. In addition, by directing the people's attention toward making money, and toward seeking material comforts and sensual pleasures, the regime believes that people will be happy with its system and will put aside demands for political change. However, how has the regime managed social stability in the digital age?

### *The CCP's Internet Crackdown*

Broadly speaking, the Internet has aided in the spread of democratic ideas and universal values in China. It became China's virtual public square, and provided a platform for people to criticize CCP leaders, to question and challenge their one-party rule, and to expose corruption and social injustice. The Internet allows Chinese individuals and their communities to organize through social media and to collectively push for change. Many Chinese activists have used the Internet to mobilize people to protest against government policy or projects, and to demand political reform on many occasions.

Although the Internet was not widely available to activists during the student movement and the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, it was instrumental in connecting the Chinese protests with supporters overseas. Through the power of the Internet, global sympathizers who expressed their outrage at the human rights abuses of the authoritarian Chinese government stood in solidarity with the student protesters.<sup>52</sup> Since 1989, the use of the Internet in China has increased exponentially, partly because of China's desire to remain technologically relevant on the world stage. Microblogs have revolutionized the ways in which people express themselves online. To counter this potential threat to the CCP, China has developed the most sophisticated content-filtering Internet regime in the world.<sup>53</sup> The government's determination to find and destroy subversive online material has certainly limited the use of media as a tool for change, however, it has also encouraged people to become more creative in finding ways to exercise their freedom of expression. For example, the constant creation of new Internet

memes provides the potential for new forms of engagement and popular political protest.<sup>54</sup>

The CCP has continuously proven that it is willing to suppress freedom of speech to protect the stability of the state. While the rise of the Internet has posed a challenge to Chinese government control over information flow, the CCP has been able to maintain their promotion of the Internet alongside their critical pursuit of economic growth and modernization. To filter the Internet, the government employs two million online censors, and also uses tools such as keyword detection algorithms and real-name registration.<sup>55</sup> Users who search for sensitive material instead encounter incorrect search results, blocked searches, deleted accounts, and even police interrogation. For the first time, China's spending on public security surpassed its military budget for exterior defense in 2011 (\$95 billion versus \$92 billion).<sup>56</sup> As one of the strongest examples of censorship, the Chinese government's online policing apparatus still meticulously and forcefully bans content that relates to the Tiananmen Massacre more than a quarter century after the incident. Certainly, the term "Tiananmen Square" is censored, but they have also blocked the numbers 'six,' 'four,' and '1989,' which could reference the date of the protest—June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989. It's shocking to think that for the majority of members of "the world's largest online population, the facts about the bloody crackdown have been erased."<sup>57</sup>



(A bottle of Baijiu produced by Chinese activists to mark the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, which is forbidden in China. *Source: The Seattle Times.*)

Before Xi Jinping, previous leaders worried about the Internet's rapid free flow of information and its effects on the public's adverse opinion to one-party rule. It has been argued by government scholars that the CCP's perceived mistake of enabling the "Beijing Spring" (meaning democracy movements) to bloom without an earlier

crackdown was motivation for the CCP to take a proactive approach in the age of the Internet. However, until Xi Jinping took power, past measures to control the Internet haven't appeared to be effective.

As soon as Xi took power, he determined that the Internet imposed an imminent danger and a real threat to regime security. He claimed the Internet as the main battlefield of China's ideological struggle, given that its security relates to the regime's stability and perpetual rule.<sup>58</sup> The CCP reasons that any information could become a weapon for ideological attacks and infiltration by hostile forces, including from those outside China. Without absolute control of the Internet, dissatisfied individuals could make trouble by creating Internet-based "public opinion storms," capable of challenging the legitimacy of the regime, causing political instability, and even potentially triggering regime change.

The regime has woven a tight and massive Internet surveillance network, which includes regular police, Internet police, Internet informants, state security agents, propagandists, communication regulators, cultural affair officials, publishers, Internet providers, and other relevant personnel who monitor all Internet activities 24/7.<sup>59</sup> Such personnel oversee everything from forums, blogs, private chat rooms, personal instant messaging, email, and WeChat, to other miscellaneous Internet communication.

