1 Introduction
A Decision to Kill

The fate of the Tiananmen Square movement was sealed on May 17, 1989, two weeks before its tragic end, with the decision to initiate martial law. On that critical day, Deng Xiaoping convened a meeting at his residence attended by his right-hand man in charge of the military and five members of the Politburo's Standing Committee, the highest leadership body in the Party Center. Several participants would in later years offer their recollections and they agreed on this important point: urged by Deng, the Standing Committee passed the decision to declare martial law. Had that been a formal vote, the outcome would have been close: two offered their outright support, two dissented, and the fifth demurred first before joining the yes tally. In any case, the point may be moot, as Deng had de facto veto power.[1]

Deng's elegant home was snuggled deep in a web of Beijing *hutong*. During normal times, quiet reined the surroundings. But that fateful spring was no normal time. The city was inundated by raucous protest crowds. In Tiananmen Square, just a few miles away, student hunger strikers had begun to faint, and ambulances wailed in and out around the clock. Many Beijing residents also took to the street in solidarity. In sizes rarely seen in the country, marches and demonstrations raged on. According to one statistic, that day alone witnessed more than 1.2 million street protesters.[2] Checkpoints by student marshals slowed the traffic. On his way back to the Zhongnanhai compound, an irritated Li Peng, the premier, and his chauffeur took a long detour, taking them more than thirty minutes for an otherwise ten-minute drive.[3]

The martial law decision was momentous. Out of the public eye, General Secretary Zhao Ziyang submitted his resignation on the second day; Deng chose Jiang Zemin, then a member of the Politburo and the party chief of Shanghai, to be the new general secretary. The army was deployed on May 19. Two weeks later, on the night of June 3 and in the early morning of June 4, troops marched from the outskirts into the city center, killing thousands of unarmed civilians and ending the protest movement that had lasted for about a month and a half.[4]

At first glance, this decision to kill seems straightforward: an authoritarian regime suppressed a burgeoning revolution. Protest represents "challenge" or

"insurgency" to the regime, and the state's default position is "repression." It seems commonsensical that a government like China's would send in troops to crack down. Indeed, that is exactly how prevailing accounts have depicted the history of Tiananmen in 1989.

Those accounts were initially developed from an "outside-in" angle; that is, from the vantage point of the protest movement, constructed when data on internal deliberations of government leaders were not available, at least during the event or in the first few years thereafter. When such information becomes accessible and an "inside-out" perspective can be adopted, the validity of the interpretation deserves a second scrutiny.

Rich information often accompanies the weight of a great event. Tiananmen in 1989 is increasingly becoming a gold mine for research, joining the ranks of the French Revolution, the American Civil War, the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and other significant historical events. For comparative political scientists, it opens a candid window into the opaque world of authoritarianism. For social-movement scholars, it provides a rare opportunity to examine elite deliberations of repression, a much-needed correction for a literature that is overwhelmingly written from the perspective of mobilization and mobilizers.

Three decades after 1989, a mountain of research materials has been accumulating. If past work had to guess the thinking process of the decision makers, we now hear from them directly – through their diaries, memoirs, and recorded conversations. Time also tested the authenticity of a few documents that claimed to have come from government dossiers, while a number of activist scholars have compiled ambitious and meticulously sourced chronological accounts. A new line of inquiry, with the focus on elite politics, is now possible. The pages that follow in this book are the fruit of such an inquiry.[5]

This book advances a new line of interpretation on the state–protest relationship during the 1989 Tiananmen events. The spotlight is on the state side: what the decision makers did and how and why they came to do it during the event. Immediately clear from the inquiry is that the leaders were busy engaging in factional politics rather than working to end the protest. Instead, they were busy in taking advantage of the protest for gain in the ongoing battle of power succession. At stake, for the younger leaders, was the advancement or termination of their career; for the elderly leaders, it was the direction of the country and the legacy of their lifetime's work.

The two considerations – to avoid a revolution and to win factional advantage – need not contradict each other. For one thing, a protest movement does not always pose an immediate danger. Official pronouncements notwithstanding, state leaders' private assessments can be a different matter. As importantly, even if the elites share a common fear, their differing interests play a role in making specific policies of response. Politicians do not have to

ignore the system's survival to engage in politics. Therefore, protest is not merely a threat; it is also a "resource" for the very state leaders whose rule is being challenged.

