

5 Demands and Responses

After Deng Xiaoping forced Hu Yaobang to resign as general secretary in January 1987, the number of things that made people angry in China, including corruption, inflation, and repression, increased and deepened. Hu himself, however, stuck around as a quiet, diminished member of the Politburo. His continued presence in the Party's top body may have given hope to people that Hu's brand of relatively tolerant politics might make a comeback. When a democracy activist from Anhui Province visited Shen Tong at Peking University in early 1989, the man asked, "Who do we put forward to take over from Deng Xiaoping if we succeed in getting rid of him?" The activist then named Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang as possible candidates. Shen recalled, "We all agreed that Hu Yaobang was probably the better of the two."¹

It was not to be. During a Politburo meeting about education policy on April 8, 1989, Hu Yaobang felt unwell. Hu stood up, asked Zhao Ziyang to excuse him, and then collapsed. He had suffered a heart attack. Hu was rushed to the Beijing Hospital, where he seemed to be recuperating. According to his son, on the morning of April 15, after drinking watermelon juice and eating breakfast, his heart rate began fluctuating wildly. Hu died a few moments later.²

Students, intellectuals, workers, and top Communist Party leaders reacted in different ways to Hu's death. As soon as news spread of Hu's death on April 15, students put pen to paper. At Peking University, Shen Tong and his friends draped a banner outside their dormitory window reading "Yaobang is gone. We mourn." Later that

¹ Shen Tong, *Almost a Revolution*, 159–60.

² Wu Renhua, 六四事件全程實錄 (The full record of the Tiananmen movement) (hereafter abbreviated as *LSQ*) (Alhambra, CA: Zhenxiang chubanshe, 2014), 6–7. Li Peng, who had visited Hu in the hospital on April 9, felt compelled to tell the world a different story in his memoir: Li recalled that Hu did not like following doctors' orders to constantly stay in bed. Li heard that on April 15, after a doctor refused Hu's request to get out of bed to use the toilet, Hu's attempt to evacuate his bowels while lying in bed strained his heart and killed him. *LP*, 56.

day, Shen bumped into a group of journalism students from Renmin University, telling them: "Hu Yaobang's death has the potential to start a student movement." In fact, the movement had already begun. One of the students from Renmin University told Shen that on their campus, "It's getting exciting ... Someone drew a picture of Li Peng as a pig, and it's on public display."³

Wu Renhua, a teacher at China University of Political Science and Law, was part of a memorial march of approximately five hundred people from his campus to Tiananmen Square on April 17, 1989; around four thousand Peking University students also marched to the square that day, chanting "Overthrow corrupt officials," "Long live democracy," "Long live freedom," and "Rejuvenate China."⁴ Wu Renhua told me how impressed he was that students and teachers had moved so quickly from campus to the square after Hu's death. Previous student movements had been campus-focused, but in April 1989 students were poised to move into the streets, marching between six and nine miles from universities in the northwest part of the city to Tiananmen in the heart of Beijing.

A small group of workers also gathered at Tiananmen Square on April 17, less interested in talking about Hu Yaobang than in commiserating about inflation, corruption, and workplace grievances. Workers who had a history of complaining and speaking truth to power, such as Zhao Hongliang, were some of the first to appear in the square. Han Dongfang, a twenty-five-year-old worker at a railyard in the Beijing suburbs, stood up and spoke on April 17 about how workers should be allowed to organize themselves instead of relying on the officially sanctioned All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). In 1986, Han had been disappointed when he asked his work unit's ACFTU representative for help. He told the official, "As far as I can see, the ACFTU does nothing except organize the occasional film show and hand out soap." Zhao Hongliang liked what he heard from Han Dongfang, as did construction worker Wang Dengyue, cook Xiao Delong, and boilermaker Zhao Pinlu. The men agreed to meet in the square the next day.⁵

Wang Yuan, who had graduated from Peking University and was working for Canon's Beijing office, also went to the square on April 17. Wang listened as a student spoke into a megaphone and claimed that Hu

³ Shen Tong, *Almost a Revolution*, 167–68.

⁴ LSQ, 20; He Zhizhou, 血沃中華：八九年北京學潮資料集 (China awash in blood: Collected material from the Beijing student movement of 1989) (Hong Kong: Xianggang xinyidai wenhua xiehui, 1989), 1.

⁵ Black and Munro, *Black Hands*, 153–54, 158–59; Andrew G. Walder and Gong Xiaoxia, "Workers in the Tiananmen Protests: The Politics of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 29 (January 1993): 1–2.

Yaobang had “died of anger and anxiety” after learning about education budget shortfalls at the Politburo meeting of April 8. The speech implied that public money that should have been going toward education was instead being siphoned off by corrupt officials. The student closed his speech by yelling: “Overthrow the bureaucratic profiteers! Eradicate the corrupt! Education will save the nation! Long live freedom! Long live democracy! Long live law and order!”

After the crowd shouted the slogans in a loud call-and-response, Wang Yuan got caught up in a packed crowd of people. That was when someone tried to steal her expensive Japanese camera. “I screamed ‘Help!’ and held on firmly. The man let go and disappeared,” she recalled. Ten days later, when Wang Yuan was on the campus of Peking University, she had another unpleasant experience. Two young men harassed her, grabbed her camera, and opened it up to expose the film, only giving it back after her company driver intervened.⁶ Mourning for Hu Yaobang and demanding democratic reforms did not transform the entire population of Beijing into altruistic angels. When the retired couple showed me their cherished photograph of Tiananmen Square, the woman told me how in spring 1989 she had once absentmindedly left her camera behind on her bicycle near the square. The camera was still there when she returned. Her point was that people in Beijing trusted each other so much during the democracy movement that theft dropped to zero. She cherishes the memory of a utopian moment. This differs from Wang Yuan’s darker experience, but neither story is necessarily inaccurate. A number of reports claim that Beijing was so orderly that pick-pockets quit stealing in May 1989. Wang Yuan’s assailants had not received that memo in April.

While nobody could have predicted that Hu Yaobang would die on April 15 and that mourning him would spark a democracy movement, political activists had already been busy during the first three months of 1989. Hu’s death allowed their message to reach a much larger audience. Fang Lizhi had been kicked out of the Communist Party and transferred to a new job at the Beijing Astronomical Observatory. Fang tried and failed to contain his thoughts to astrophysics. On January 6, 1989, Fang sent a letter to Deng Xiaoping. Fang wrote:

1989 is both the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC and the seventieth anniversary of the May 4th Movement.⁷ Many activities are expected

⁶ Wang, *Inconvenient Memories*, 136–37, 165–66.

⁷ The May Fourth Movement of 1919 began with student protests against the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and became a part of the broader New Culture Movement against imperialism and traditional Chinese culture. Ever since 1919, intellectuals have

to mark the two anniversaries. However, more people are concerned about the present than about recollections of the past. They are hoping that these important dates will bring new hope.

Fang proposed that Deng commemorate the special year of 1989 by pardoning all political prisoners in China.⁸ Inspired by Fang's letter, on February 16, 1989, thirty-three writers and artists issued an open letter urging amnesty for prisoners of conscience. Ten days later, a group of forty-two natural scientists and social scientists wrote a longer open letter calling for democratization, freedom of speech, releasing political prisoners, and better funding for education.

Fang eventually heard that Deng Xiaoping did read his original letter. "True to form, though, he gave no sign of having done so: no acknowledgment, no response," Fang wrote. According to Fang, the Ministry of Justice complained that "writing public letters about prisoners compromises the independence of China's judiciary." Security officials visited the signatories to issue warnings; some were put under surveillance. Fang concluded that even though "public calls for amnesty had failed in their immediate objective ... that they caused such nervousness shows that 'dissidence' had grown into an epidemic that the authorities could not easily be rid of. The regime's absolute power was declining."⁹

The writings and speeches of physicist Li Shuxian and her husband Fang Lizhi inspired Peking University undergraduates Shen Tong and Wang Dan, who had been holding separate reading and discussion groups in 1988 and early 1989. Wang Dan heard Fang Lizhi speak at a Beijing hotel in February 1989. Wang posted an open letter on campus on April 3, 1989, stating that the May Fourth Movement's "legacy of academic freedom and freedom of speech is in danger." Wang also edited an independent magazine called *New May Fourth*, to which Li Shuxian contributed a preface.¹⁰ Li had visited Shen Tong's discussion group in early March 1989. She made a big impression on the students when she described how, on February 26, police officers had blocked her, Fang Lizhi, and Perry Link from attending a Texas barbecue at the

emphasized the movement's call for democracy and science, while the Chinese Communist Party, whose founders included such important May Fourth activists as Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, eventually deployed May Fourth in the service of patriotism, instructing intellectuals to loyally serve the Party state. See Fabio Lanza, "The Legacy of May Fourth in China, a Century Later," *Made in China Journal* 4, no. 2 (April June 2019), madeinchinajournal.com/2019/05/04/the-legacy-of-may-fourth-in-china-a-century-later.

⁸ Michel Oksenberg, Lawrence R. Sullivan, and Marc Lambert, eds., *Beijing Spring, 1989: Confrontation and Conflict: The Basic Documents* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1990), 166–67.

⁹ Fang Lizhi, *The Most Wanted Man in China*, 275–76.

¹⁰ Black and Munro, *Black Hands*, 140–42.

special invitation of President George Bush, who had been in Beijing for meetings with Deng Xiaoping and Zhao Ziyang. Shen Tong recalled that “Li Shuxian’s story of how they had handled themselves when harassed by the police was worth more to us than a thousand lectures on [human] rights.”¹¹

The small groups of professors and students targeting the seventieth anniversary of the May Fourth Movement as an opportunity to petition the Communist Party for political reforms reacted quickly when they learned of Hu Yaobang’s death. They “simply moved the date up,” wrote Craig Calhoun, who was teaching in Beijing in 1989.¹² But on April 15, 1989, many people in China were not paying attention to politics and barely reacted to Hu’s death. In rural Hunan Province, Lu Decheng had no idea that the former general secretary’s death would eventually lead to Lu’s own imprisonment and exile. A former classmate of Lu’s who had become a high school teacher in 1989 led a small memorial march for Hu, but Lu Decheng did not join in, instead observing from the sidelines. Nor did Lu bother to watch Hu’s televised memorial service.¹³ Like many working-class people who would eventually get involved in the protests of 1989, Lu did not view Communist Party officials as heroes, symbols of hope, or potential allies.

Chai Ling and her husband Feng Congde saw Hu Yaobang in a positive light, but Chai and Feng did not immediately jump into action in response to Hu’s death. After completing her undergraduate studies at Peking University, Chai Ling had entered a graduate program at Beijing Normal University. April 15, 1989, was her twenty-third birthday. She worked on her application to graduate school in the United States, then ate a birthday cake that Feng brought her.¹⁴ Two days later, Feng was shocked to see posters on the Peking University campus that he interpreted as directly targeting Deng Xiaoping: “He who should die will not die, but he who shouldn’t die has left us!” “The sincere person has died but the two-faced person lives on.” It was not until three days after Hu Yaobang’s death, on April 18, that Chai and Feng first went to Tiananmen Square. They went in a support role, bringing food and water to other students who had been sitting in the square for hours.¹⁵

Earlier that morning, Wang Dan and another Peking University student, Guo Haifeng, delivered a list of seven demands to a functionary

¹¹ Shen Tong, *Almost a Revolution*, 154. ¹² Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 1.

¹³ Chong, *Egg*, 198. ¹⁴ Chai Ling, *Heart*, 82.

¹⁵ Feng Congde, 六四日記：廣場上的共和國 (June Fourth diary: Republic on the square) (Hong Kong: Zhenzhong shuju, 2009), 75, 77–78.

named Zheng Youmei in the Great Hall of the People next to the square.¹⁶ The seven demands were:

1. Fairly assess Hu Yaobang's achievements, affirm his views on freedom, democracy, and moderation.
2. Thoroughly repudiate the movements to eliminate spiritual pollution and oppose liberalization. Rehabilitate those who suffered unjustly during the movements.
3. Demand that Party-state leaders and their children reveal their property holdings to the people of the nation.
4. Allow independent newspapers; end press censorship.
5. Increase education budgets and raise intellectuals' salaries.
6. Rescind the Beijing People's Congress's unconstitutional "ten articles" restricting demonstrations.
7. Accurately report on this protest in official publications.¹⁷

Zheng Youmei, who worked for the State Council's Bureau of Letters and Visits, promised to pass the demands on to higher officials and asked the students to return to campus, but the petitioners wanted to speak directly to members of the National People's Congress Standing Committee. Zheng could not make that happen, so the sit-in lasted all day.¹⁸

Chai Ling and Feng Congde did not know about this – they only knew that their schoolmates were hungry and thirsty – but then something happened on the evening of April 18 that compelled them to join the student movement. After going to Tiananmen Square, the two joined a crowd at Xinhua Gate, the entrance to the top Communist Party leadership compound. Protesters shouting "Li Peng, come out," faced off against guards. Chai and Feng got caught up in a group fleeing police, who were beating people with clubs. "When I finally slowed down to catch my breath," Chai wrote, "I was burning with shame and rage. I had never felt so humiliated in my life, chased down the street like a dog." Chai saw this as a turning point in her life: "My wounded pride and a newfound rage dried up my sorrow. From now on, I would not run away, and neither would Feng."¹⁹ Over the next few days, reports of clashes between protesters and security forces at Xinhua Gate, some purportedly

¹⁶ *LSQ*, 26. ¹⁷ He Zhizhou, 血沃中華 (China awash in blood), 106.