The millions of the regime's Internet agents will often use technology such as domain name hijacking, keyword filtering, network sniffing, gateway IP blockades, electronic data forensics collection, and many other sophisticated methods developed indigenously or imported from western companies, such as Cisco, to filter information and spy on Chinese netizens.<sup>60</sup> These agents have the power to ban and remove any content that they consider "harmful" to the regime's agenda. Any person who criticizes the regime or discusses sensitive subjects could be charged with "inciting subversion of state power," "overthrowing the socialist system," "inciting separatism and undermining national reunification," "inciting ethnic hatred" and "ethnic discrimination," "undermining national unity," "[stealing] and [revealing] state secrets," and/or "spreading cult religion and obscene information."<sup>61</sup>

It is worth noting that all of this is done under the color of the law. Since 1995, the regime has implemented about 60 laws and regulations to censor the Internet—many of which, including the most notorious Cybersecurity Law passed in 2016, were created under Xi Jinping.<sup>62</sup> For example, any slanderous message forwarded more than 500 times or read more than 5,000 times could earn convicted offenders up to three years in prison.<sup>63</sup>

Xi Jinping has ordered a continuous, mass police offensive against what it calls "malicious rumor-mongering" online as part of a sweeping crackdown aimed at suppressing dissent.<sup>64</sup> Following the offensive, police forces across the country detained and arrested hundreds of microblog users, particularly the Internet's "Big Vs," who are the most influential and outspoken commentators on China's social media platforms, who read, discuss, and spread their writings and opinions to millions of fans and followers.<sup>65</sup> These "Big Vs" were detained, prosecuted, and publicly humiliated. Tens of thousands of websites were ordered to close, and millions of pages of content were removed. For example, China's popular blogging site, Weibo, was recently ordered to close for a thorough clean-up.<sup>66</sup>

Through these harsh measures, the regime has already turned the Internet into an intranet.<sup>67</sup> Even so, the CCP still feels insecure, given that there are millions of Chinese netizens who use technology such as virtual private networks (VPNs) to circumvent China's censorship system, known as the "Great Firewall."<sup>68</sup> To seal all possible channels for the Chinese people to access the outside world and sensitive information, the regime decided that from 2018 onward, it will ban VPNs, including those used by transnational companies in China. All VPNs, if not managed by China's three government-owned telecommunication companies will be banned and blocked by the "Golden Shield."<sup>69</sup>

This is consistent with Xi's effort to rewrite the global rules on Internet freedom. Instead of Internet freedom, Xi proposes a shift to "Internet sovereignty," where countries would "independently choose their own path of cyber development," as a "model of cyber regulation" without external interference. What's puzzling is the fact that Western companies have happily complied with the Internet laws implemented by the Chinese Communist Party. For example, Apple recently removed all VPN apps in China, claiming it was only following the law. Under this pretense, Apple is now transferring all Chinese Apple customers' iCloud data to a data center in China's Guizhou province. Previously Apple banned audio and video products in Apple Stores at the request of the Chinese regime.<sup>70</sup> The regime has not only used the Internet to spy on the Chinese people, it has also reshaped it into a powerful tool, able to manipulate public opinion. It does so through newly developed big data, AI technologies, and a huge troop of the "Fifty Cent Party (五毛党)," who are paid online commentators helping the regime monitor netizens and direct opinions in favor of the regime's agenda through manipulation.<sup>71</sup>

Despite the CCP's increased crackdown on the Internet, the Party has also sought ways to utilize the Internet as a central component of social stability. The government has begun calling the Internet "a crystallization of human wisdom" in order to boost e-

commerce.<sup>72</sup> The Internet in China has now evolved into a source of conventional economic growth, as well as a platform utilized to spy and shape public opinion. Interestingly, while the regime has severely suppressed dissenting ideologies, it has opened up all areas of social life such as porn, eating and drinking, leisure activities, and other areas unrelated to politics.<sup>73</sup> This commercialization and vulgarization of the Internet has truly turned it into “spiritual opium,” making the people oblivious of their inalienable rights, freedoms, and liberties. Consequently, their enthusiasm for politics has gradually transitioned into chasing money and enjoying sensual pleasures.