Indeed, scholars of social movements and collective action are among the first to point out that state elites do not always repress and that they may *facilitate* instead.[6] These researchers have put forward various models of the "political opportunity structure," a theoretical pillar in the field.[7] My findings stay consistent with this insight, but my work extends it to an entirely different empirical problem. My focus is not mobilization itself, but the state's reaction to it. While those social-movement scholars' models are movement-centered, looking at how elite politics can present an "opportunity" for protest, my new theoretical perspective looks at how a protest can become a "resource" for political elites and is thus "politics-centered."[8]

The Revolution–Counterrevolution Narrative

The Tiananmen Square movement was a series of student-led peaceful demonstrations in Beijing that lasted for a month and a half between April 15 and June 4, 1989. To varying degrees, it spread to other major cities as well. It is named for the occupation of the square by protesters (starting with a hunger strike) and the final violent, bloody actions to clear the square by the government's use of the military.[9] Never before or after under China's communist rule has a truly popular protest reached such a scale, intensity, and depth and ended in a tragedy of such magnitude. It was also a watershed moment. Within China, Deng's economic reform was at the crossroad, and the protest was a reflection of intense political discontent among students and intellectuals. Its tragic end, vividly documented by television crews of the international media, was imprinted in the public consciousness at once as a spectacle, an inspiration, and a historical trauma.

Globally, 1989 witnessed a tidal wave of revolutions that effectively ended the Cold War. While Poland might be seen as the most significant forerunner for its long-standing Solidarity movement, China's Tiananmen protest marked the very first wave of "unarmed insurrections" – as scholars would later call them – in that year.[10] Undoubtedly, it served as an inspiration for people everywhere living under communist rule. Visible methods of harsh repression inspired communist rulers as well. In an extraordinary moment soon after the Tiananmen massacre, Erich Honecker, the general secretary of East Germany, visited Beijing. He shook hands with Deng Xiaoping and praised China's firm action. Not long after his return, when Honecker faced a wave of protest against his own regime that winter, he contemplated using

"the Beijing solution." His attempt failed and the regime fell, as did many other communist governments.[11] A common storyline across the communist bloc is that peaceful protest succeeded in bringing down communist rule. As one exception, Tiananmen therefore is seen as a revolution that failed.

Since then, Tiananmen as history has been told in a standard narrative of two acts: an act of revolution by the populace, followed by an act of counterrevolution by the government. The protest was seen as a movement that aimed to bring down a regime, and its scale and its power were seen as capable of such a task. Following that logic, the government's military crackdown was seen as a necessary measure to save the regime.

Before it became scholarly canon, this narrative was first introduced by two unlikely partners: the Chinese government eager to justify its action and an international media eager to amplify a popular movement. In the years since, the government has never ceased to "regard the slaughter as appropriate" and brand such slaughter as "pacification."[12] The government's main defense rested on the claim that force was used only as a last resort. In other words, had it not been for this military endgame, Chinese communist rule would have ended then and there in 1989; the violent crackdown effectively stopped a revolution.

Shortly after the crackdown, the government staged a victory lap on June 9. An energized Deng, aged eighty-four, appeared before a group of military generals and officers to hand out medals and deliver a speech. His energy level was far from the more subdued image of himself. In his remarks, he did not deny the killing. Rather, he laid out a few lines of justification: it was indeed an operation of pacification in response to a violent uprising and a necessary measure to save the regime from an anti-party and anti-socialism conspiracy:

> This storm was bound to come sooner or later. This is determined by the general international climate and China's own small climate. It was bound to happen and is independent of man's will . . . The incident became very clear as soon as it broke out. They have two main slogans: one is to topple the Communist Party, and the other is to overthrow the socialist system. Their goal is to establish a totally Western-dependent bourgeois republic.[13]

Deng pointed out that "some comrades do not understand the fundamental nature of this event and mistake it as purely an issue of how to handle demands from the masses." He asserted that initial turmoil (*dongluan*) developed into a violent uprising (*baoluan*), in which "weapons were stolen" and "many of our soldiers were injured or even killed."[14] This characterization of the events would be the guide for the lengthy official report, delivered by Beijing mayor Chen Xitong later in the month.[15]

Is any of this – the official story of the 1989 events according to Deng and the party – true? One of the central arguments – that there was a violent uprising

prior to June 4 – was a blatant lie, and the world knew it.[16] But the public and even scholars are debating his two other major claims – first, that Tiananmen was a revolutionary attempt at toppling the regime, and second, that the only way to stop the movement was to deploy military force.

Existing accounts mostly concur with both claims. Newspaper reporters and researchers alike believe that Tiananmen was a revolutionary attempt, albeit one ending in failure, and that the government had no choice outside the military solution. "In the end," writes an eminent China scholar, "the state leaders were left with only two choices, either to repress the students or to face the prospect of eventually stepping down."[17] In other words, we find ourselves by and large in agreement with Deng Xiaoping even when we all mourn the dead and condemn the act on moral grounds. Indeed, for three decades since 1989, writings on Tiananmen have been dominated by this revolution–surpression narrative, particularly in analyzing the decision of the government and the outcome of the protest.