¹⁸ *LSQ*, 26; Han Minzhu, ed., *Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 11–12.

¹⁹ Chai Ling, *Heart*, 87–88; Feng, 六四日記 (June Fourth diary), 84–85.

resulting in bloodied heads, had the same mobilizing effect on other students as Chai Ling's escape had on her.

Feng Congde, Wang Dan, Shen Tong, and others met at Peking University to discuss establishing an independent student organization and boycotting classes. Chai Ling did not join all the meetings or speak very often, but she recalls the crucial role she played in convincing a room full of men to stop cutting each other off and come to a decision:

As the only girl present, I was the true minority in the room. I sat on the fringe of their debates and listened ... I offered to mediate ... They all listened to what I had to say, probably because I spoke in a soft, feminine voice amid this conclave of males.²⁰

That was April 20. The events of the next two days in Beijing – deciding to boycott classes, a big march to Tiananmen Square on April 21, subverting official plans to cordon off the square for Hu Yaobang's memorial service the next day, and then a dramatic sit-in during the service itself – would convince top Communist Party leaders that they needed a plan to deal with the tens of thousands of protesters on the streets and in the square.

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Li Peng was more worried than Zhao Ziyang was. Li had returned to Beijing from an official visit to Japan on the evening of April 16. When he looked at the front page of *People's Daily* the next morning, he did not like what he saw: a prominently placed photo of a crowd at the Monument to the People's Heroes in Tiananmen Square, gazing mournfully at a memorial wreath dedicated to Hu Yaobang. In spite of Li's claims that he felt sorrow about Hu's death, he did not see *People's Daily's* coverage as evidence of shared national grief. He interpreted it as an attack on Deng Xiaoping and thought that it would "incite more students to go to Tiananmen Square, resulting in social disorder. This incident made me ponder things and raised my guard."²¹ Li viewed students' gathering at Xinhua Gate through a similarly sinister lens, writing in his diary that "thousands of people stormed Xinhua Gate in the deep of night. This is unprecedented in the history of the PRC."²²

²⁰ Chai Ling, *Heart*, 92. Lee Feigon has analyzed Chai Ling's leadership through a gender lens, writing, "At times it almost appeared she felt more secure when she could think of herself as the traditional, helpless female, although that was clearly not what she was." Lee Feigon, "Gender and the Chinese Student Movement," in *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China*, 132.

²¹ LP, 60–61. ²² LP, 63.

Zhao Ziyang, however, did not seem bothered by students' mourning or protests. When Li Peng met with Zhao on April 18 to demand a "clear attitude" toward students marching on the streets, Zhao told Li that there was no need to prevent students' spontaneous tributes to Hu Yaobang. As Li recalled in his memoir, Zhao said, "As long as the students are not beating, smashing, or looting, we should not do anything about them. This will avoid intensifying conflict."²³ On April 19, Zhao received a boost of confidence in his approach when he met with Deng Xiaoping to discuss Zhao's upcoming official visit to North Korea. In addition to talking about foreign relations, Zhao recalled that he told Deng "about the student demonstrations, and [gave] him my views on how the situation should be handled. At the time, Deng had expressed support for me."²⁴ What Zhao omitted from his account was that Deng had not only supported him but had also told him to get ready for a second term as general secretary and to prepare to take over Deng's position as chairman of the Central Military Commission.²⁵ Zhao knew that his political fortunes depended on Deng's support, but in mid-April 1989 he had no inkling that his leadership position was weakening, let alone that his political career and personal freedom would end in a few short weeks.²⁶

As students escalated their protests on April 20, 21, and 22, Zhao Ziyang stayed calm while Li Peng continued to fret. They each saw what they expected to see. Zhao saw spontaneous, patriotic, well-intentioned mourning, recalling that "overall their activities were fairly orderly and nothing excessive took place."²⁷ Li saw an unprecedented threat to the Communist Party's monopoly on power, writing in his diary that the "nature of the situation" was changing.²⁸ Neither man was wrong. Past midnight on April 21, the recently formed Peking University Student Preparatory Committee announced that a class boycott would begin at 8 a.m. that day and would continue until "fair news reporting" and "severely punishing the chief culprit" behind police brutality against students at Xinhua Gate had been achieved.²⁹ Dingxin Zhao's perceptive

²³ *LP*, 63. ²⁴ *PS*, 9.

²⁵ Bao Tong, director of the Office of Political Reform and Zhao Ziyang's political secretary, heard the details about Deng and Zhao's conversation on April 19, 1989. Dai Qing, who interviewed Bao, believes that Deng's support for Zhao remained genuine when the two met on April 19. Dai Qing, 邓小平在1989 (Deng Xiaoping in 1989) (Hong Kong: New Century, 2019), 63–64.

²⁶ On this point specifically and for more on how PRC elite politics are a "black box" for scholars and also for Chinese politicians themselves, see Frederick C. Teiwes, "The Study of Elite Political Conflict in the PRC: Politics inside the 'Black Box'," in *Handbook of the Politics of China*, ed. David S. G. Goodman (Northampton, MA: Elgar, 2015), 39.

²⁷ *PS*, 4. ²⁸ *LP*, 68. ²⁹ *LSQ*, 49.

finding that an ever-changing cast of student leaders made “spontaneous and individualistic responses to events rather than conscious decisions arrived at collectively by their organizations” can be seen in the class boycott announcement, which responded to outrage about clashes at Xinhua Gate rather than repeating the seven demands of April 18.³⁰

Even more consequential than the class boycott of April 21 was protesters’ response to the Beijing Public Security Bureau’s announcement that Tiananmen Square would be closed between 8 a.m. and noon on April 22. This edict prohibited people from gathering in the square during Hu’s memorial service. But instead of accepting that the square would be closed, approximately forty thousand students and teachers marched from campuses to the square. The front of the parade arrived at the square around 11:15 p.m.; a column extending more than four miles long then filed in, thwarting official plans to keep the square empty during Hu’s memorial.³¹ Wu Renhua, who led a contingent of around one thousand marchers from his university, told me that the evening march and overnight occupation of the square were a major turning point in the protest movement – in Wu’s words, an “unprecedented large-scale united action” coordinated by twenty universities. Wu also felt encouraged that residents along the parade’s path had come out to clap, cheer, and give drinks to marchers. Less than a week after Hu Yaobang’s death, students and teachers were forming alliances between universities and were also garnering support from Beijing residents.

At 10 a.m. on April 22, the thousands of students who had spent a cold, mostly sleepless night in the square listened to Hu’s memorial service broadcast live on loudspeakers. Wang Yuan was watching the service on television with her two Japanese coworkers. Her boss, Mr. Murata, was an avid observer of elite Chinese politics. He told Wang to listen carefully for the word “Marxist.” Wang wrote, “Communists believed that after this life, it was Karl Marx that they would meet on the other side. Therefore, it was very important for them to be called a ‘Marxist’ upon death.”³² When Wang heard Zhao Ziyang say that Hu Yaobang was a Marxist at the opening of his forty-minute eulogy, she interpreted it as a victory for activists who had been calling for a positive appraisal of Hu’s life. She did not know that Deng Xiaoping had cut the word “great” before “Marxist” from the eulogy text. According to Li Peng, Deng Xiaoping had approved praising Hu Yaobang’s overall life contributions but felt that designating Hu as a “great Marxist” was going

³⁰ Zhao, *Power of Tiananmen*, 146–47.

³¹ *LSQ*, 53–54.

³² Wang, *Inconvenient Memories*, 153.

too far.³³ At the end of the ceremony, Wang Yuan's boss asked her to time the funerary music, telling her that "the length of time indicated the importance of the deceased. The shortest the music had ever played was a mere thirty seconds. The longest was three minutes, thirty-five seconds, at Mao Zedong's memorial service ... Hu Yaobang received a minute, seventeen. Not bad."³⁴

The thousands of students in the square may have initially shared Wang Yuan's assessment that Hu Yaobang had been properly appreciated. They became restless and upset, however, when no hearse or funeral procession appeared. Students had expected to pay their final respects to Hu and assumed that his hearse would circle the perimeter of Tiananmen Square. But then they learned that the vehicle bearing Hu's body had quietly departed from the west side of the Great Hall of the People, which was not visible from the square. A group of outraged students rushed toward the hall, demanding that Li Peng come out to speak with the students. Three students knelt in front of the hall. One of them, Guo Haifeng of Peking University, lifted above his head a paper scroll on which was written a modified version of the students' seven demands, including properly appraising Hu Yaobang, press freedom, and requiring officials to publicize their incomes and property. The petition had been signed by representatives of nineteen schools. Two staff members from the memorial service organizing committee tried to convince the students to stop kneeling and to let them take the scroll, promising that they would deliver it to Li Peng, but the students refused – they wanted to personally hand it to Li.

The longer the three men knelt on the steps leading from the square to the Great Hall, the more upset the crowd got. Onlookers felt humiliated that the three students had pathetically resorted to a traditional form of supplication, like subjects begging for an emperor's favor, and were outraged that the government seemed to be ignoring them entirely. Pu Zhiqiang of the China University of Political Science and Law was so upset that he hit himself with a megaphone, bloodying his face. Wu Renhua heard bystanders saying, "Those poor students," "Why is nobody paying attention to them, they have been kneeling for such a long time," and "This shows how scared the officials are of the students." After kneeling for thirty minutes, the three supplicants retreated into the crowd of students, carrying the scroll with them.³⁵ Chai Ling recalled how emotional the moment was: "We felt betrayed. Our government officials had turned a deaf ear to us. The image of students weeping while

³³ *LP*, 71. The text of the eulogy is in *RMRB*, April 23, 1989, 1.

³⁴ Wang, *Inconvenient Memories*, 153. ³⁵ *LSQ*, 60.

our petitioners sat on their knees on the steps of the Great Hall before a silent bastion of stone became the symbol to me of our humiliation.”³⁶ The students slowly filed out of the square and resolved to continue and expand their class boycott.

Top Party leaders inside the hall were unaware of the petition or the kneeling. They were taking an elevator down from the memorial service and getting ready to leave the building. On the way out, Zhao Ziyang told his colleagues his ideas about how to handle further protests. The formal version of Zhao’s three-point plan proposed that:

1. With the memorial service now over, social activities should return to normal. Students need to be persuaded to discontinue their street demonstrations and return to their classes.
2. According to the principal goal of reducing tensions, dialogue should be conducted at multiple levels, and through various channels and formats to establish mutual understanding and to seek a variety of opinions. Whatever opinions they held, all students, teachers, and intellectuals should be allowed to express themselves freely.
3. Bloodshed must be avoided, no matter what. However, those who engaged in the five kinds of behavior – beating, smashing, looting, burning, and trespassing – should be punished according to law.³⁷

If Zhao had been aware of the dramatic events in the square and had communicated the second point promising continued dialogue and freedom of expression before, during, or immediately after the three lone students ritualistically knelt with an uplifted petition, he might have defused the emotional situation. Instead, Zhao and Li Peng had a hasty private conversation and went their separate ways. This would make the coming days and weeks more difficult for both men.

After Li Peng heard Zhao explain his three points, Li was unhappy. The points did not address his main worries. Li asked Zhao, “What if the students want Western-style freedom and democracy?” Zhao said that they could not say yes to that. Li then asked, “What about the illegal student organizations?” Zhao responded that the government could not recognize them. Li wanted to hold a Politburo Standing Committee meeting to discuss these issues, but Zhao said that meeting was unnecessary, got in his car, and took off. Why was Zhao in such a hurry? Two days later, Li Peng ended his diary entry with this nasty note: “According to reliable sources, after the memorial service ended, Zhao went to play golf in the afternoon. He sure can put his worries aside.”³⁸ Li Peng was

³⁶ Chai Ling, *Heart*, 98. ³⁷ *PS*, 5–6. ³⁸ *LP*, 72, 81.

not the only person who snarked about Zhao's passion for golf. On April 20, Han Dongfang, Zhao Hongliang, and other workers set up a meeting spot on the western edge of Tiananmen Square because students refused to let them gather in the square itself, saying that they wanted to protect the "purity" of the protest movement. The workers posted "Ten Polite Questions for the Chinese Communist Party." The second question was: "Do Mr. and Mrs. Zhao Ziyang pay the golfing fees when they play every week? Where does the money for the fee come from?"³⁹

Activist workers viewed Zhao Ziyang as one among many out-of-touch and corrupt officials. Li Peng saw Zhao's golfing as a political weakness he could exploit. Li was anxious on April 22 because Zhao Ziyang was leaving for North Korea on an official visit the next day, putting Li in charge of implementing what he saw as vague, contradictory principles that failed to address the seriousness of the situation. Li thought that illegal student organizations were asking for Western-style democracy. Craig Calhoun has observed that the emergence of new, independent student groups demanding recognition and concessions "was in fact a basic challenge, for communist China had never recognized the right of people to form independent representative organizations at will."⁴⁰ Zhao agreed with Li that the demands and their source were unacceptable, but his answer was to restore normalcy, increase dialogue, and punish looting. Even if Li had liked Zhao's plan, he was uncertain how to implement it.