In 2016, Freedom House ranked China in last place (for the second consecutive year) out of sixty-five countries that represent 88% of the world’s Internet users.<sup>74</sup> The France-based watchdog group, Reporters Without Borders, ranked China 176 out of 180 countries in its 2016 worldwide index of press freedom.<sup>75</sup> Chinese media outlets and Internet companies employ self-monitoring and self-policing tactics to ensure their content does not deviate from the Party line. Censorship guidelines and instructions to manipulate public opinion are circulated daily from the Chinese Communist Party’s propaganda department and the government’s Bureau of Internet Affairs.<sup>76</sup> Undoubtedly, the regime’s Internet censorship strategy has been, at a minimum, a temporary success.

### ***Challenges to Civil Resistance in the Post-Tiananmen Era***

The Tiananmen Massacre has hardened the regime, with its leadership opting to give up any political reforms, and instead enact more oppressive and sophisticated policies and tactics to deal with dissent. In essence, the CCP has effectively set back China’s transition to democracy for decades to come.

Following the Massacre, the political reality in which the regime was willing to use force without hesitation, to murder anyone in the way of its perpetual one-party rule, and to impede political opposition through its “stability maintenance” strategy, deterred many pro-democracy intellectuals, participants, and activists. It pushed such individuals to become cynical, pessimistic, and even fatalistic about the prospect of China’s democratization. What’s more, some now believe using mass movements to achieve democracy is undesirable, and others even endorse a totalitarian regime. Yet, on the other hand, the Massacre also forced people to rethink China’s path and strategies in achieving democratic transition, resulting in a complete acceptance of constitutional democracy and liberalism.

For example, Liu Xiaobo was the first to examine the 1989 democracy movement’s internal pitfalls. Liu published a book analyzing the movement, titled: *The*



*Monologue of a Doomsday's Survivor.*<sup>77</sup> With courage, humility, and perceptiveness, he critiqued the movement's—and his own—misjudgments and moral deficiencies, and argued that the biggest failure was in the delay of democratization.

Today, some Chinese believe an armed revolution is the only potential escape from a strengthened dictatorship that leaves no political immunity, while others insist that non-violent action is best for China. In either case, discourses on democracy, and activities in defense of democracy and human rights, have persisted in China; yet, such discussions and activities are fragmented, limited to local systems, and are often disguised.

*The Resiliency of the Chinese People: From Tiananmen to #MeToo*

Over the span of the past thirty years, civil resistance activities first emerged in the form of remembrance of the June 4<sup>th</sup> Massacre, to seek a reversal of the regime's verdict on the 1989 pro-democracy movement from "a reactionary riot" to a patriotic student movement. In 1995, on the eve of the Massacre's sixth anniversary, a group of intellectuals led by Liu Xiaobo signed an open letter urging the government to push forward with the process of democratization and the establishment of rule of law.<sup>78</sup> For those actions, the police detained Liu Xiaobo and put him under "residential surveillance" in the suburbs of Beijing. He was not released until January 1996. In fact, on every anniversary of the June 4<sup>th</sup> Massacre, small groups of people around the country have continued to join together—one way or another—to mourn the victims and demand vindication of the 1989 pro-democracy movement. Unfortunately, the police are always able to crack down on the organizers, so these activities never grow into a full-fledged social movement.

The "Tiananmen Mothers," an informal organization formed by people whose children were killed during the Massacre, have been courageously seeking global support for their campaign to end impunity and to seek accountability for the Massacre.<sup>79</sup> This group has identified over 200 victims and has been active for 29 years, despite continued harassment by the regime. However, their efforts haven't produced any concrete results.



(Tiananmen Mothers campaign. *Source: Hong Kong Free Press.*)

In contrast to activities on the mainland, tens of thousands of Hong Kong residents have been participating in annual June 4<sup>th</sup> Massacre commemorations. Each year, they vow to carry on the memory of the 1989 pro-democracy movement. In fact, in 2014, such a vow eventually led to the Umbrella Revolution. The Umbrella Revolution was a civil disobedience campaign, with a series of sit-in street protests, which lasted for nearly four months. The aim of the movement was to demand universal suffrage (as was promised in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration and in Article 45 of the 1997 Hong Kong Basic Law), and to protest against the Chinese regime's decision to deny the people of Hong Kong the right to elect their own leader.<sup>80</sup> With undertones of the Tiananmen protests, the Umbrella Revolution also ended violently.<sup>81</sup>