In the academic literature, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly spell Tiananmen as a revolutionary situation, an endorsement of the revolution–counterrevolution narrative published in their influential treatise *Dynamics of Contention*. They dub Tiananmen a "revolutionary situation" – a popular uprising that aimed at overthrowing the government despite being short of achieving a "revolutionary outcome."[18] A more elaborate explanation for the martial law decision can be found in Dingxin Zhao's book *Power of Tiananmen*, one of the most important works on Tiananmen:

> During the 1989 Movement, the state dealt with the movement in the following ways. First, it tolerated the movement. When tolerance did not work and the movement escalated, the government verbally threatened the students with a *People's Daily* editorial. However, when the editorial did not work, the government adopted limited concessions in order to contain the movement. Unfortunately, limited concessions could not co-opt the students; therefore, the state implemented martial law and deployed a huge number of troops to Beijing. Martial law and the soldiers were initially aimed primarily at intimidating the students and the Beijing residents. It was only when a show of force was unable to end the Tiananmen Square occupation that the government ordered the repression.[19]

Zhao's characterization suggests the following points. First, the regime is perceived as working collectively as a whole. He notes the internal debate and conflict, but he insists that conflict did not significantly determine the final outcome. Second, the regime did not want the protest and did everything it could to end it. Third, the regime at times made concessions as a tactical move, with stopping the protest as the ultimate goal. Fourth, the use of military force was a logical end after other, softer, methods did not work. The common thread behind Zhao's reasoning is a united group of elites who shared the same ideological belief and the same fear of a regime collapse. Therefore, he writes,

"since most top leaders in China during the 1980s had joined the revolution long before the communists took power, it was almost impossible for them, 'reformers' and 'hardliners' alike, to give up the power for which millions of their revolutionary comrades died. Thus, military repression became their only choice."[20]

If Dingxin Zhao's analysis portrays a regime that came together for *ideological* reasons, then Ezra Vogel's account in his majestic book *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* may be called *managerial*. In his telling, Deng and other key players differed in their assessment of the situation and their proposed solutions. They all seemed to be doing their best to manage the task at hand – to resolve the crisis presented by the protest. Li Peng, the premier, advocated a hardline approach, while Zhao Ziyang, the general secretary, proposed accommodation. Yet both are portrayed more like managers in a boardroom than political enemies. So was Deng, depicted like a patriarch adjudicating the debate and giving a final say in good faith. Vogel does not endorse Deng's crackdown and calls it a "tragedy of such enormous proportions," yet he appears equally sympathetic with Deng's decision when he writes, "As much as we scholars, like others concerned about human life and the pursuit of liberty, want to find clear answers that explain the causes of that tragedy, the truth is that none of us can be certain what would have happened had different courses of action been taken."[21] In other words, the result seemed to be inevitable, with Deng's hands forced by the circumstances.

Prevailing as it is, this revolution–counterrevolution narrative does not exist without challengers.[22] The most forceful response came from dissidents-turned -scholars. For instance, in a series of essays, Wu Guoguang – a former Zhao Ziyang aide and a professor currently teaching in Canada – asserted that Deng's decision for military action was tantamount to a "coup," whose real purpose was to remove Zhao Ziyang.[23] Dai Qing, another prominent dissident journalist, in her book *Deng Xiaoping in 1989* also provides an account of the supreme leader using the protest as a pretext for political gain.[24] This view was shared by another high-profile dissident, Bao Tong, who was Zhao's top aide.[25] Academic scholars also questioned the revolutionary capacity of the movement. As will be reviewed in a later chapter, the research by Walder and Gong is an example. They started their study to document workers' participation but concluded that the workers' involvement was limited only to some activists close to students.[26] Neither was there any report of support coming from the vast population of peasants.[27] In other words, the student movement was narrowly based. Writing as early as 1989, the editors of *Annual Register*, a famous publication on world events, offered this exceedingly insightful observation:

> The cheering demonstrators in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, superficially very much like those in Wenceslas Square in Prague, neither had coherent objectives nor were they the brave youthful front of a nation-wide mass emotion. They proclaimed general aspirations rather than demanding particular means of realizing them, save a boneless plea for "democracy." It was a courageous adventure which will have its reward one day; but, without a mass will behind it, it succumbed to the military power of the state.[28]

In his deeply researched account of the June 4 massacre, Jeremy Brown deems the military decision and operation a "profound failure of governance." After a meticulous narrative of what happened, his book devotes an entire chapter to question whether calling in troops was necessary and whether the scale of bloodshed was inevitable:

> But what if the government had been more patient? Was letting the movement "die out on its own" a realistic way to avoid violence? . . . If Deng Xiaoping, Yang Shangkun, Chen Yun, Li Xiannian, Wang Zhen, and Li Peng had been brave enough to wait, it might have been possible for them to meet their goals of clearing Tiananmen Square and disbanding the autonomous student and worker organizations. They could have averted the massacre.[29]