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After seeing off Zhao at the train station on April 23, Li Peng met with Yang Shangkun, the eighty-two-year-old elder, to discuss his concerns. Yang suggested that Li ask Deng Xiaoping for instructions. Yang and Li agreed to go together to meet Deng, which they would eventually do in a fateful meeting on the morning of April 25. Beijing municipal Party secretary Li Ximing and Beijing mayor Chen Xitong helped Li Peng craft the message he took to China's godfather. Li Ximing and Chen Xitong were embarrassed that protesters had, with total impunity, flouted Beijing municipal regulations prohibiting unauthorized marches and had subverted city leaders' attempt to keep Tiananmen Square empty during Hu's memorial service. The capital's top officials were also upset that the day after they met on April 23 to tell university

³⁹ Han, *Cries for Democracy*, 277; Black and Munro, *Black Hands*, 161.

⁴⁰ Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 44.

administrators from sixty-seven Beijing schools to get students to stop boycotting classes, more than sixty thousand students refused to attend class.

The two city leaders complained that the growth of the student movement was making it impossible for them to do their jobs. They got the support they wanted when Li Peng convened a Politburo Standing Committee meeting on the evening of April 24. Li agreed with Chen Xitong's claim that plotters had taken advantage of Hu Yaobang's death to try to overthrow the Communist Party.⁴¹ At the meeting, Chen Xitong issued a warning that was certain to get Li Peng's attention and that would spark Deng Xiaoping into action the next day. Chen said, "This student movement is directly targeting Party Center. On the surface it seems to be targeting Premier Li Peng, but in actuality it is targeting Comrade Deng Xiaoping."⁴² The meeting ended with a decision to crack the whip against plotters and protesters and to get all officials and news agencies on the same page.

Li Peng and Yang Shangkun went to Deng Xiaoping's house the next morning – this was the meeting that Li and Yang had requested shortly after Zhao Ziyang left for North Korea. Deng's secretary had called Li Peng, telling him to come to see Deng at 10 a.m. on April 25. Li gave Deng an update about the severity of the protests and about the previous evening's decision to take a hard line against them. Li's report sounded compelling to Deng, who agreed with Beijing municipal leaders' description of the severity of the threat to Communist Party rule and to Deng's own position. Deng did not need much persuading on the question of harshly cracking down on student protests. Even though Deng had initially supported Zhao Ziyang's approach of getting back to normal, engaging in dialogue, and punishing vandals, he was inclined to accept Li Peng's portrayal of events. After Zhao found out about Deng's reaction, he was not surprised. Deng "had always tended to prefer tough measures when dealing with student demonstrations because he believed that demonstrations undermined stability." Zhao understood that Deng had sided with Li's version of events because "it coincided more closely with what he had really believed all along."⁴³

Deng instructed Li Peng what to do next while also expressing confidence that the Communist Party would emerge victorious against what he saw as a plot to spread turmoil nationwide. Deng said that the Party

⁴¹ *LSQ*, 76–78.

⁴² Zhang Wanshu, 歷史的大爆炸: "六四"事件全景實錄 (Historical explosion: Panoramic record of the "June Fourth" incident) (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu, 2009), 57.

⁴³ *PS*, 10.

should issue a strong statement addressing the “turmoil” and should use China’s legal system to stop marches and protests. Deng also wanted to build up evidence against the “behind-the-scenes backers and black hands of this turmoil, of whom Fang Lizhi and Li Shuxian are prime examples,” telling Li Peng and Yang Shangkun to “deal with them at the appropriate time.” Deng expected that a sternly worded public statement, combined with prohibiting demonstrations and arresting people, would “stop the turmoil.” Deng said, “All of the workers, farmers, and intellectuals support us. So do the officials ... We also have millions of soldiers. What are we afraid of? Of the sixty thousand students boycotting classes, quite a few have been coerced or prevented from going to class.”⁴⁴

Li Peng must have left Deng’s house with a spring in his step. He was on the same page as Deng and could now publicize Deng’s words. He authorized circulating a transcript of Deng’s remarks to officials nationwide and also had it sent to Zhao Ziyang in North Korea. When Zhao read the transcript inside the Chinese consulate in Pyongyang, he felt that he had no choice but to formally respond that he “completely agreed with Comrade Xiaoping’s decision on dealing with the current turmoil problem.” Maybe the situation had grown worse since he had left Beijing, Zhao thought, and in any case, in late April it was still unthinkable for Zhao to openly split with his boss. Zhao predicted that the student movement would ebb and that he would have to supervise another movement opposing liberalization, as he had had to do in 1987. He was wrong.

On the afternoon of April 25, Li Peng supervised the drafting of the public editorial that Deng had asked for. The editorial, titled “We Must Take a Clear-Cut Stand against Turmoil,” was broadcast on television and radio that evening and was published in newspapers nationwide the next day.

Primary Source: The April 26 Editorial (excerpt)

An extremely small number of people were not memorializing Comrade Hu Yaobang, were not promoting socialist democracy in China, and were not merely complaining about minor grievances. Instead, they were flying the false flag of democracy in order to destroy democracy and the rule of law. Their goal is to confuse people’s feelings, throw the entire country into

⁴⁴ *LP*, 86–87.

turmoil, and destroy political stability and unity. This is a premeditated conspiracy. It is turmoil. In essence, it wants to fundamentally negate the Communist Party's leadership and the socialist system.

Source: *RMRB (People's Daily)*, April 26, 1989, 1.

Reactions to the broadcast and editorial varied. Lu Decheng in Hunan read the newspaper at work, found its language and tactics typical, and shrugged, reckoning that "public opinion didn't count."⁴⁵ A good number of people in China may not have paid attention to the broadcast or the editorial, and many of those who did surely had reactions similar to Lu Decheng's, seeing the message as business as usual. This is what Deng Xiaoping, Li Peng, and even Zhao Ziyang in Pyongyang were expecting. But even if Deng had been correct that many workers and farmers were on his side, enough people in China felt so angered and insulted by the tone and contents of Deng's statement that they defied top leaders' expectations. Instead of dying down quietly, the protest movement escalated.

Peking University students, especially those who had taken part in newly formed student associations, felt targeted when they listened to the broadcast on the evening of April 25. It called the new organizations "illegal" and accused them of "seizing power" from Party-approved student groups. Chai Ling recalled that when she heard the broadcast, "Shocked disbelief, fear, and anger were the emotions coursing through my system." Then she heard her schoolmates raging against Deng by smashing glass bottles ("Xiaoping" is a homonym for "little bottle"), banging on tables, yelling, and cursing.⁴⁶ That evening, independent student organizations issued statements claiming that they did not oppose the Party. They announced a citywide march from campuses to the square in protest against the "turmoil" label.⁴⁷

Journalists in Beijing also vigorously opposed the editorial. *People's Daily* editor Lu Chaoqi said that on April 26, his colleagues unanimously agreed that the editorial was a mistake – nobody had anything good to say about it. Lu's phone was ringing nonstop; the callers were all reacting to the editorial and had two main complaints: first, they disagreed that students' marching and memorializing Hu Yaobang was "turmoil." Second, they complained that the editorial offered no solutions to the legitimate questions that protesters had raised about democracy and

⁴⁵ Chong, *Egg*, 200.

⁴⁶ Chai Ling, *Heart*, 114.

⁴⁷ *LSQ*, 88–89.

corruption.⁴⁸ At a meeting for Xinhua News Agency Party members at which someone recited Deng's remarks in their entirety, journalists stood up to take turns denouncing the document. They found it insulting to Hu Yaobang's memory, said it reminded them of the repression of the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Cultural Revolution, and complained that Li Peng and Yang Shangkun, who was not even a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, had gone behind Zhao Ziyang's back while the general secretary was out of the country.⁴⁹

Not everyone in China felt angry like Beijing journalists or indifferent like Lu Decheng in Hunan. Some people interpreted Deng's words as marching orders and tried to implement them faithfully. Beijing municipal leaders made statements warning the "chiefs" of "illegal organizations" that they would suffer "severe consequences" if they did not stop "illegal activities." The Beijing Public Security Bureau issued notices reminding the capital's residents that demonstrations that had not been preapproved were illegal and that giving speeches, collecting donations, and passing out leaflets would be punished according to the law.⁵⁰ And university administrators and teachers actually did try to "take a clear-cut stand" against protests by meeting with students on April 26 and trying to convince them not to march the following day.

In some instances, their persuasion was convincing. Örkesh Dölet, an undergraduate at Beijing Normal University better known by his Chinese name Wuerkaixi, went to Peking University on April 26, where he spoke with Shen Tong. Örkesh said that his university's administrators had promised that if he could stop students from marching the next day, "we wouldn't be punished for the organizing we've done so far," and that dialogue between students and officials would follow. Shen Tong could not commit to this, saying that Peking University students had already decided "as a compromise" to "walk part of the way to Tiananmen square and no farther, to show the government that we will cooperate but we can't be intimidated."⁵¹ Örkesh gave up on trying to persuade Shen Tong and went to Tsinghua University nearby to try to convince students there not to march.

Administrators at China University of Political Science and Law put intense pressure on Zhou Yongjun, that school's delegate to the Beijing Students' Autonomous Federation, an alliance of newly formed independent unions at each university. University officials held Zhou in a

⁴⁸ Lu Chaoqi, 六四内部日記 (Inside journal of June Fourth) (Hong Kong: Zhuoyue wenhua chubanshe, 2006), 34.

⁴⁹ Zhang Wanshu, 歷史的大爆炸 (Historical explosion), 79. ⁵⁰ LSQ, 96.

⁵¹ Shen Tong, *Almost a Revolution*, 200 1.



Figure 5.1 Student protesters in Beijing on April 27, 1989. Catherine Henriette/AFP via Getty Images.

meeting until 3 a.m. on April 27 until he agreed to sign a slip of paper cancelling the big protest march.⁵² Someone pounded on Shen Tong's door at 5 a.m. to show him the cancellation notice; Shen then took it to Feng Congde and other Peking University activists. "We all suspected that Zhou Yongjun had made it by himself, because no other signatures were on the message," Shen wrote, "and we didn't think the federation could have had a meeting in the past couple of hours. In the end we agreed to proceed as planned."⁵³

Anger overcame fear on April 27. Approximately one hundred thousand students first broke through university gates that administrators had locked and then pushed through lines of unarmed police officers who were halfheartedly blocking intersections. Once the protesters realized that they would reach the square without facing violence or arrests, the mood turned giddy, and the number of people out on the streets surged to around five hundred thousand. Not wanting to be left out, Örkesh Dölet ended up leading the Beijing Normal University marchers; Feng Congde, Wang Dan, and Shen Tong headed up the Peking University contingent, which decided to march all the way to the square instead of turning around halfway. Chai Ling described the day's "festival" as a

⁵² *LSQ*, 96.

⁵³ Shen Tong, *Almost a Revolution*, 202.

“total victory” for students and Beijing residents.⁵⁴ The April 26 editorial had not only failed to stop the student movement, it had emboldened protesters to keep demanding dialogue with the government. It offered hope that they could win recognition and respect.

Why did Deng’s harsh approach fail to scare Beijing students into meekly going back to class? Years later, Zhao Ziyang thought that by 1989 something had changed and that the “old ways of political labeling that had worked before were no longer effective.” And because almost everyone knew that the April 25 broadcast and April 26 editorial had come directly from Deng Xiaoping’s spoken remarks, which had been widely circulated, the protests of April 27 convinced Zhao “that even the symbol of the paramount leader had lost its effectiveness.” Not only had threats from the godfather become impotent, Zhao thought, but tough Beijing public security regulations had proven “as good as a piece of wastepaper” when marchers easily pushed through police blockades.⁵⁵

Outwardly, Li Peng and Deng Xiaoping expressed optimism and relief in the immediate aftermath of the April 27 demonstrations. Li wrote in his diary that the *People’s Daily* editorial had wielded great power and effectively stabilized the situation.⁵⁶ Deng’s secretary called Li to say that Deng was pleased because Party Center’s attitude had been clear and there was no bloodshed.⁵⁷ But in reality, both men were shaken by the events of April 27. Li Peng fielded phone calls from elders, including Deng Yingchao, Li Xiannian, Song Renqiong, and Wang Zhen, urging him to switch course.⁵⁸ Li Xiannian and Wang Zhen reportedly called for mass arrests. Peng Zhen made multiple calls to Party Center urging restraint and hoping that force would not be used against protesters.⁵⁹

Li Peng scrambled to try different strategies. He asked State Council spokesperson Yuan Mu to draft a less militant editorial about the importance of maintaining stability. Li also adopted Zhao Ziyang’s language about dialogue, instructing officials nationwide to prepare for meetings with student representatives at “multiple levels” and “through various channels” on April 28. But when students who had formed independent organizations and organized huge marches found out about a dialogue session on April 29 between national officials and students who had been vetted by the Party, they reacted with surprise and outrage.