In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Massacre, pro-democracy activists on China's mainland realized the importance of having a political party on which a viable opposition could be built. Indeed, they tried in the late 1990s to establish their own party. In 1998, when U.S. President Bill Clinton was visiting China, Wang Youcai and two other former Tiananmen protesters attempted to register an official Democratic Party of China (DPC) with the Hangzhou Civil Public Affair Bureau in Zhejiang Province, but their application was rejected. Wang was arrested the next day and subsequently sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment.<sup>82</sup> The other two activists who tried to set up the Democratic Party of China were convicted around the same time; they were sentenced to 13 and 12 years in prison, respectively, for attempts to overthrow the Chinese Communist Party and for harming state security.<sup>83</sup> The heavy sentences served as a warning against any challenge to the regime's one-party rule. Soon after, the regime

declared the DPC an illegal organization and adjusted the law to severely punish those who dared to support it.

The Tibetan and Uyghur uprisings in 2008 also appeared to take the CCP's internal security system by surprise, but, yet again, the Party was able to successfully suppress the protests with violence;<sup>84</sup> both crackdowns left hundreds of Chinese citizens killed or injured. Protests first broke out in Tibet before China hosted its first Olympic Games. Tibetans demanded basic human rights and called for the Chinese government to let their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, return home.<sup>85</sup> The Uyghur uprising, spurred by the death of Mutallip Hajim while in police custody, quickly evolved into communal violence in Xinjiang.<sup>86</sup> The Chinese regime violently suppressed the uprising and blamed the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) for their so-called “terrorist” attacks.<sup>87</sup>

Also in 2008, activists associated with the “Charter 08” Movement joined together on the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for pro-democracy rallies.<sup>88</sup> “Charter 08,” originally a manifesto co-authored by Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, demanded constitutional democracy and political reforms to ensure human rights for the Chinese people. The Charter began with 303 signatures from prominent Chinese intellectuals and human rights activists, and later received more than 10,000 signatures. Unfortunately, even this moderate effort could not be tolerated by the regime. Following the publication of “Charter 08,” the CCP quickly arrested Liu Xiaobo, and sentenced him to 11 years imprisonment for “inciting subversion of state power.”<sup>89</sup> In 2017, Liu died of liver cancer under guard at a Chinese hospital.<sup>90</sup>

In early 2011, inspired by the Arab Spring, Chinese pro-democracy activists worked to launch extensive protests, known as the Jasmine Revolution, in over a dozen Chinese cities resulting in widespread tension among the CCP regime. In response, the authorities dispatched a mass amount of anti-riot police to the streets, ordering them to use violence against protesters and journalists in an effort to overpower them. Later, a few dozen remaining activists were arrested, and five people were charged with inciting subversion of state power.<sup>91</sup>

When Xi Jinping became General Secretary of the CCP in 2012, he started to implement a total control strategy. The strategy began with strict regulation of the Internet. Although Chinese netizens fought back to maintain a free Internet through many subtle—or not so subtle—protests against the regime’s suppression, none were successful. Today, the regime maintains very tight control over the Internet and over Chinese netizens’ free expression online.

Despite Xi Jinping's huge internal security machine, massive protests and strikes have continued throughout China since he took power in 2012. Most protests have related to environmental issues or "rights defense (维权)"<sup>92</sup> issues.

Another major political and social campaign currently taking place called the "New Citizens Movement," promotes a peaceful transition towards constitutionalism, advocates for equal education rights for migrant workers' children in large cities, and engages in citizen activism under the banner: "Freedom, Justice, and Love."<sup>93</sup> Between 2012 and 2013, citizen groups went to the streets to demand that government officials publicly disclose their assets and income. The New Citizens Movement began in 2010 and was tolerated under Hu Jintao, but a few months after Xi took power, the CCP cracked down against it. Many individuals involved with the Movement were arrested and received jail sentences.<sup>94</sup>

In 2015, Xi shifted his repressive targets to human rights lawyers, legal activists, and others. Today, attacks on such individuals often include the rounding up of several hundred people at a time. In 2016, a group of wives of some of the lawyers arrested by the CCP got together to defend their husbands' rights, which received international attention. The regime released some and tried others, but the crackdown has largely silenced China's human rights lawyers.



(People's Liberation Army veterans sit outside the provincial government office in south central China's Hubei province. Source: *Radio Free Asia*.)