Brown also believes that the depth of the tragedy was avoidable. "Just as the killing was not inevitable, the scale and scope of the massacre was not set in stone. It did not have to be as bad as it was." Further, "Emphasizing the victims of the atrocity, however, shows how inaccurate and inhumane it is to think of the crackdown as a success. The massacre was a profound failure of governance."[30]

Nonetheless, the revolution–counterrevolution rendering of history has remained canon, suffering little wear and tear as it has aged. Writing in 2015, Minxin Pei, another prominent China scholar, declares,

> In 1989, the regime had its closest brush with death when millions of protestors demonstrated in major cities throughout the country, calling for democracy and venting their anger at official corruption. The party was saved only with the help of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), whose tanks crushed the peaceful protestors around Tiananmen and in Beijing on June 4.[31]

Shifting the Focus of Repression Research

The counterrevolution model is intellectually rooted in a long-standing academic tradition. Theoretical contributions on state responses in social-movement literature are predominantly written through the lens of "repression," with the state seemingly caring exclusively about dispelling protest. Such a lens focuses on the "protest–repression" interface and pays scant attention to policy debates within a regime. In a sense, it is a perspective that is politics-free.[32]

This perspective is increasingly untenable, though, as empirical findings tend to show a mismatch between state action and protest: the effects of repression may be an inverted U shape, and strong repression may "backfire."[33] Scholars also find that many modern countries adopt methods to "manage protest" rather than "disperse crowds."[34] Among them, even authoritarian regimes adopt policing methods learned from Western countries to contain or channel, rather than crush, protests.[35] Some state elites may even help protesters and become allies.[36] A leading scholar observes that state actions normally include "mobilization," "facilitation," and "rewards";[37] another uncovers four types of state response: no response, accommodation, nonviolent repression, and repression.[38] How does one account for the variety of *responses*, as opposed to the presumed usage of *repression*?

Appearing in recent years, new research has shifted the focus of state repression onto government insiders. Nelson Picardo presents California during the 1930s as a case in which authority figures actively pursued countermovements as a tactic to deal with farmers' mobilization. Similarly, Jenny Iron makes an argument about Mississippi during the early civil rights movement in the late 1950s.[39] These studies set out to examine state response to protest by looking not at the protest but at state elites. Picardo starts his paper by observing,

> The involvement of the power elite in social movements has been a neglected area of research. The investigation of elites has generally been limited to that of local elites, political parties, and philanthropic foundations, and their involvement in social movements is believed limited to resource support (either to further or deter the progress of an insurgent social movement) or the institutional obstruction or facilitation of the movement. I contend that under specific conditions, the power elite may become *active mobilizers, leaders, and supporters*.[40]

David Cunningham collected data from FBI counterintelligence memos and demonstrated the inner working of the state's covert repression and its impact on the ebb and flow of the New Left movement. His elegant analysis lends great weight to his call that "our focus needs to shift to study the repressors themselves" for some movements. Training the investigative eye on state actors and state operations, his study is a promising example for future research to go beyond the concept of "political opportunities" in treating the state's impact.[41]

Joseph Luders argued that different responses to the civil rights countermovement across the southern states can be accounted for by "the behavior of public authorities" – the governors, the police, and others. For instance, in North Carolina, active state-led suppression of white supremacist mobilization severely limited the prospects for white countermobilization during the 1954–1965 period. Governors Hodges and Sanford warned the Klan against violence and called for law and order. Similarly, in South Carolina, Governor Hollings

took a few effective steps to suppress anti-rights harassment and violence. As a result, both movement and countermovement were less extensive in the Carolinas than in other southern states such as Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. A memorable quote by Hollings illuminates the relations between the state, the countermovement, and the movement:

> When Martin Luther King marched in . . . we had black policemen policing the streets and the incidents, and when one of them stepped out of line there was a black policeman leading him into the paddy wagon and they threw away their cameras. They said this isn't what we want. And they went on down to Montgomery where Bull Connor, the sheriff, had his hoses and police dogs.[42]

Elsewhere, the state response to popular mobilizations has been richly featured in historical accounts, demonstrating the imprint of elite politics. In high-profile cases that ended in revolutionary change, the authorities often refrain from using utmost force for other political considerations. Gorbachev forwent past methods of military intervention during the 1989 East European revolutions,[43] and later during the 1991 disintegration of the USSR itself.[44] In some cases, an initial harsh repression backfires, tying the hands of the elite in later parts of the unrest, as in the case of the shah in the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979.[45] There are cases in which high-profile politicians step up to become champions of popular insurgencies, as in Hungary in 1956 and the Philippines in 1984.[46] Most germane to the subject of this book are cases in which divisions within state elites produce results that are far from the typical counterrevolution approach – which happened in Romania in 1989, where the security force defected to the revolution, and in Egypt in 2011, where competition between the military and state security ended in the military's adoption of the protest.[47] This book joins with this line of scholarship on repression by probing the elite chambers of decision making and competition.