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⁵⁴ Chai Ling, *Heart for Freedom*, 118.

⁵⁸ *LSQ*, 106.

⁵⁵ *PS*, 14.

⁵⁶ *LP*, 97.

⁵⁷ *LSQ*, 107.

⁵⁹ *PS*, 13.

Dingxin Zhao has argued that the dialogue of April 29 “was not as phony as many have subsequently described it to have been” and that “this was the one where students and government officials had the most substantive discussion.”⁶⁰ Zhao seems to be admitting that the event was a sham but that it contained a sliver of substance. This is an excessively low bar. The government designed and executed the meeting entirely on its own terms, holding it in the official All-China Students Federation conference room and preselecting forty-one of the forty-five students who attended. When Örkeshe Dölet of Beijing Normal University showed up at the door and identified himself as a representative of the independent BSAF, he was not allowed to enter.⁶¹ According to Li Peng himself, during Zhao Ziyang’s absence Li set up the dialogue as a “struggle” to be won, not as a solution, conversation, or negotiation. “The PSC was very clear,” Li recalled, “dialogue is a struggle, we cannot place hopes of curbing the turmoil on dialogue. Both sides are using dialogue to try to win over undecided people.”⁶²

By that measure, the selectively edited television broadcast of the dialogue was a victory for Li Peng and Yuan Mu, who chaired the meeting. Yuan was a good talker. He began his long-winded opening speech by saying that “Comrade Li Peng” wanted to clarify that when the April 26 editorial referred to people opposing the Communist Party and opposing socialism, it was not targeting patriotic students but rather a tiny number of lawbreakers. Li had instructed Yuan to say exactly this, and Yuan was careful to give Li credit. Li was happy: “This differentiated the majority of students from a small number of bad people.”⁶³ Li was even happier that most student questions allowed Yuan Mu to speak at length about how the Party was truly committed to eradicating corruption. The format, like a press conference rather than a conversation, played right into Yuan’s hands.

Xinhua editor Zhang Wanshu was horrified by stilted exchanges that attacked Zhao Ziyang while allowing Yuan to praise Li Peng.⁶⁴ Zhang Wanshu was convinced that the following exchange was preplanned and that the questioner had been planted by the government:

STUDENT: I am Chang Weijun of the Institute of Civil Engineering and Architecture.

I want to ask Comrade Yuan Mu a question. Austere times require an air of austerity. We must share joys and hardships together. But bringing one’s wife to play golf every week is too far removed from our nation’s economic level and from the spirit of overcoming difficulties together (applause). Here

⁶⁰ Zhao, *Power of Tiananmen*, 157.

⁶¹ Feng Congde, 六四日記 (June Fourth diary), 240. ⁶² LP, 100 1. ⁶³ LP, 104.

⁶⁴ Zhang Wanshu, 歷史的大爆炸 (Historical explosion), 90 92.

I have a magazine, it's issue number 2 of this year's *Guide to Health*. On page 48 there is an article and a color photo featuring golfing (while speaking, he holds up a photo of Zhao Ziyang playing golf).

YUAN MU: He plays once a week?

STUDENT: Yes, you are correct, he practices once a week.

YUAN MU: I will pass along this opinion to the leading comrade this student is referring to. It is true that golf is seldom played in China. Do you students think that occasionally playing golf for the sake of international networking is permissible, or is that too much? I'm not clear on the facts of whether he is really golfing every week. If it is true I will pass this along to him. This is one thing. On a related point, I want to tell you that Party Center has considered the masses' complaints, and Comrade Li Peng also spoke about this in his report at the Second Session of the Seventh National People's Congress, saying that each level of government needs to take the lead in austerity to fully gain the masses' sympathy. I fully support this.⁶⁵

Yuan concluded by stating that China would stop importing luxury cars for top leaders' use, garnering a round of applause from the audience. The thousands of students who had marched on April 27 were furious that nobody had mentioned their seven demands and that the independent student associations had been barred from the room. Millions of television viewers throughout China, however, who were totally unaware of the existence of newly formed student organizations or their demands, saw a mature government spokesperson authoritatively handling naive questions from stammering youngsters.

Yuan Mu deftly parried the few punches students were able to swing. Xiang Xiaoji of China University of Political Science and Law questioned the legitimacy of the dialogue meeting, stating that the student representatives present had not been properly elected; that the students had not had a fair opportunity to propose the timing, location, and topics of dialogue; and that they would not consider returning to classes until genuine dialogue started. Yuan Mu managed to evade Xiang Xiaoji's points while appearing magnanimous, stating that he welcomed all types of dialogue big or small, that student-proposed preconditions were unnecessary obstacles to productive conversations, and that holding elections for student representatives would be so difficult that it might make dialogue impossible.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ 火與血之真相: 中國大陸民主運動紀實, 1989 (The truth of fire and blood: A documentary on the pro democracy movement in mainland China in 1989) (Taipei: Institute for the Study of Chinese Communist Problems, 1989), 4.115 16.

⁶⁶ 火與血之真相 (The truth of fire and blood), 4.113 14.

In the days after the sham dialogue, students' class boycott continued and Xiang Xiaoji worked together with Shen Tong to organize a democratically elected student dialogue delegation. But on April 30, as Li Peng headed to the train station to welcome Zhao Ziyang home from North Korea, he must have been pleased that the humiliation of April 27 had been followed by a victory on April 29. Zhao had an inkling of the storm he was heading into. In addition to reading Deng Xiaoping's comments about turmoil from Pyongyang, Zhao heard from officials in northeast China on his way home. They told him that "many people were critical of Deng after hearing his remarks." Years later, thinking back on the moment when he arrived in Beijing on April 30, Zhao said that the "situation had grown perilous" and that "large-scale bloodshed had become all too possible."⁶⁷ Zhao, Li, many students, and plenty of other people in Beijing were reacting to each other's choices in ways that backed them into corners. But large-scale bloodshed was more than a month away, and while it was always a possibility, it was never inevitable.

⁶⁷ *PS*, 14.

6 Backed into Corners

During the first eleven days of May, students held big, festive marches on May 1 to celebrate Labor Day and on May 4 to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the May Fourth Movement. Hundreds of journalists from *People's Daily*, Xinhua, and other news organizations also marched on May 4, calling for an end to censorship and demanding to report the truth – a sign that the protest movement had expanded to include professionals as well as students.¹ The marches were fun and continued to attract support from Beijing residents, but many participants realized that they were not accomplishing much. Many students who had been boycotting classes began to resume their studies. Every few days, student leaders, including Wang Dan, Xiang Xiaoji, and Wang Chaohua, a graduate student in literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, presented slightly different petitions to Party and government offices, demanding genuine dialogue on the students' own terms. Each time they were rebuffed, including on May 3, when Yuan Mu said that one petition's threatening tone and unreasonable preconditions were actually provoking turmoil.²

Undeterred, the independent dialogue delegation led by Xiang Xiaoji and Shen Tong continued meeting, hoping that by practicing internal democracy and repeatedly asking the government to meet they would be seen as reasonable interlocutors rather than as rabble-rousers. Shen Tong explained the dialogue delegation's long-term goals to reporters on May 11:

We see the movement in three stages. The first is to gain attention so that the people of China understand our concerns. The second is to make our campuses democratic castles and strengthen our own commitment to democratic reform, while giving students in other cities and those in other sectors of society workers, peasants, and journalists the time to gain their own political awareness. And third, after this has been achieved, we will probably hold a

¹ *LSQ*, 151–52. ² *LSQ*, 145.

nationwide prodemocracy movement in the fall, to educate people as to what democratic reform is all about.³

Shen Tong and other dialogue delegation members' long game took pains to sound reasonable and even adopted official language about democratic reform. Elizabeth J. Perry has critiqued students "undemocratic style," arguing that, fettered by tradition, they "engaged in an exclusionist style of protest that served to reinforce pre-existing authority relations."⁴ Perry's point is perceptive and accurate, but students themselves, including Shen Tong and Wang Chaohua, were aware of this problem and tried to overcome it. Given enough time and space, they could have continued to learn and adjust. But many other students were thinking about the next few days, not the next few months.

Deng Xiaoping was also deeply preoccupied with more immediate concerns, specifically the upcoming visit of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who was scheduled to arrive in Beijing on May 15, to normalize diplomatic relations between China and the Soviet Union after decades of tension. Appearing at Hu Yaobang's memorial service had taken its toll on Deng Xiaoping. He felt sick and tired. His number one priority was to rest and recuperate so that he could meet with Gorbachev; he avoided public appearances and even private meetings.⁵ Deng's inaccessibility in early May meant that tension between Zhao Ziyang and Li Peng escalated as the two men had to operate with no guidance from above. Deng's absence also caused a diplomatic snafu when Iranian president Ali Khamenei cut off talks with Li Peng on May 9, 1989, because Deng Xiaoping was nowhere to be seen. The Iranian leader knew as well as anyone else that Deng was China's top leader and was scheduled to meet with Gorbachev a few days later; Khamenei demanded the same courtesy. After a series of frantic phone calls, Li promised Khamenei that Deng had agreed to meet. Deng finally emerged from seclusion to spend thirty minutes with Khamenei on May 11.⁶

After returning from North Korea on April 30, Zhao Ziyang was unable to directly contact Deng Xiaoping about how to handle the student movement. When Zhao called Deng's secretary Wang Ruilin to ask for a meeting, the secretary said that Deng was too sick. Zhao then tried to get in touch through intermediaries. The message he received on

³ Shen Tong, *Almost a Revolution*, 234.

⁴ Elizabeth J. Perry, "Casting a Chinese 'Democracy' Movement," in *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China*, 88; Perry, "Introduction: Chinese Political Culture Revisited," 7.

⁵ Dai Qing, 邓小平在1989 (Deng Xiaoping in 1989), 84, 89. ⁶ *LP*, 136, 142.

May 2 from Yang Shangkun, who had spoken with Deng's children and with Wang Ruilin, was that it would be impossible to convince Deng to change his mind about the April 26 editorial. At best, Yang told Zhao, the editorial's harsh tone "could be downplayed by not mentioning it again while gradually turning away from it. They said that if I were to talk to Deng then, only to have him reaffirm his stand, it would make it even more difficult to turn things around in the future."⁷

Zhao's splashiest attempt to downplay the April 26 editorial was his speech to visiting delegates from the Asian Development Bank on May 4. Highlights of Zhao's remarks were published on the front page of *People's Daily* the next day under a prominent headline that lauded Zhao's proposal to "solve problems democratically and legally." Even more notable was this part of Zhao's opening statement: "Major turmoil will not occur in China. I have full confidence in this." Zhao said that people were unhappy and protesting because China's legal system was weak and lacked democratic supervision, and because the political system needed more openness and transparency.⁸

People had varied reactions to Zhao's speech. Some journalists interpreted Zhao's call for openness and transparency as an acceptance of the demands they had issued. On May 5, *People's Daily* editors published an article below Zhao's remarks about how "students and teachers welcomed Zhao Ziyang's speech, hoping that the Party and government will conscientiously strengthen the construction of democracy and the legal system and will increase transparency." In a step toward reporting the truth, a photo of thousands of happy marchers waving banners in Beijing on May 4 appeared at the bottom of the paper's front page. Throughout the rest of May 1989, China's newspapers and broadcast stations, especially those in Beijing, created the most open publishing environment in the history of the People's Republic since autonomous Red Guard organizations had circulated independent newsletters in 1966 and 1967.⁹

While some reporters reacted to Zhao Ziyang's messaging as if they had finally been released from censors' shackles, other journalists felt paralyzed. While working for Canon, Wang Yuan began a relationship with a married journalist named Guo Yan, first hooking up with him at his apartment the day after Hu Yaobang died (unlike Chai Ling, who said she had no access to contraceptives, Wang Yuan was able to obtain condoms in 1989). Wang and Guo traveled to Shanghai in early May,

⁷ PS, 18. ⁸ RMRB, May 5, 1989, 1.

⁹ On the surge in independent publishing at the outset of the Cultural Revolution, see Michael Schoenhals, "China's 'Great Proletarian Information Revolution' of 1966-1967," in *Maoism at the Grassroots*, 230-58.

but after Zhao Ziyang's speech on May 4, Guo told Wang to return to Beijing without him. Guo's father was so anxious when he compared Zhao's words with the April 26 editorial that he forced his son to stay at home in Nantong, upriver from Shanghai. Wang Yuan recalled that Guo's

father just forbade him from going back to work. According to his father, all signs indicated that a schism had formed between Zhao Ziyang and Li Peng, and that the power struggle would continue for a while. If Guo Yan went back to his job, he would be forced to choose a side. Not wanting his son to fall as collateral damage, his father wanted him to wait it out at home.