One of the most significant protests took place in 2016, which included the participation of about 10,000 former PLA soldiers.<sup>95</sup> For the first time, former PLA soldiers encircled the powerful CCP Central Committee Military Commission and demanded fair pension benefits.

In 2017, few mass protests were reported because Xi tightened media and Internet control, but, still, protests indeed occurred. In early April 2017, a massive protest took place in Luzhou, Sichuan province. That protest, in particular, offered evidence that Xi's control is not as tight as it appears; public trust in the regime eroded further. During the Luzhou protest, a local teenager's death ignited uproar on Chinese social media when a video of the 14-year-old student's dead body went viral.<sup>96</sup> Rather than investigating the case and informing the public about it, the local stability sustaining apparatus (to include local police, online monitoring, etc.)<sup>97</sup> personally attacked anyone who discussed the case. People went to the streets, demanding the authorities disclose details of the case. The authorities responded by sending 2,000 police—including anti-riot police—to the village, cutting off power to the area, blocking the roads to prevent protesters from gathering, and arresting people for spreading "fake" information.<sup>98</sup> The authorities' actions confirmed to the villagers that the case was intentionally covered up, despite their claims otherwise.

In December 2017, Beijing began a 40-day operation that was called "clean up the low-end population (低端人口)," which violently removed tens of thousands of migrant workers and destroyed tens of thousands of houses, apartment buildings, factories, and warehouses under the pretext of eliminating fire hazards.<sup>99</sup> Facing this undue injustice, hundreds of migrant workers went to the streets to protest the government's brutality. Tens of thousands more supported them on Chinese social media platforms, and over 100 prominent Chinese intellectuals published an open letter online, citing the forced evictions and demolition as a serious violation of human rights.<sup>100</sup>

Within the past three decades, rights awareness and consciousness has expanded significantly among the Chinese people. Human rights activists and defenders have been trying to find a breakthrough that forces the regime to recognize and respect them. One area of focus is women's rights. In defiance of the authorities' 2015 crackdown on non-governmental organizations (NGOs), a group of feminists attempted to distribute leaflets warning of sexual harassment on public transit, but they were arrested, and authorities later closed several female legal aid-oriented NGOs.<sup>101</sup> The regime cannot tolerate any collective action in China, including that of women's rights groups, because the regime worries these actions threaten the stability and security of the CCP. The Party also believes women's rights activists are helping reactionary foreign forces to lead a smear campaign against China.

Even so, the crackdown has failed to stop women's rights activists in China. Luo Xixi, a graduate of Beihang University, was inspired by this past year's #MeToo Movement in the United States.<sup>102</sup> Luo and several other schoolmates used Chinese

social media to publicly expose their teacher, Chen Xiaowu, for sexual harassment. In the end, Chen—a prominent professor—was fired. Given China's male-dominated culture, researchers found that nearly 70% of Chinese college students have reported that they experienced sexual harassment. It is for this reason that young Chinese women quickly joined the #MeToo Movement. The Movement's sudden popularity challenged the authorities' censorship apparatus, as netizens used various Chinese ways to express "me too." Despite the regime's censorship, thousands of students and alumni from over 30 universities across the country have participated in the Movement, and demanded authorities adopt and implement anti-harassment policies.<sup>103</sup>

The significance of the Chinese #MeToo Movement lies in that it is the first nationwide, spontaneous, social media-based movement since the Tiananmen protests.<sup>104</sup> Under this new dictatorship, the rapid disappearance of the people's—already limited—political space has motivated them to find new and innovative ways to fight back. These initiatives, whether big or small, are creating a new dynamic for civic participation within the country by mobilizing and engaging civil society organizations, human rights activists, as well as individual citizens.

So far, the failure of the Chinese civil resistance post-Tiananmen largely has been a result of the power of China's Marxist-Leninist dictatorial machine, which is operated through vast totalitarian control. The CCP does not hesitate to use violence and coercion as a tool to maintain its one-party rule. Failure has also been due to fragmentation and localization of civil resistance movements, as well as a lack of broad support from a Chinese majority. Instead, activists have been coerced and deceived to believe that China—under the leadership of the CCP—is becoming more open, and that people's lives are improving despite the regime's continuous suppression of any challenge to its monopoly on power. In the post-Tiananmen years, the regime has become more resilient, adaptive, and sophisticated. The Chinese Communist Party has added nuance to its rule, such as the inclusion of discourse on democracy, rule of law, checks on the power of the Party (such as the anti-corruption campaign), and governmental administrative reforms. The CCP's discourse has shaped people's perception that China is moving toward democracy, when, in fact, it is not.