New Materials on Tiananmen

No doubt state response to a large degree depends on the level of threat. Yet, since such level is often contested and constructed by politicians, looking at protest alone is insufficient to explain why a specific reaction is adopted. Examining how major players inside the polity behave, if information is available, becomes important. Past research fails to do so partly due to the lack of data. However, it is also strongly influenced by movement-centered traditions,[48] which are deeply entrenched in a repression narrative for a case like Tiananmen in 1989, even after research materials on elite politics have now become abundant.

The first wave of such information came from government dossiers smuggled out by Chinese dissidents, for example, the *Tiananmen Papers* (and its

Chinese version, *June Fourth: The True Story*), which is rich with data on insiders, such as behind-the-scenes conversations and meeting minutes of the Politburo. It was initially reported that the materials were smuggled directly from the government's classified dossier. Upon closer examination, a more accurate characterization of these materials is they are write-ups of those files. Direct quotations are still extensive. These sources and their credibility were questioned when they first came out in 2001, but the content has been corroborated by other sources since then.[49] Among the high-quality confirmations of key events is a collection of party leaders' speeches published under the title *The Last Secrets* in 2019. Addressing two post-Tiananmen meetings in June 1989, the leaders, including Deng, Li Peng, Jiang Zemin, and some twenty others, reflected on the events of Tiananmen around the theme of justifying the dismissal of Zhao Ziyang.[50]

A considerable amount of information has also come out in the form of personal recollections by key protagonists, including Li Peng (then premier), Zhao Ziyang (then general secretary), Chen Xitong (mayor of Beijing, member of the Politburo, and the author of the official report on June 4), Deng Liqun (member of the Politburo, rumored to harbor ambition to succeed Zhao Ziyang as general secretary), Bao Tong (Zhao's chief of staff), and Xu Jiatun (Zhao's ally, the head of Xinhua News Agency in Hong Kong). In one way or another, each wrote a book that was published outside China.[51]

Added to this genre of records are accounts by dissidents who had worked inside the system before and during 1989, including Chen Yizi (head of a think tank under Zhao Ziyang), Bao Tong (Zhao's chief of staff), Dai Qing (a renowned journalist and adopted daughter of the late defense minister), Wu Guoguang (a high-ranking researcher and speech writer working for Zhao Ziyang), and Wu Wei (another staff member of Zhao Ziyang's inner circle).[52]

Similar accounts by insiders are also made available through three prominent journalists, Zhang Wanshu, Lu Chaoqi, and Yang Jisheng, who worked for the highest organs of the Party propaganda – Xinhua and the *People's Daily* respectively.[53]

In China, after the death of an elderly leader, a major party press traditionally publishes a multivolume "life chronology" (*nianpu*) in his or her honor. By now, such published chronologies include those for former leader Deng and three of his top-tier comrades-in-arms – Chen Yun, Li Xiannian, and Wang Zhen. A conspicuous exception is the absence of a relevant volume for a fourth elder, Yang Shangkun, for the period covering 1989 to 1992.[54]

To help me evaluate the vast information from the aforementioned materials, I consulted a group of individuals who participated the 1989 movement directly and in a high-profile fashion. I have no access to any top state leaders. Nor am I able to conduct interviews in China. Yet, for better or worse, many public

figures in connection with the Tiananmen affair are, or were at one time or another, residing overseas, so I was able to interview many of them.

These published materials not only provide incredibly valuable information on insiders' policy deliberations and contentions; surprisingly they also contain hard-to-get information on the movements and operations of the martial law troops. This information first came from an unlikely source: an official publication entitled *One Day on Martial Law Duty* (戒严一日) by a military press. This ensemble of recollections on the military mission was presumably intended to glorify the military and was contributed by more than 200 officers and soldiers, including lieutenant generals, major generals, and colonels, all the way down to corporals and privates.[55] Using the two volumes as a lead, Canadian historian Timothy Brook was able to construct a fairly complete picture of the June 3–4 military action in his book *Quelling the People*, while Chinese historian Wu Renhua further identified the troops down to unit level in his book *The Martial Law Troops in the June 4th Affair* (六四事件中的戒严部队), published in Hong Kong.[56]

I have extensively used research published in Chinese by four scholars. I relied on Yang Jisheng's *The Political Struggle during the Reform Era*, for his insight on and chronicle of pre-1989 elite politics. Next, I rely heavily on Wu Renhua, who has published three books in Hong Kong on military operations during Tiananmen. Also helpful is Chen Xiaoya's monumental contribution, *The History of the Pro-democracy Movement in 1989*, which comes in three volumes totalling 1,725 pages with more than 4,400 footnotes. This publication appears to contain the most comprehensive sources, which is further enriched by her own research as a journalist, including interviews with a group of experts and witnesses who offered assistance with the sources and their own testimony. Important to my study are the writings of Dai Qing, a fourth author who was herself deeply involved in the Tiananmen movement in 1989 as a public intellectual and the daughter of a high official of the party. I am greatly indebted to her two earlier collections of essays and the development of the overall thesis of the book has greatly benefited from her ideas. She further articulated a framework that centered on the supreme leader as the driving force in her most recent book, *Deng Xiaoping in 1989.* Although I gained access to the book late in the process of my research and writing of this book, I am comforted to find that my thesis dovetails neatly with the tenets of hers.[57]