Wang was less concerned with political analysis than with the sinking feeling that she had been sleeping with a loser. "I couldn't help but groan" when Guo defended his father's wisdom, she wrote. "He was twenty-nine years old, and he still had to listen to his daddy? What had I seen in this man in the first place?"¹⁰

Guo Yan waited nervously at home, worried that his job might be in jeopardy but not yet realizing that his extramarital affair with Wang was over. Meanwhile, politicians in Beijing did choose sides. Yang Shangkun expressed support for Zhao's speech. Elder Peng Zhen told Yang that he would stand with Zhao if Deng Xiaoping ended up criticizing the general secretary. Peng would be unable to keep this promise. Another elder, Li Xiannian, had a stranger reaction. On May 4, Zhao visited Li in the hospital, where he probably gave him a preview of his message that major turmoil would not occur in China. As soon as Zhao left Li's hospital room, Li was so excited that he jumped out of his bed barefoot and practically danced a jig, shocking a nurse who saw him spinning around. Why was the eighty-year-old former PRC president and current chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference so moved? Writer Dai Qing thinks that Li had been looking for a chance to take down Zhao Ziyang and had finally found a way to move against him. Li could now tell Deng Xiaoping that Zhao was actively undermining Deng's orders to strike hard against turmoil.¹¹

Dai Qing's interpretation of events is impossible to verify. We do not know for sure why Li jumped out of bed, let alone whether he gleefully went to the godfather to tattle on Zhao. But the elders' maneuvering was probably more consequential for Zhao Ziyang's political future than younger Politburo members' statements were. Of the four members of the Politburo Standing Committee aside from Zhao Ziyang, two – Hu Qili

¹⁰ Anna Wang, *Inconvenient Memories*, 178–79.

¹¹ Dai Qing, 邓小平在1989 (Deng Xiaoping in 1989), 95.

and Qiao Shi – said that they liked Zhao’s fresh approach. Two others – Li Peng and Yao Yilin – strongly opposed Zhao’s language.¹² When Li Peng and Yao Yilin met for a private talk on the evening of May 4, Yao mused to Li that maybe Zhao Ziyang had incited protests on purpose, to promote himself while trying to overthrow Deng Xiaoping and get rid of Li Peng. Li wrote in his diary that night that he doubted that Zhao was plotting against him and Deng. But looking back on Yao’s suspicions years later, Li wrote, they “really make you think.”¹³

Li Peng claimed that Zhao’s speech on May 4 gave the protest movement a shot of adrenaline, inflaming a situation that had been calming down since April 29.¹⁴ But at the time, activist workers and students were uncertain how to interpret Zhao’s remarks and were reluctant to see him or any other Communist Party leader as a potential ally. Such workers as Han Dongfang and Zhao Hongliang were consistently suspicious of Zhao and his motives. Student leaders Chai Ling and Feng Congde were ambivalent toward Zhao and had no reaction to his speech. Feng wrote:

Zhao’s speech was obviously a signal, but at the time I did not notice it. If I had, it might have affected my assessment of the situation ... Many students, including me and Chai Ling, did not have especially fond feelings toward Zhao Ziyang until he was purged. I thought he was an opportunist – his going to North Korea to lie low was a prime example.¹⁵

Feng would later change his mind about Zhao and wish that he had understood what the general secretary was trying to accomplish in May 1989. Older observers had a clearer sense that ending the protests depended on resolving the gap between Zhao’s tolerance and Li Peng’s intolerance. On May 9, Zhang Wanshu, the editor at Xinhua News Agency, sent a team of junior editors to Beijing’s main universities to investigate the state of the protest movement as it related to China’s top leaders. Zhang’s team discovered two intractable stalemates. The first was between autonomous student organizations and the government. The students were not willing to give up until they got dialogue and recognition. The government refused to grant the new organizations legitimacy, calling them illegal. There was no solution in sight. The second stalemate that the Xinhua editors recognized was between Li Peng and Zhao Ziyang. Zhao had been seeking solutions using legal and democratic channels, while officials allied with Li had showed up on university campuses to tell administrators and teachers that Zhao’s

¹² *LSQ*, 155. ¹³ *LP*, 123. ¹⁴ *LP*, 133.

¹⁵ Feng Congde, 六四日記 (June Fourth diary), 233

speech on May 4 was not a new direction approved by Party Center – instead, the April 26 editorial correctly represented Party Center’s view.¹⁶

On May 8, 9, and 10, Zhao Ziyang acted more like a true general secretary than like Deng’s passive underling. Zhao was not completely unshackled – he knew that he could not openly repudiate the April 26 editorial or affirm autonomous student organizations’ right to exist – but he pushed as hard as he could within those limits. Knowing that Deng Xiaoping had generally agreed with increasing transparency, Zhao spoke openly about press freedom. This further encouraged journalists to write what they wanted. It also enraged Li Peng, who said that press reports were siding with “turmoil elements” and accused Zhao of “once again inciting turmoil in the news.”¹⁷

Zhao also went out on a limb about how to handle dialogue and student organizations, saying at a PSC meeting on May 8 that dialogue did not have to be mediated by the All-China Students Federation and that it was fine if activist students took over officially approved student unions. Zhao brought up the same points on May 10 at a meeting of the entire Politburo. Li Peng thought that Zhao was openly advocating for student autonomy. “The facts show that Zhao had already departed quite a bit from Party Center’s policy,” Li wrote in his memoir, retroactively erasing the fact that Zhao himself was a more senior member of Party Center than Li was.¹⁸

Zhao Ziyang’s political authority may have seemed ascendant on the front page of *People’s Daily*, which continued to celebrate the general secretary’s moderate approach. But the events of May 11 underscored the grim reality that Zhao faced: the elders – above all, Deng Xiaoping – could bring him down at any time. Deng’s secretary Wang Ruilin called Li Peng to pass along an encouraging message from Deng. “Without the April 26 editorial, we would not have had the calming of the situation that we see today,” Li recalled Wang telling him. “Li Peng should resolutely stand up to the pressure that is coming at him from inside and outside.”¹⁹ After this boost from Deng, elder Wang Zhen invited Li to his home for a visit later that evening. Wang wanted Li to hold a new version of the “Seven Thousand Cadres’ Conference” of 1962, when the Party had dealt with the fallout of the Great Leap famine. Wang’s hope was to gather a large number of officials together to “unify thinking within the Party and solve the turmoil problem.” Although Li found

¹⁶ Zhang Wanshu, 歷史的大爆炸 (Historical explosion), 146–47.

¹⁸ *LP*, 135.

¹⁹ *LP*, 143.

¹⁷ *LP*, 132.

the “old revolutionary’s” plan impractical, he appreciated Wang’s support.²⁰

By the end of the day on May 11, Li Peng must have felt more confident in trying to block Zhao Ziyang’s attempts to behave like a genuine general secretary. But something even more momentous for Zhao’s future was brewing. *The Tiananmen Papers*, a compilation of primary sources of questionable provenance, includes an implausibly detailed transcript of a purported private conversation between Deng Xiaoping and Yang Shangkun on May 11. If the two elders indeed met that day, we do not know for sure what they said – *The Tiananmen Papers’* transcripts are not reliable or verifiable. What we do know is that two days later, on May 13, Yang and Zhao went to visit Deng. Zhao recalled that the main point of the visit was to prepare for Gorbachev’s visit, but Zhao also advocated for dialogue and increased transparency in handling the protests.²¹ Deng was noncommittal, saying that while transparency was good, precisely how to be transparent needed to be investigated further. Later that day, Yang Shangkun told Li Peng that Deng had been grumpy, saying to Zhao, “I’m really tired, my brain isn’t working right, and my ears are ringing like the devil. I can’t hear what you’re saying.” Li interpreted Deng’s comments about transparency as opposing Zhao’s attempts to open up the press.²² While they were meeting on the morning of May 13, neither Deng, Yang, nor Zhao knew that later that day a group of students would take a dramatic step that would stymie their efforts to end the protests.

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During the first half of May, such students as Shen Tong, Wang Chaohua, and Xiang Xiaoji tried to set up dialogue meetings that were not stage-managed by the government. Members of autonomous student groups sought to make their organizations more democratic. They discussed possible next steps in the short, medium, and long terms now that marching to Tiananmen Square had become more of a routine than a thrilling breakthrough. A divide emerged between activists who wanted a slower, step-by-step organizing drive and those who felt that the window for change was rapidly closing.

Among those who wanted immediate action were Chai Ling, Örkesh, Wang Dan, and Zhang Boli, a twenty-nine-year-old journalist from northeast China who had entered a writers’ training program at Peking University in fall 1988. Zhang recalled that “the time had come for us to

²⁰ LP, 145. ²¹ PS, 21. ²² LP, 151.



Figure 6.1 Chai Ling, Örkesh Dölet (Wuerkaixi), and Wang Dan in May 1989. Peter Turnley/Corbis Historical via Getty Images.

step up the pace. A hunger strike appealed to us as being the strongest action we could take without resorting to violence.”²³ Chai Ling remembered that Zhang told her “with great excitement how Gandhi had used hunger strikes to achieve political goals.”²⁴ On May 12, Wang Dan told Chai Ling that he and around forty other students at Peking University had decided to stage a hunger strike, but that he was joining on his own because student organizations had voted against the move, calling it too drastic. Chai agreed to join Wang. The two gave speeches that night announcing their decision.

Chai Ling’s speech included two demands: to reverse the “turmoil” label and to hold dialogue on equal terms. The way she framed her overall goal, however, was more compelling than her specific demands:

Dear fellow students, when we sacrifice our health, we want to see the true face of our government. When we were growing up, we were raised to say, “We love our country, we love our people.” Now we want to see if our country loves us and if our people will stand up for us. We want to know if this country is still worth our struggle, our sacrifice, our devotion. I want to use the courage to face death to fight for the right to live life.

²³ Zhang Boli, *Escape from China: The Long Journey from Tiananmen to Freedom*, trans. Kwee Kian Low (New York: Washington Square Press, 2002), 39.

²⁴ Chai Ling, *Heart*, 126.

Chai's powerful language sparked applause and emotional reactions from her audience. After she finished speaking, the number of students who committed to take part in the hunger strike jumped from 40 to 220.²⁵

Shen Tong, who was deeply involved in dialogue delegation work, did not think that staging a hunger strike was a good idea. Chai Ling's speech changed his mind. "It touched me as no other speech had," he wrote. "Chai Ling made me understand why students would want to make such a sacrifice." Shen understood that ramping up pressure on the government also raised the stakes of organizing dialogue. As he put it, "The lives of the hunger strikers depended on our success."²⁶ Feng Congde was equally certain that Chai's appeal had been highly effective, but he differed from Shen in explaining its power. In Feng's view, when Chai said that she wanted to see the government's true face and added, "we want to wake up the conscience of the nation," she was implying that the Chinese government was as authoritarian as it was because people had failed to stand up to it.²⁷ Chai's focus was as much about getting people to act as it was about demanding a government response.

Act they did. The next afternoon, on May 13, more than three hundred hunger strikers from thirteen Beijing universities, along with more than two thousand supporters, marched to Tiananmen Square to set up a protest camp. A crowd of approximately thirty thousand onlookers surrounded the hunger strikers.²⁸ Each day over the following week, the crowds grew, as did the number of hunger strikers. People in Beijing were moved by the students' plight and by the wailing sirens of ambulances assisting students who had fainted. On May 15, Wang Yuan's Japanese boss told her to close the doors to their office's balcony because the ambulances were too loud. When Wang went out for lunch, she noticed a change on the streets. Strangers were talking to each other about the fasting students. Even unspoken glances held meaning: "Every pair of eyes I saw were silently screaming to be heard. They radiated anger, worry, even helplessness. The only emotion they didn't communicate was indifference."²⁹

The basic message of the hunger strike was that students were willing to die in order to change China. This resonated with the broader population of Beijing, especially as they watched the Communist Party's response, which began with confusion and indifference and ended with martial law. On May 15 and 16, hundreds of thousands of people marched in support of the hunger strikers. On May 17, the number of

²⁵ Chai Ling, *Heart*, 131–32. ²⁶ Shen Tong, *Almost a Revolution*, 237.

²⁷ Feng Congde, 六四日記 (June Fourth diary), 281. ²⁸ *LSQ*, 208.

²⁹ Wang, *Inconvenient Memories*, 191.

marchers swelled to more than a million, and the number was almost as high on May 18. Hitting the streets to support the students became a popular group activity organized and supported by work units, members of which carried banners and wore uniforms identifying their factory or office. Businesspeople, laborers, journalists, retirees, teachers, and even police officers and soldiers took part. Many of their slogans and petitions praised nonviolent protest while criticizing Deng Xiaoping and the system he oversaw: "Government by old men must end! The dictator must resign!"³⁰

The students forgoing food in Tiananmen Square, whose numbers had grown to more than three thousand, had succeeded in mobilizing more than a million people to oppose dictatorship and demand something better. This success in broadening the movement meant that by mid-May, students were no longer the main force of the movement. Of course, students still saw themselves as the most important and newsworthy group in Beijing – in the years since, some scholars, writers, and filmmakers have followed their lead. They were wrong. Students and officials struggled anxiously to find solutions, but few of their ideas addressed or included the hundreds of thousands of people in the streets every day.