### ***Opportunity Ahead for China's Democratization***

Under Xi Jinping's rule, China's prospects for democratization have suffered extreme setbacks in the post-Tiananmen Massacre era, while every indication of freedom has declined rapidly, if not disappeared entirely. Repression under Xi is now full in scope, ruthlessly suppressing all dissenters, and almost completely terminating

the free flow of information. Xi also aggressively campaigned to convince citizens into believing the CCP genuinely enforced programs to improve common people's lives and to clean up government corruption. Today, the regime has firm control over every aspect of Chinese life, and the once-emerging civil society is now in grand retreat.

Although these measures, in essence, are similar to the classic tricks used by Deng Xiaoping and the regime after the Tiananmen Massacre, Xi has added and refined unseen nuances and intensity that have proven to be more effective. His rhetoric of “putting the power into the cage,” “developing democracy and the rule of law,” and “reforming institutions and transforming the functions of government to deepening reform in all areas,” are very deceptive, causing many to believe that China is building a democracy from the top down, leaving no need for grassroots efforts.<sup>105</sup> This misinformation, formed by Xi's so called “democracy with Chinese characteristics,” and his determination to maintain the CCP's absolute power, will remain the biggest roadblocks to China's democratization.<sup>106</sup>

However, the regime's resilience also lies in its vulnerability; signs show many positive changes taking place, reshaping Chinese politics. These changes include the people's growing awareness of their own rights and their willingness to defend them; the Party's disarray and divisions within the ruling elite; the erosion of private entrepreneurs and middle-class acquiescence; an economic slowdown that has led to diminished performance legitimacy; and Beijing's contentious rise that has driven the U.S. to adopt new foreign policies.

### *The Splitting Elites*

The ruling elite in China are beginning to split from within. Party leadership and unity have disintegrated since 2012, as shown by the purge of Bo Xilai, Ling Jihua, Zhou Yongkang, Xu Caihou, Guo Boxiong, and their cronies, most recently to include Fang Fenghui and Zhang Yang.<sup>107</sup> Today, the cracks within the Party are only widening.

Xi's anti-corruption campaign has accelerated the splitting process, given its highly selective nature that has harmed the interests of many in the Party establishment. Unlike previous power struggles, this one involves tens of billions, even trillions, of dollars in wealth and resources; it has become a fight of life-and-death. Rumors say that Xi himself has narrowly escaped a few assassinations. Not only is it unfair that no princelings have been targeted, even though they are generally the most corrupt of them all, the process is not law-based, and, instead, is tied to the Party leaders' political objectives. Even worse, torture is often used to coerce confession without due process. Most importantly, the anti-corruption campaign fails to address the root causes of

corruption itself: a dual-track economic system, the absolute power of the Party, the lack of a free press to expose corruption, and the lack of an independent judicial system to try corruption cases.

Given all these fissions, discussion among some Chinese elites is underway surrounding a potential reconsideration of constitutional democracy and rule of law to ensure safety. Without political reform, corruption will flourish once again after the initial shocks of Xi's crackdown subside.

As long as Xi continues his selective anti-corruption campaign, he won't be able to maintain Party unity; that, coupled with the ever-widening cracks among the party-state ruling elite, indicates democracy will have a better opportunity to emerge in China in the future.

### *Economic Slowdown: Performance Legitimacy is a Dead End*

It is no longer sustainable for the CCP to use economic performance as a method to increase the regime's legitimacy. Since 2011, China has experienced a drop in economic growth under Quanguai (权贵) capitalism.<sup>108</sup> Unemployment has increased as tens of millions of high school students, college graduates, and migrant workers struggle to find jobs, and young people cannot afford to buy houses, or even get married.

As people's lives improve, their expectations also increase. The regime believes that it would be safe to ensure a 7.2% growth rate and keep unemployment down to 4%, but this is based on the assumption that the regime can create new jobs for 10 million college graduates every year. Unfortunately, birth rate data and elementary school student enrollment data in the past 15 years show that China has more than 20 million people that will soon be eager to enter the job market. Elementary school student enrollment is kept at a constant 17 million annually. To this end, China needs at least a 15% growth rate to maintain a low national poverty level.