Drawing on these and other materials, my book unpacks the workings of a political regime during a period of major protest. Instead of treating state elites as a unified whole, I present players and factions who were in competition and conflict. I trace earlier steps of elite deliberation and infighting and focus on how these steps led to policies that became consequential to the protest.[58] Out of this effort is a politics-centered model that features what I call "protest–

politics–response." Here, "politics" turns into the focus of inquiry, and state reaction is understood as "response" instead of "repression." Such a shift in perspective yields critical insights which have been lacking in past analytical interpretations.

The Issue of Source Reliability

The rich array of sources is a researcher's fortune. My method of treating them is based on two differing considerations. On the one hand, it would be professional negligence not to do our best to fully use all the possible information, especially considering how difficult it is to obtain information about the inner working of a communist regime. The goldmine of information becoming available on Tiananmen is a rare opportunity.

On the other hand, we should use the sources judiciously. It would be a fool's errand to use any information at face value. Nor should we place equal confidence in them without distinction. Take the memoirs and recorded reflections as an example. Are they truthful to the facts? Do the authors, often former state leaders, have an ax to grind? Some other materials, such as the *Tiananmen Papers*, for another example, come into the public domain in a mysterious way, and they may or may not be the source they are first declared to be. Are they still useful?

One way to establish confidence is to compare information from multiple sources and different origins, or to verify by checking writings that were penned by former political opponents. Take one of the most consequential events as an example. As recounted in the opening paragraph of this book, Deng and a host of other top leaders met on May 17 and decided on the military crackdown. Under the heading "Standing Committee Meeting Held in Deng Residence," the *Tiananmen Papers* starts its account this way:

> In the morning of May 17, a meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP Central Committee was held at Deng Xiaoping's residence. Participants included Deng Xiaoping, Yang Shangkun, Bo Yibo, Zhao Ziyang, Li Peng, Qiao Shi, Hu Qili, Yao Yilin. The following is a summary the meeting's minute.[59]

If I have only this one source, whose origins are less than clear, I will not be in a strong position to establish the fact that the meeting took place, let alone a detailed account of it including who, when, where, and what.

Thankfully we have writings by two key participants. Premier Li Peng starts the day's diary entry: "May 17. At 4:00 p.m., Comrade Xiaoping convened a meeting to discuss the current situation. Participants included Zhao, Li, Hu, Yao, and Shangkun. Wang Ruilin was also present. That was a meeting that decided China's fate."[60]

Another participant, General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, also offered an independent account which starts, "On [May] 17, I made a request by phone to see Deng. Later Deng's office notified me to go to Deng's residence for a meeting, one that was attended by the members of Standing Committee and Shangkun."[61]

Finally, very solid confirmation of the event came in the form of a post-Tiananmen speech by Li Peng in a collection of party documents published in 2019.[62]

This level of cross-support is not always possible, however, so confidence levels vary from one detail to another. Therefore, when the preferred method of triangulation is not possible, I will indicate the lack of confidence and let readers judge for themselves. For example, while the *Tiananmen Papers* proves to be very accurate in its outline of major events given the existence of other supporting documents, its recording of detailed conversations between leaders lacks independent sources for verification.[63]

Smuggled to the United States by an anonymous dissident (pseudonym Zhang Liang), the *Tiananmen Papers* is a compilation of materials about the events, official meeting minutes, leaders' remarks, and analysis of the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement and the government's response to it. It was first published in English and initially characterized as authentic documents from the government's dossier. Soon scholars found that this was not the case. Instead, it is a *compilation* of original materials, consisting of excerpts, summaries, and editorializing. This twist dampened its credibility for a time and inspired scholarly debate.[64]

The credibility of the *Tiananmen Papers* has experienced a resurgence in recent years, as it has become increasingly verifiable by the emergence of plentiful source materials from other channels. These include superb reporting by prominent journalists such as Yang Jisheng (Xinhua), Zhang Wanshu (Xinhua) and Lu Chaoqi (*People's Daily*).[65] Most important of all, two of the highest leaders during Tiananmen, former premier Li Peng and former general secretary Zhao Ziyang, both published their "diaries" or "recorded conversations," and their reflections have confirmed many details recorded by the *Tiananmen Papers*.