Between the middle of May and the early hours of June 4, 1989, students collected donations of money and tents, argued over who was in charge of their rapidly changing organizational structures, and debated whether to withdraw or to continue to occupy the square. Chai Ling took on an even more prominent leadership role, as "commander in chief" of the Hunger Strike Headquarters. Even though Chai occasionally considered scenarios in which students would evacuate the square, the result of each daily debate was to stay. Sociologist Dingxin Zhao explains why:

While the leaders and organizations that emerged during the movement could usually effectively stage radical movement activities, such leaders and organizations were absolutely unable to exercise effective control over the movement. Whenever movement leaders or organizations wanted to make strategic moves rather than take more radical actions, they were immediately marginalized.³¹

This observation is accurate and perceptive. But Zhao and other analysts, especially the filmmakers of *Gate of Heavenly Peace*, argue that the hunger strike along with student leadership squabbles that led to a prolonged occupation of Tiananmen Square "set the stage for the movement's bloody ending."³² This is victim blaming. It is also myopic and

³⁰ Han, *Cries for Democracy*, 222.

³¹ Zhao, *Power of Tiananmen*, 147.

³² Zhao, *Power of Tiananmen*, 164.

inaccurate. In an essay written in 1995, Wang Chaohua, who as a leading member of the Beijing Students' Autonomous Federation in 1989 was deeply involved in debates about whether to stage a hunger strike or whether to leave the square, convincingly pushed back against this notion. Wang argued that it is wrong to overemphasize students' decisions, mistakes, and conflicts or to see them as provoking a deadly crackdown. To focus excessively on student leaders' choices after mid-May is to ignore the more than a million Beijing residents who had been inspired to march against dictatorship, to form their own independent organizations, and, eventually, to resist an armed invasion. This demand for change by the broader population of Beijing was not dependent on students' presence in the square. Over the coming days, Beijing residents would make their own choices regardless of students' decision making.³³

Students and Beijingers were broadly aligned but not in complete agreement. Beginning on May 16, sociologist Craig Calhoun conducted surveys that highlight how students' goals and thinking compared to what other Beijing residents wanted. Calhoun first asked 109 students what they thought were the most important aspects of democracy. The top three answers were "accurate news reporting" (mentioned by 89 percent of respondents), "free expression" (83 percent), and "free elections" (68 percent). Students' understanding of democracy differed from how they stated their goals. Their top three goals were ending corruption, accurate news reporting, and freedom of expression. Only 33 percent of student respondents mentioned free elections as a main goal. Like the students, ordinary Beijing residents said that they supported democracy, but were even more focused on corruption. The most important goals that bystanders hoped that the protests would achieve were ending corruption (82 percent), stopping official profiteering (59 percent), and accurate news reporting (50 percent).³⁴

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The peaceful uprising of millions of people in Beijing, sparked by sympathy with hunger-striking students, meant that the students' numbers were dwarfed by a mass citizens' movement. In the middle of May, the movement suddenly became much more diverse and inclusive, ranging from factory workers to elderly officials, not to mention the tens of thousands of people from hinterland provinces – including Lu

³³ Wang Chaohua, 從來就沒有救世主: 六四30週年祭 (There are no saviors: A remembrance on the thirtieth anniversary of June Fourth) (Taipei: Jiangxin wenchuang, 2019), 226–27.

³⁴ Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 244–48.

Decheng, the mechanic from Hunan – who took trains to Beijing to join the protests. The broader concerns of nonstudents, focusing on ending corruption and dictatorship, did not bode well for Zhao Ziyang's attempts to resolve the situation by downplaying or repudiating the April 26 editorial and engaging in dialogue with activist students. Students might have liked what they were reading in *People's Daily* about Zhao's approach. Many Beijing residents who were angry about corruption, however, saw him as part of the problem. His golf hobby made him seem out of touch and his sons were rumored to be involved in profiteering. Industrial workers associated Zhao with liberalizing reforms that undermined their job security and weakened their ability to speak up about workplace issues. Zhao's lack of support among protesters did not help him in May 1989, but it did not cause his downfall. Deng Xiaoping did that, with help from Li Peng and others.

Deng, Li, and Zhao's immediate reaction when they learned about the hunger strike on May 13 was not to address students' concerns or solve the problems they had raised. It was to prevent the protests from disrupting Mikhail Gorbachev's visit. Efforts to get the hunger strikers to vacate the square took two forms on May 14, the eve of Gorbachev's arrival: a rushed "dialogue" meeting that ended in disarray, followed by a visit by twelve older intellectuals who pleaded with the students to behave rationally.

On May 13, students demanding dialogue finally got the planning discussion they had been asking for. Yan Mingfu initiated the meeting. Yan led the Party's United Front Work Department and was an ally of Zhao Ziyang. He reached out to the Beijing Social and Economic Research Institute (SERI), a private think tank where Bai Hua and Wang Juntao worked, to figure out how to contact student activists. SERI founders Chen Ziming and Wang Juntao had been paying close attention to the student movement but had shied away from getting directly involved. Now that the Party was asking for SERI's help, Chen and Wang felt obligated to say yes.³⁵ Wang, Bai Hua, and others drove around in vans to gather up student leaders including Chai Ling, Örkesh, Shen Tong, Wang Chaohua, Wang Dan, and Xiang Xiaoji.

When the students and think tank intellectuals arrived at the United Front Department, Shen Tong got the impression that the intellectuals supported the student movement and were pressing for genuine dialogue. The students had never heard of Yan Mingfu. They learned that he seemed to be a reformer associated with Zhao Ziyang and that the

³⁵ Black and Munro, *Black Hands*, 171–72.

government was desperate to get the students to voluntarily leave Tiananmen Square before May 15. Yan said, "Many of you believe that there is a distinction between reformers and conservatives in the government. You are in fact wrong about this, but if you believe it, then you are hurting the reformers by being stubborn." He added, "If the students do not leave the square by May fifteenth, the consequences will be hard to predict. None of us wants to see anything bad happen."³⁶

The next morning, May 14, Zhao Ziyang convened a PSC meeting to let his colleagues know that there would be a formal dialogue meeting later that day with students. The goal was to convince them to leave Tiananmen Square in advance of the Soviet delegation's visit. Zhao had managed to arrange a discussion with members of autonomous student organizations, although he did not show up himself. Yan Mingfu and Li Tieying, China's top education official, did most of the talking. The meeting took place at the United Front headquarters, with thirteen chairs on each side of a table: thirteen Party and government officials sitting directly across from thirteen student representatives, thereby achieving the students' goal of "equal dialogue." More students stood behind the table, constantly passing notes to Xiang Xiaoji and Shen Tong, who tried to summarize the dialogue delegation's points. The meeting fell apart when a group of students disrupted the meeting to complain that it was not being broadcast live over loudspeakers in Tiananmen Square. Before the meeting started, Zheng Youmei, the clerk to whom students had been delivering petitions, had agreed to Shen Tong's request for a broadcast, but the loudspeakers remained quiet. Shen Tong thought that conservative officials had sabotaged the broadcast, while Yan Mingfu blamed technical difficulties.³⁷ Nobody left satisfied.

The student activists who had been in the room with Yan Mingfu on May 13 and 14 had a sense that he was acting on behalf of Zhao Ziyang. But many of the thousands of students in the square had no idea who Yan Mingfu was and had little interest in Zhao Ziyang. Feng Congde had stayed in the square on May 14 to run the students' own broadcast station. Looking back on events, he thought that the conversation with Yan Mingfu had been a "great opportunity" for students to cooperate with "enlightened" Party leaders. Feng later realized that by pointedly reaching out to the leaders of autonomous student organizations, Yan had actually legitimized the newly formed groups. But at the time, Feng and his fellow students did not trust Zhao Ziyang. "Whether it was Zhao Ziyang or Li Peng, everyone thought they were parts of the Party's

³⁶ Shen Tong, *Almost a Revolution*, 242–43.

³⁷ Shen Tong, *Almost a Revolution*, 247–50.

bureaucratic machinery and did not place any hope on them,” Feng wrote.³⁸

Students’ distrust extended to the twelve older intellectuals who tried to persuade them to leave the square later on the evening of May 14. After the dialogue meeting fell apart, Dai Qing (a journalist at *Guangming Daily*), Su Xiaokang (a lecturer who had written the script of the *River Elegy* television show), and a professor named Wen Yuankai took turns praising the student movement while asking them to be rational and to compromise with the government by temporarily relocating their protest. Some students were distrustful, saying, “the government’s lobbyists have arrived; don’t let them trick us!”³⁹ The students decided to stay in the square. Feng Congde was especially disdainful of the intellectuals’ attempt at mediation, calling them cowards and elitists.⁴⁰

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When Mikhail Gorbachev arrived in Beijing on May 15, the official welcoming ceremony was held at the airport instead of at Tiananmen as originally planned. Li Peng reported that during the banquet honoring Gorbachev in the Great Hall of the People that evening, students and workers kept “attacking” the hall. Li was unable to enjoy his meal because of the reports he was hearing: people were planning on setting themselves on fire in front of the hall. “They were using Gorbachev’s visit to threaten the government,” Li wrote. Beijing municipal authorities put together a rescue team, but the rumored self-immolations never occurred.⁴¹ Over the next two days, Zhao Ziyang’s career did go up in flames.

At a PSC meeting on May 16, Zhao Ziyang formally proposed “revising the judgment of the April 26 editorial.” He thought that it was the only way to “end the hunger strike and proceed with dialogue.” Zhao recalled that Li Peng jumped in to say that the “designation contained in the April 26 editorial was drafted strictly according to Deng Xiaoping’s words and therefore could not be changed.” Yang Shangkun also opposed revisiting the question, warning that “revising the April 26 editorial would damage Deng Xiaoping’s image.” Zhao had failed. He decided that he had “no other choice but to express my views to Deng personally.”

Zhao asked for a meeting with Deng and was told to go to Deng’s home on the afternoon of May 17. Zhao had expected a one-on-one

³⁸ Feng Congde, 六四日記 (June Fourth diary), 305.

⁴⁰ Feng Congde, 六四日記 (June Fourth diary), 310.

³⁹ LSQ, 221 22.

⁴¹ LP, 156 58.

conversation, but when he showed up, he had company: "All the members of the Politburo Standing Committee plus [Yang] Shangkun were already there ... Since I had asked for a personal meeting with Deng, only to have Deng call for a full standing committee meeting at his home, I realized that things had already taken a bad turn." Instead of asking what was going on or why Li Peng, Hu Qili, Qiao Shi, Yang Shangkun and Yao Yilin were there, Zhao forged ahead with his original plan, saying that the April 26 editorial, "which caused so much misunderstanding, must have been unclear or incorrectly expressed in some way. The only way to bring about some kind of resolution would be to somewhat relax the judgment from this editorial." Zhao recalled that as he was speaking, "Deng appeared very impatient and displeased."⁴²

Li Peng spoke next, saying that the editorial had initially calmed the situation, but that Zhao Ziyang's tone on May 4 had fanned the flames and made the situation worse. Li Peng wrote in his diary that Qiao Shi said that the editorial had been correct, Yao Yilin said that "Zhao's mistakes had caused the turmoil," Hu Qili expressed anxiety about how out of touch the PSC was from ordinary people's thinking, and then Yang Shangkun said that there could be no retreat from the editorial – because protesters were directly targeting Deng, the only choice was to "take a clear-cut stand in opposing turmoil."⁴³ Zhao Ziyang recalled that Yang Shangkun also said that an elderly high-ranking military officer named Liao Hansheng "believes that martial law should be imposed. Perhaps we should consider imposing martial law."⁴⁴

Deng Xiaoping agreed with Yang. The two elders had probably decided on martial law as a solution before meeting with the PSC. According to notes that Li Peng took while Deng was speaking, Deng also agreed with Li Peng's assessment of events, saying that the April 26 editorial had been correct and that "Zhao Ziyang's speech on May 4 was the turning point. It allowed people to see discord within Party Center, riled up the students, and lots of people shifted allegiance to the students." Deng repeatedly emphasized that because events in Beijing were influencing cities nationwide, a solution in Beijing had to come first.

Deng said:

The method I'm thinking of is martial law. Only this method can put down the turmoil within a short period of time ... Martial law means using the army. The army must be told that as long as bad people are not rioting, the army should not fight back. If conflict does arise, injuries will be unavoidable. Beijing does not

⁴² PS, 27–28. ⁴³ LP, 165–69. ⁴⁴ PS, 28.

have enough police, so proclaiming martial law is the only way to restore normalcy and order for working and studying.⁴⁵

Li Peng and Yao Yilin supported Deng's idea. So did Qiao Shi. Hu Qili was again noncommittal, only remarking that he was very worried about the situation. Zhao Ziyang opposed martial law, saying that he could not carry it out. Even though there had not been a formal vote of the standing committee, Deng was satisfied that his authority, plus Yang Shangkun's support, carried the room. Deng put Li Peng, Qiao Shi, and Yang Shangkun in charge of implementing martial law.⁴⁶

Zhao had lost. He asked his secretary Bao Tong to draft a resignation letter, but then withdrew it. Zhao and Li visited hunger strikers in the hospital around 5 a.m. on May 18 and made an early morning visit to the square on May 19. Li Peng shook hands, signed some autographs, and left. Zhao stuck around to give an impromptu speech that was printed in *People's Daily* the next day. "You are still young and you have long lives ahead of you," Zhao said into a megaphone:

You should live healthily so that you can see the day when China achieves the Four Modernizations. You are not like us. We are old, it doesn't matter [what happens to us] ... You are teenagers or are in your twenties, are you really going to sacrifice your lives like this? Can't you think a bit rationally?