The Chinese economy is facing severe stagnation. The regime's solution is to transform the economy from high-growth to high-quality development, and from the world's factory to the world's innovation center; but the key elements for innovation include a more relaxed political and regulatory environment, an education system that encourages independent and critical thinking, a system that allows innovators to question and challenge the established norms, and a legal framework for intellectual property (IP) that protects the interests of the innovators. China has none of these. On the contrary, China's totalitarianism and state-imposed ignorance cannot stimulate



sustained innovation. Given this, the regime's effort to implement a true economic transformation is doomed to fail.

In addition, China's economic "miracle" has largely been based on massive real estate development and currency supply manipulation.<sup>109</sup> Through land development and redevelopment, a real estate boom has lasted for more than a decade, but expert consensus reveals this has produced a big bubble that could burst at any moment. The real estate economy is not only a hotbed for corruption, but it has also hijacked China's economic growth, local government finance, and even their statewide financial system.

To support high economic growth, the regime has manipulated China's currency for years, which, in effect, has allowed it to steal from its citizens. In 2007, China's money supply (M2) was 40.34 trillion RMB and its M2 to GDP ratio was about 1.14 to 1.<sup>110</sup> However, by the end of 2017, China's M2 reached 167.68 trillion RMB, a net increase of more than 127 trillion RMB from the 2007 level. In roughly the same period of time, the U.S. M2 net supply increased only about \$6.4 trillion.<sup>111</sup> Unlike in the United States, China's M2 to GDP ratio doubled by the end of 2017.<sup>112</sup> China's leverage ratio has been accelerating too fast, reaching 247% of GDP in the macro economy, and 165% in the corporate sector by the end of 2016.<sup>113</sup>

The leverage ratio in China's shadow banking sector is even higher because financial firms and local governments constantly find ways to lend more money and mask real debt risks, such as using public-private partnership financing. Moody reports that China's shadow banking levels reached 64 trillion RMB in 2016, which is equivalent to 86.5% of China's GDP.<sup>114</sup> The debts owed by private companies, state-owned enterprises, and local governments are piling up. A number of mega companies, like HNA, are now facing the threat of bankruptcy.<sup>115</sup>

All of these risks are highly likely to pop China's housing bubble and trigger a sudden chain reaction that would lead to a full financial crisis. This would be disastrous, wiping out government services, as well as people's savings and investments; in turn, the poor economic performance would drastically reduce the regime's legitimacy. Hyperinflation, high unemployment, corruption, financial losses, and lower living standards are all situations under which people are likely to demand political reform, which could lead to a democratic transition.

### *Future Prospects for Democratization*

China's "stability sustaining system"<sup>116</sup> has made almost every enemy possible: dissidents, independent intellectuals, land-lease peasants, victims of forced demolitions

and evictions, victims of forced abortions, veterans, migrant workers, Tibetans, Uyghurs, Mongolians, Christians, Falun Gong practitioners, students, and more.<sup>117</sup> With slower economic growth, the grievances of China's "low-income population (低端人口)"<sup>118</sup> will be laid bare, and social unrest will only mount.

Recent party and state reforms may indicate a weaker regime that has lost faith in itself; a regime that has no choice but to lean on traditional communist violence and state instruments to ensure total control over the people.<sup>119</sup> Yet, wherever there is oppression, there, too, is resistance; the greater the oppression, the stronger the resistance. Even though Xi has successfully consolidated his power and stifled outside influence, he does not feel secure; divisions within society continue to deepen, all while socioeconomic tension increases to dangerous levels. It begs the question: what random event could potentially cause a snowball effect, triggering the regime's collapse?

The Chinese people's daily revolts against the regime demonstrate that the Chinese populace is now aware of their political and civil rights, and are willing to take action to defend them, despite the vast repressive state apparatus. So far, all forms of civil resistance have failed to mobilize into a nationwide social movement. Although fragmented and decentralized, the hope of democratization in mainland China can be seen through these constant, incremental, and spontaneous actions that show people have awakened; the people are ready to claim and defend their rights.

All these conditions may serve as the driving force that will cripple China's party-state apparatus. With each day, the prospect of China's democratization is, thus, growing stronger.

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