What about skepticism about the word-for-word transcripts of "private conversations"? Some scholars may question whether "private" conversations can even be recorded in the first place, but I contest the notion of "privacy." Indeed, such "private" conversations were routinely recorded, as is evident in many similar daily entries in the life chronology of a top leader published after his death.[66] A key to understanding this phenomenon lies in the absence of boundaries between "private" and "public" life in the communist regime, a far cry from Western systems. The leaders could keep such conversations confidential if they chose to. But, by the same token, they could decide at a later time

to publish them with great fanfare. In any event, what a leader said would not go wasted without dutiful recording.

To be sure, no definitive history of elite politics of communist China is possible until the regime opens its archives for research. Until then we still have to work with what is possible to come by to advance scholarship, by definition a work in progress.

Protest as Elite Resource

Zooming in on the details of what happened behind the scenes, it becomes clear that top leaders of the party-state never saw the Tiananmen student movement as the kind of threat that could topple their regime. Instead, they could afford to be busy using the protest to leverage their own political interests. They did so by engaging in activities such as "contentious labeling," channeling the protest to a certain direction, and making a spectacular show of military might. In contrast to their public declarations, private deliberations lacked evidence of intentions to end the protest. Deng Xiaoping appeared to have already decided that student protests "would not end up with much." At the height of the 1989 crisis, Deng privately reassured his listener, "A good economy sets a foundation . . . Now [with this foundation], there is no unrest among the peasants across the nation; nor among the workers, by and large."[67]

So what was the deadly decision based on? If the leaders did not make such a decision out of a sense of threat, what was on their minds? The course of my research was therefore directed away from a narrow focus on the student movement and perceptions of it. In doing so, I examined the broader context of politics, especially the thought processes and motivations of elite players. Among them the most prominent player is Deng Xiaoping, a supreme leader. As such, elite conflict regarding succession issues came into focus.

The signs had been there all along. The movement was triggered by the death of a secretary general of the Chinese Communist Party who had been groomed by Deng but later dismissed; it was thrust upon the secretary general who was in a precarious position; Deng's reform agenda was at a crossroad, and this protest further presented an opportunity for Deng's rivals to discredit his reform policies and possibly install a new leader; and, finally, it represented a defining crisis for an eighty-four-year-old supreme leader whose policies and legacy were hanging in the balance.

Worries about Rivals versus Worries about Revolutionaries

In the nondemocratic system, a communist leader's concern is to respond to those at the top or within the top, with little regard for the public. This idea is in

line with the concept of "state autonomy," an analysis developed by Skocpol and others to explain democratic systems.[68] In communist regimes, state autonomy might actually be more salient. This insight has not been appreciated enough by existing scholarship, which tends to exaggerate revolutionary potentials of popular unrest in communist countries. To elaborate on this point, Tullock observes that the most likely cause of a dictator being overthrown comes from high officials in his own regime while the chances of his being deposed by popular forces is rare:

> Most dictators are overthrown by higher officials of their own regimes, simply because the higher officials want to promote themselves with at least one of them becoming the new dictator. If the reader has doubts about this, I suggest he consult the New York Times Index for the previous six months or so and check the numbers of cases in which dictators have been overthrown.[69]

Tullock goes on to write,

> The last, and in many ways least likely, way in which a dictator may be overthrown is by a genuine popular uprising. This is rare, not only in my own opinion but that of most people who have seriously looked into the matter . . . History shows that, in the last resort, success or failure hinges on the attitude which those armed forces of the status quo government will take toward an insurrection . . . Whatever government or party has the full allegiance of a country's armed forces is to all intents and purposes politically impregnable . . . If it [success of a popular uprising] is rare in the study of actual overthrows of dictatorship, *it is very common in the romantic literature*.[70]

In other words, even in a time of major unrest, politicians are as much concerned with their rivals as they are with the protesters, if not more so. And ongoing protest enters the political equation as a new factor.

Protest as a Differing Value

The theoretical premise behind the revolution–counterrevolution narrative (or the revolution suppression model, to be discussed below) treats popular protest as a threat, particularly when the scale of protest is significantly large. A corollary of this conception is that the state elites form a united front in their response. But in real-life cases, threat level varies. So does the degree of coherence of state actors.

The perception of threat not only varies from one protest to another, but also within the course of a protest. Elite players assess the situation differently, either in good faith or to their political advantage; they do not automatically rush to "repress." Instead, they constantly frame and reframe the nature and the scale of the protest, doing so with a focus on their rivals.

One politician's curse can be another's blessing, and vice versa. In a communist regime, when a popular protest occurs, the usual first order of business is disassociation. One faction may turn the situation into a political weapon by pinning the responsibility on opponents. The other side, under whose watch "things have gone wrong," may not be able to avoid the blame; they may then try to salvage the situation by painting the protest in a less ominous light. On extremely rare occasions, they may even attempt to legitimize it as a rightful expression of "the will of the people." As such, in one way or another, protest can often be a resource for elite conflict.