With tears in his eyes, Zhao wrapped up his remarks by saying that "we" – referring to top Party leaders – had once been young and had marched and lain down on train tracks in protest without considering the consequences.⁴⁷

Years later, Zhao recalled that he was trying to explain that the hunger strike "was no use against the group of elders who had taken a hard-line position," but that the "students did not understand what I meant."⁴⁸ Zhao's final public appearance of his life was feeble and pathetic. Once he had opposed Deng's imposition of martial law, Zhao's already limited authority had plummeted to zero. Zhao was on the verge of losing everything, but he did not behave like someone who had nothing to lose. His speech at the square came across as hesitant and fearful, full of confusing code words about old age and youth. It made the sixty-nine-year-old Zhao seem elderly even though he was the young one compared with the men in their eighties who had settled on a military solution.

In contrast to the defeated Zhao, Li Peng swung into action with authority and confidence on May 18 and 19. On May 18, Li met in the Great Hall of the People with hunger strikers including Örkesh, Wang

⁴⁵ LP, 170 72. ⁴⁶ LP, 172 73. ⁴⁷ RMRB, May 20, 1989, 1. ⁴⁸ PS, 31.

Dan, and Wang Chaohua. Wang Dan stated the students' main demand: that the government affirm that the students were engaged in a patriotic democracy movement, not turmoil. Li Peng's response was that while the government had never said that the majority of patriotic students were causing turmoil, Beijing had descended into a "state of anarchy" over the past few days and that the "chaos" was spreading nationwide. He said that it would be "inappropriate and irrational" to stubbornly "quibble" (纠缠) over the specific issues Wang Dan had raised. Li's stated agenda was for the students to stop the hunger strike, leave the square, and get the medical care they needed.⁴⁹

Then, in the most memorable moment of the meeting, Örkesh, who was wearing hospital pajamas and holding an oxygen tube to his nose, confronted Li Peng. Örkesh said, "It is not us student representatives who are quibbling. Another point is that I should not need to repeat what I said at the beginning, but it seems that some leading comrades still don't understand so I'll say it again." He then rephrased what he had said earlier: the students sitting in the hall with Li Peng did not hold the key to solving the problem. In the middle of a sentence, Örkesh dramatically took the oxygen tube out of his nostril, grabbed a green pillow, and threw the tube and pillow on the ground. The "objective reality, the objective fact," he said, was that if "one single person does not leave the square and continues to hunger strike, then it is very difficult for us to guarantee that the remaining thousands of people" will not stay.

When video of the meeting was broadcast on television nationwide, viewers had diverse reactions. Some may have been impressed by Wang Chaohua's statement that it might be possible to persuade hunger strikers to leave Tiananmen Square, and that overemphasizing students' patriotic enthusiasm obscured the movement's "calm, rational, restrained, and orderly" nature.⁵⁰ But the pajama-wearing Örkesh's clash with Li Peng made the opposite point and made a more lasting impression.

Watching the televised meeting at home on the evening of May 18, Wang Yuan was at first amused by Li Peng's awkward style: "I couldn't help but laugh. Not only was Li Peng's IQ cause for concern, but he completely lacked charisma." But when Örkesh said that if one student refused to stop their hunger strike, thousands of others would remain by

⁴⁹ A transcript of the meeting is in 火與血之真相 (The truth of fire and blood), 4.140–45; televised excerpts translated into English can be found in Oksenberg, Sullivan, and Lambert, *Beijing Spring*, 1989, 269–81.

⁵⁰ 火與血之真相 (The truth of fire and blood), 4.142.

their side, Wang Yuan's "laughter tapered off. Something was very wrong with that statement." Wang wrote:

Wu'erkaixi's words told a dangerous story. If the students couldn't be accurately represented by their leaders, and the end of the strike depended on the satisfaction of every student, what end could ever be in sight? What was the point of demanding a sit down with government officials and broadcasting it to every home in the country? Maybe Li Peng was smarter than he seemed.⁵¹

It is doubtful that Li Peng won many fans after his performance sitting across from the hunger strikers in the Great Hall, but by allowing Örkesh to imply that negotiating with student leaders was pointless, Li had achieved a public-relations victory on the eve of declaring martial law.

The next morning, Li Peng received another boost at a meeting at Deng Xiaoping's house. Elders Chen Yun, Li Xiannian, and Yang Shangkun were there, as were Yao Yilin and Qiao Shi. Hu Qili and Zhao Ziyang had not been invited, but PLA brass Chi Haotian, Zhao Nanqi, and Yang Baibing were there, as well as three other veteran military leaders named Qin Jiwei, Hong Xuezhong, and Liu Huaqing. According to notes that Li Peng took at the meeting, Deng began by saying that the "turmoil" had been caused by a problem within the Party. "There are two headquarters in Party Center. On the surface it is Li Peng versus Zhao Ziyang, but in actuality it is me against Zhao Ziyang." Deng lamented that he had twice mistakenly picked general secretaries who were too weak in opposing liberalization. Hu Yaobang had been too rushed in making reforms, Deng said, while Zhao Ziyang had "said a lot and not accomplished much, always using my name to do his own thing."

Deng declared that Li Peng would continue as premier – Deng had seen enough to decide that Li was a useful servant but would not make a suitable general secretary. He recommended instead that Shanghai's Party secretary Jiang Zemin take over Zhao Ziyang's position as China's top leader on paper. "Turmoil is a bad thing," Deng concluded, "but the bad thing can become something good. If we resolve this well, we can preserve ten or even twenty years of stability and there will be great hope for China."⁵²

Everyone at the meeting agreed with Deng's remarks, including his unilateral selection of a new general secretary. Later that evening, Li Peng delivered a stern speech about Beijing's descent into "anarchy," ordering the students to stop the hunger strike and telling people in Beijing to quit marching in support. Continuing to support the hunger

⁵¹ Wang, *Inconvenient Memories*, 197. ⁵² *LP*, 187–92.

strikers, Li said, would push them into ruin.⁵³ Yang Shangkun spoke after Li, saying, “To maintain social order in the capital and restore normal routine, we have had no alternative but to move [to Beijing] some troops from the People’s Liberation Army.”⁵⁴ Troops began entering the city on the evening of May 19. This set the stage for the official imposition of martial law at 10 a.m. on May 20, 1989.

⁵³ *LP*, 193–95. ⁵⁴ Han, *Cries for Democracy*, 258.

8 Protests

Alternative Paths

Throughout April and May 1989, people in Beijing often said, “If only,” and asked, “What if ...?” Looking back on the events of spring 1989 with hindsight, participants and observers have obsessed over key turning points and moments that could have pushed events in new directions and led to different outcomes. All of these hypothetical scenarios underscore one crucial point: nothing was inevitable. Each turning point was contingent on countless choices and coincidences. From Hu Yaobang’s sudden death to the students kneeling after his memorial service, from Zhao Ziyang taking a train to North Korea to Deng Xiaoping seeing “turmoil,” from staged dialogue meetings to a hunger strike, from failed martial law to real bullets, many possible paths unfolded. This was as true for China’s political future as it was for the individual fates of Chai Ling, Han Dongfang, and other people whose lives were drastically changed. Students might have found ways to form lasting, democratic organizations that continued to push for political changes. BWAFF might have sparked a nationwide movement of independent unions. Zhao Ziyang might have managed to satisfy protesters’ demands, prevent the publication of the April 26 editorial, and stay in power. Something different might have replaced the Communist Party’s dictatorship. Nothing was predetermined.

Imagine if on April 22, 1989, students and professors had been permitted to attend Hu Yaobang’s memorial service inside the Great Hall of the People. Imagine if Li Peng and Zhao Ziyang had stepped outside the hall after the service to receive the kneeling students’ petition and to tell them that dialogue was a central part of Zhao’s three-point plan. Chai Ling did imagine a different outcome:

I believe the way the government treated the students on the day of Hu Yaobang’s funeral incited their anger and led directly to the demonstrations on Tiananmen Square ... I have often wondered whether events might have turned out differently if the government had invited a few students to attend the funeral.¹

¹ Chai Ling, *Heart*, 100.

Welcoming students into Hu's memorial service would have sent a conciliatory message. But Deng Xiaoping did not believe in compromise with critics. He thought that a single compromise would lead to escalating demands that could never be satisfied. And which students would have been invited to the memorial service? Random founders of unauthorized associations, or members of officially approved student groups who had already been vetted by the Party? On April 22, not even Zhao Ziyang had good things to say about "illegal" student organizations. Inviting students seen as stooges or lapdogs would have done little to satisfy the crowd in Tiananmen Square.

What if Li Peng or Zhao Ziyang had personally tried to defuse the emotional scene when Guo Haifeng tearfully held a scroll aloft on the steps of the Great Hall? In his memoirs, Li stewed over claims that he had refused to show his face. He felt targeted by students repeatedly calling on him to appear and insisted that he knew nothing about the kneeling students that day. Li wondered why the students were calling his name and not Zhao Ziyang's. As the two men left the Great Hall on April 22, Zhao told Li his three principles (life should go back to normal and students should return to classes, dialogue at multiple levels, avoid bloodshed and punish lawbreakers), while Li pushed Zhao to condemn Western-style democracy and unauthorized organizations. If someone had alerted the men to the tense scene in the square and convinced them to receive the students' petition together, maybe more students would have returned to classes, and maybe the protest movement would not have gained the angry momentum it did when it seemed as if officials were ignoring good-faith appeals.

Li Peng's protests notwithstanding, he was not inclined to mingle with the public, let alone take charge of an unpredictable public scene. According to Zhao Ziyang, later in May 1989, Li only visited hunger strikers in the hospital and in Tiananmen when he heard that Zhao would be visiting them. This suggests that if one man had decided to step out of the Great Hall and receive a petition on April 22, the other man would have been likely to join him. Ironically, competition between Li Peng and Zhao Ziyang could have presented a message of unity in front of the students in the square after Hu's memorial service, if they had only known that their presence would have been helpful. In an era without ubiquitous mobile phone use and in a political environment in which aides would have been reluctant to interrupt high officials eager to leave a stressful event, Li and Zhao's absence from the square on April 22 was more of a communication mishap than a failure of will.

Respectfully receiving a petition might have defused emotions, but it would not have been likely to end the protests entirely. Of the seven

demands on the petition that Guo Haifeng held aloft on April 22, Li and Zhao could have easily said yes to many of them on the spot. Fairly assessing Hu Yaobang: Zhao had already called him a Marxist and his funeral music had played for an appropriately long time. Revealing the property holdings of Party-state leaders and their children: easy to agree to, also easy to fabricate. Increasing education budgets and raising budgets: easy to agree to, also easy to stall on. But neither Li nor Zhao could have quickly said yes to repudiating movements against liberalization. Li supported those movements. Zhao had carried them out (reluctantly, he said in retrospect). He could not openly criticize them without breaking with Deng, something he was not willing to do in April 1989. As for students' demands to allow independent newspapers and end censorship, Zhao did end up moving to promote greater transparency in reporting. At the April 29 "dialogue" chaired by Yuan Mu, Yuan denied that press censorship existed in China. On the whole, it is easy to imagine Zhao delivering assured responses to many of the student demands. It is equally difficult to imagine students being satisfied with any official answers. At best, different choices by Li and Zhao could have deflected and delayed, but were not likely to stop, the protest movement.

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If Li Peng and Zhao Ziyang had successfully calmed students on April 22, Zhao would have had no qualms about getting on the train to Pyongyang the next day. Zhao's decision to leave China on April 23, 1989, and his statement of support for Deng's language about "turmoil" from a secure room inside the Chinese Embassy in North Korea, are two of the most momentous turning points of spring 1989. If Zhao had decided to postpone his trip to North Korea, he could have taken charge of implementing his three-point plan, and presumably Li Peng, Chen Xitong, and Li Ximing would not have been able to take advantage of Zhao's absence to convince Deng Xiaoping to call the protests "turmoil" and to inflame the situation with the April 26 editorial.

At least two officials urged Zhao to postpone his trip. On April 20, Vice Premier Tian Jiyun reportedly told Zhao that perhaps he should consider not going to North Korea during such a politically sensitive time. Zhao replied that he had thought about it but had concluded that it would look bad to cancel a long-planned diplomatic visit.² Shortly before Zhao headed to the train station, Beijing Party secretary Li Ximing called Zhao to say that as the top leader of China, Zhao should not leave the

² *LSQ*, 43.

country in a time of crisis, especially because Li Peng was ill-equipped to handle things in Zhao's absence. In his memoir, Li Peng claims to agree with Li Ximing: "As a technical cadre with only book knowledge, how could I handle such a thorny political situation? I fully supported Ximing's suggestion, but he was unable to convince Zhao Ziyang."³

Zhao's recollections do not discuss the question in depth, but he did talk about the upcoming trip to North Korea when he met with Deng Xiaoping on April 19. According to Zhao's secretary Bao Tong, Deng told Zhao that he should go to Pyongyang, and that when he returned Zhao could take over for Deng as chair of the Central Military Commission. In a conversation in 2018, Bao Tong presents this as a plot in which Deng, who had already decided to purge Zhao, tricked the general secretary into leaving China. Bao Tong thinks that Deng saw Zhao's sympathy with students memorializing Hu Yaobang as an attack on his own authority. For Bao Tong, whose career had been ruined by Deng Xiaoping's choices in 1989, Deng's sole concern was protecting his own image and interests.⁴

Wu Guoguang, who was Bao Tong's assistant in 1989, has given a lot of thought to the question of why Zhao did not postpone his trip to North Korea. Wu thinks that refusing to travel to Pyongyang would have meant openly disobeying Deng Xiaoping. Deng told Zhao to go, so he had to go. And at the moment when Zhao's train pulled away from the Beijing station, the protest movement did not seem out of control and Li Peng had agreed to follow Zhao's guidance in handling it. Zhao had no idea what would happen over the next few days.

In the Chinese embassy in Pyongyang, Zhao had another chance to intervene, but he did not do so. According to Wu Guoguang, this was in part because of technical limitations. Today, a top leader traveling in a foreign country would have access to secure communications and would be able to consult in real time with colleagues back home. In 1989 in North Korea, Zhao and his entourage had no access to information about what was happening in Beijing aside from the telegram reporting Deng's remarks about turmoil.⁵ They could not have a back-and-forth conversation. And Zhao did not know that Deng's language would be published as an inflammatory article in *People's Daily*, so he did not move to stop it. Once again, all Zhao felt he could do was to obey the godfather.

³ LP, 76.

⁴ Li Nanyang, "鮑彤再看六四 (一): 鄧小平的一場政變?" (Bao Tong looks back on June Fourth (Part One): Was it Deng Xiaoping's coup?), *New York Times* (Chinese web edition), May 23, 2018, cn.nytimes.com/china/20180523/bao-tong-talks-89-li-nanyang-part1/zh-hant.

⁵ Author's email correspondence with Wu Guoguang, April 22, 2020.

"I replied by telegram: 'I completely agree with Comrade Deng Xiaoping's decision regarding the policy toward the current turmoil,'" Zhao recalled.⁶ For Zhao, forging a different path, whether by staying in Beijing or voicing objections from Pyongyang, would have required taking a clear-cut stand against old-man politics.

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By the time Zhao returned to Beijing, Deng had made up his mind about "turmoil" and nothing would convince him otherwise. Tens of thousands of protesters had felt a sense of exhilaration and victory during the unprecedented marches of April 27. Zhao tried to push for dialogue and for democratic, legal solutions to the protests after he got back to China, and until May 13 his efforts had completely changed the message received by readers of *People's Daily*. But everything changed on May 13. The hunger strike that began that day was the next major turning point of the protests. What if Shen Tong, Wang Chaohua, and other students who preferred gradual measures and opposed the hunger strike had persuaded their classmates not to escalate their protests?

Deng Xiaoping had a playbook for dealing with student protests in 1986 and 1987: shut down meetings, apply pressure to activists, and arrest agitators. If a general secretary was too conciliatory toward protesters, push him aside. It is likely that if there had been no hunger strike, the Party's approach toward the protesters would have been similar to what it had done in 1986 and 1987. Activist students would have been frustrated and would have had to decide whether to wait for another opportune moment to protest or to escalate instead. Knowing that no meaningful changes came from the relatively calm protests of 1986 informed the choices of students who pushed for a hunger strike in 1989. They had tried marching, they had tried talking, they had even formed autonomous organizations and were trying to operate them on democratic principles. But the system around them remained the same. It is no wonder that many wanted to try more radical protests.

Another "what-if" scenario that worried students and leaders alike in May 1989 was that hunger strikers would escalate even further. What was more radical than a hunger strike? Self-immolation. How would events have unfolded differently if protesters had set themselves on fire in Tiananmen Square? The idea crossed the minds of people at the time. On May 15, a student from Nanjing named Li Lu, who was one of the few students from outside Beijing who became a protest leader in the

⁶ PS, 11.

capital, approached Chai Ling. Li was frustrated that the hunger strike seemed to be ineffective. According to Chai, Li said:

If the government is willing to stand by and watch the lives of these students waste away one by one, then we should take more extreme measures. To gain the support of the people, put pressure on the government, and prevent striking students from dying, we need leaders who will rise up and be willing to burn themselves alive, like that student in the Prague Spring.

Li was presumably referring to Jan Palach, who set himself on fire in Prague in January 1969 to inspire Czechoslovakians to resist the Soviet-led military occupation. Chai's immediate reaction to Li Lu's suggestion was horror: her aunt had died in a fire and she did not want to suffer that way. But the more she thought about it, the more she realized that Li Lu "was right. If by dying I could prevent the death of others, then so be it."⁷

Rumors that self-immolations were imminent spread on May 15. Zhang Boli rushed from Peking University to the square "to help quell that fanatical idea."⁸ Someone told Feng Congde that "Chai Ling has announced that she will set herself on fire to use one person's death to save a hundred thousand hunger strikers' lives." Feng frantically tried to find his wife. When he tracked her down, Chai laughed and told him not to worry, the moment had passed.⁹ But later that day, reports that students might self-immolate reached Li Peng during his banquet with Mikhail Gorbachev.

If Chai Ling or other students had set themselves on fire, what might have changed in Beijing? On April 7, 1989, across the Taiwan Strait in Taipei, publisher Cheng Nan-jung (also known as Nylon Cheng) committed suicide by setting himself on fire in his office. Cheng pushed for freedom of speech during Taiwan's martial law period by publishing unauthorized magazines. Chiang Ching-kuo ended the Republic of China's four decades of martial law in July 1987, showing that it is possible for a dictator to cede power without "turmoil" and for a formerly authoritarian party – the Kuomintang – to become a participant in a multiparty democracy. But democratization in Taiwan was a slow process. Cheng's activism continued to rile authorities during the late 1980s. In 1989, authorities ordered his arrest because he published a draft constitution for an independent "Republic of Taiwan." Cheng reportedly said that he would not allow the ruling Kuomintang to arrest him, only to seize his dead body.¹⁰

⁷ Chai Ling, *Heart*, 147. ⁸ Zhang Boli, *Escape from China*, 41.

⁹ Feng, 六四日記 (June Fourth diary), 312.

¹⁰ Ashley Esaray, "'Struggle for 100% Freedom': The Legacy of Nylon Cheng and Taiwan's Democratization" (lecture, Taiwan Studies Group, Simon Fraser University, November 26, 2018).

Cheng's self-immolation was a key moment in Taiwan's democracy movement. April 7 is commemorated as "Freedom of Expression Day" in Taiwan and visitors can tour Cheng's still-charred office, which is part of the Nylon Cheng Liberty Foundation and Memorial Museum. Even though commemorations of Cheng's death occurred almost simultaneously with Chai Ling and Li Lu's discussion about escalating protests through self-immolation in Beijing, Chai and Li seemed unaware of what was happening in Taiwan, instead looking to the Prague Spring for inspiration. May 19, 1989, the eve of the imposition of martial law in Beijing, was also the day of Cheng's funeral procession in Taipei. As the march neared the presidential office building, a democracy activist named Chan I-hua set himself on fire.¹¹

If hunger-striking students had self-immolated in Tiananmen Square, one possible outcome would have been a deepening and broadening of the democracy movement, as would happen in Taiwan. But self-immolation could have had the opposite effect in Beijing, allowing the authorities to depict suicide by fire as dangerous extremism. In fact, in January 2001, during a very different political moment, Communist Party propagandists managed to use the purported self-immolation of five Falun Gong practitioners in Tiananmen Square to convince hundreds of millions of television viewers that Falun Gong was a fanatical cult that needed to be forcibly repressed.¹² If students had escalated by turning to self-immolation in 1989, the act might not have been as effective in garnering public sympathy as their group hunger strike had been.

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If Chai Ling had set herself on fire on May 15, 1989, it might have changed the course of events. Ever since 1989, people have obsessed over much smaller things that might have led to different outcomes. Louisa Lim told me that one of the people she interviewed while working on *The People's Republic of Amnesia* was convinced that the single most consequential turning point of spring 1989 was Örkesh's decision to wear hospital pajamas when he met Li Peng on May 18. Lim's contact said

¹¹ "詹益樺簡介" (Brief introduction to Chan I hua), www.nylon.org.tw/main/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=56&Itemid=18.

¹² I was a guest in a home in Wuhan when the *Focus Report* (焦点访谈) anti Falun Gong documentary aired during Chinese New Year in 2001. My host returned from his office that day saying that the authorities had ordered everyone to watch an important show. Before the documentary aired, people I spoke to in China were ambivalent about Falun Gong. Afterward, people's reaction to the religious group was overwhelmingly one of revulsion.

that Örkesh's clothing and tone during the exchange, which was televised throughout China, was simply too disrespectful and gave Li Peng the upper hand in dealing with the protesters. It strains the imagination to think that pajamas caused a massacre. I see this as victim blaming. Örkesh's self-presentation or his and other protesters' statements about staying in the square did not have the power to cause or avert a military crackdown.

In late May 1989, some activists and officials pushed for an unprecedented political intervention that would have been far more significant than deciding to wear pajamas in the Great Hall of the People. They tried to get another occupant of the Great Hall – the National People's Congress (NPC) – to behave as a genuine legislative body and to vote to cancel martial law. What if the NPC had been able to act? In late May and early June, advocates of continued protests wanted to maintain pressure on the government during the lead-up to June 20, when the NPC Standing Committee was scheduled to meet. Their hope, spurred by a joint letter signed by fifty-seven NPC Standing Committee members calling for an emergency meeting "to solve the serious situation through legal and constitutional means," was that the NPC would rescind martial law and sack Li Peng.¹³

On May 21, after Zhao Ziyang was sidelined but before his formal removal, Zhao himself tried a last-ditch effort to activate the NPC. Zhao spoke with Yan Mingfu, NPC vice chairman Peng Chong, PSC member Hu Qili, and Vice Premier Wu Xueqian about a plan to hold an NPC Standing Committee as soon as possible. Wan Li, who chaired the NPC's Standing Committee, was a key ingredient in this plot. But Wan had been away on official visits to Canada and the United States since May 12, 1989. Zhao tried to have a telegram sent to Wan instructing him to cut his trip short, but Li Peng sent a separate telegram telling Wan not to return early.¹⁴ On May 25, Wan Li changed his itinerary and landed in Shanghai – not Beijing – where Jiang Zemin briefed him. On May 27, Wan issued a statement saying that martial law was legal and completely necessary to "resolutely curb the turmoil and quickly restore order."¹⁵

This dampened protesters' hopes that the NPC or Wan Li could act as a constitutional check on the declaration of martial law or the removal of Zhao Ziyang, both of which had violated Party and state constitutions. The NPC was supposedly the top governing body in the People's Republic, but in reality it was subordinate to Party leadership. As it

¹³ Brook, *Quelling the People*, 82–83.

¹⁴ PS, 33.

¹⁵ RMRB, May 28, 1989, 1.

turned out, when it came to the NPC in 1989, the eighty-seven-year-old Peng Zhen, who held no meaningful official positions, was more powerful than Zhao Ziyang. Chung Yen-lin has discovered that Peng originally supported Zhao's moderate approach to the student protests, but after Deng Xiaoping decided on martial law, Peng quickly fell into line. He then pressured NPC Standing Committee members to support martial law.¹⁶ On May 25, Peng met with Xi Zhongxun, Peng Chong, Liao Hansheng, Geng Biao, Chen Muhua, and Wang Hanbin. Peng's message was that bourgeois liberalization was unconstitutional, the marches and demonstrations were "turmoil," and because the NPC represented all 1.1 billion Chinese people, it could not go along with a small number of protesters. Peng's colleagues obeyed him.¹⁷

Looking ahead to June 20 as a pivotal date for the NPC Standing Committee meeting, or trying to move up the date of the meeting, were desperate dreams that butted up against the hard wall of old-man politics. They overlooked the reality that Deng Xiaoping wielded or ignored institutions and rules whenever it was convenient for him to do so. Elders like Peng Zhen, even if they had initially liked Zhao Ziyang's approach and had shuddered at the thought of martial law, knew that Deng's word was law. Critics in the square who pilloried Deng as an elderly dictator and who decried old-man politics had accurately identified the main obstacles to meaningful political change in China. Without Deng as godfather and without the elders who did his bidding and whipped colleagues into obeying Deng's orders, the NPC might have been part of a nonviolent solution. Finding a way to defeat old-man politics could have averted a massacre.

¹⁶ Chung Yen lin, "彭真在1989年中共'天安門事件'中的角色和活動," *Zhongguo dalu yanjiu* 62, no. 1 (March 2019): 1–33.

¹⁷ *LP*, 222.