How do we measure the amount of political advantage, or the usefulness, of such a resource? A clue to this question lies in a comparison between a politician's re-election prospect in an electoral democracy and a leader's political standing in a communist system. The target audience in the former is the voters, and advantage is measured by "vote counting."[71] The target audience in the latter consists of the supreme leader and a limited number of oligarchs. In this sense, political standing can also be measured by "vote counting," albeit with a much smaller target audience and an unequal distribution of power (e.g., individuals such as the supreme leader having more, or more weighted, "votes" than others).[72] As will be shown in the following pages, in 1989 the student protest would be a major issue that affected the "votes" of confidence cast on the frontline leaders by the supreme leader and the important oligarchs.

Forms of Elite Contribution to Producing and Ending Protest

During a major protest, top leaders are often at the forefront of state responses. They act with the purpose of "scoring points" for themselves or undercutting their opponents, or even using the opportunity to reset the entire political landscape. The forms discussed below are ideal types in the conceptual sense, as real-life action usually varies and may take the form of a combination of two or more of them.

Sponsorship is used by a leader, most likely the supreme leader, who launches a mass campaign and uses the party-state apparatus to lead, to finance, and to organize.[73] Examples include political campaigns in the Mao and Stalin years. At first glance, one may assume that this form of state response may not be available for those protests such as Tiananmen that were initiated from below. But, as will be seen, for a political actor on the ground, the distinction between state-sponsored movement and popular protest is academic: a state-sponsored campaign always involves popular initiatives, and a popular event, if it is to go on, always has at least some level of state support or acquiescence.

That leads to the second kind of elite contribution: *Co-optation.* A friendly faction of leading officials frames the protest in a positive way, e.g., it is "patriotic in its intention," "orderly and peaceful"; it "correctly identify problems the party is also working on," and so on. If the faction prevails over their adversaries, they may even adopt the movement as their own.

Third, officials under the supreme leader normally cannot start a new movement of their own. Rather, they can only pledge support for one that has already been launched, by forces from either above or below, an elite option we may call *alliance*. Indeed, they often feel compelled to jump on the bandwagon and embrace or oppose, a perilous undertaking that could make or break a political career. Like buying stocks or betting on a horse, it is hard to predict whether one will end up on the winning or losing side. Therefore, *evasion* becomes the fourth, and important, option.

Most common is *public framing*. As mentioned above, in the absence of independent media outlets, state leaders have great discretion on how a protest is presented. Different facts are picked to fit a narrative, and "facts" can also be manufactured if needed. Is it patriotic or "anti-party and anti-socialism"? Is it orderly or chaotic? And so on and so forth. As I show below in this book, the overarching concern of the conflicting factions in 1989 was not so much ending the protest as winning debates of public framing.

To be sure, measures of *repression* can always be deployed from early on, but they are not chosen exclusively for the purpose of *suppression*. Rather, the selective use of these measures is often intended to *channel* or even *facilitate* the protest.

Finally, the ultimate means of repression, a *military operation*, may or may not target just the protest. It could also act as a form of *coup d'état*, in the sense that the introduction of military power transforms the political landscape. In the case of Tiananmen, it was a soft kind of *coup d'état*: the military is deployed to target elite players as deterrence only, because no arrest of elite players was ever needed.

Three Models of Political Division and Their Differing Predictions

It would be too simplistic to assume that all an elite actor cares about is defending the system. So also would it be to assume that all he cares about is pushing a policy according to his ideological orientation. Priorities and alliances shift according to political moments.

Political leaders may have three layers of identity. The first concerns their official capacities. As members of the polity, they are first and foremost defenders of this system. They also have role-specific identities based on the

division of labor and the power hierarchy, such as the general secretary, the vice chair of the Military Committee, and the premier.

The second concerns factional affiliations. In democratic systems, such alliances often come in the form of alignments with political parties, while in communist systems divisions operate through labels like reformers and conservatives.

Third, one might adopt identities through the important political fight of the time. Unlike the first and second sets of identities, these are more situational and fluid. The main focus of top leaders (including Deng himself) in Beijing leading up to the 1989 conflict was on the emerging post-Deng political landscape. On top of factional affiliations that already exist, one might follow one of the three camps within succession politics, as described further below.

These three layers of identity are not mutually exclusive: "Politicians routinely promote their understanding of the general welfare, while, in the back of their minds, considering how those actions will affect their popularity. Often, the two concepts overlap."[74]

A first perspective, the *revolution suppression model*, exclusively focuses on one-dimensional identities to explain the behaviors of state elites. That is, they are understood solely as defenders of the communist system against collapse. While such an identity is correctly recognized, and it applies to almost everyone in the top echelon, the model errs in assuming that this identity is the most important all of the time.

A second model, the *two-way factionalism model*, oversubscribes pre-existing factional affiliations with the division between "reformers" and "conservatives." For long, observers of communist regimes have followed a tradition of divining the opaque politics through the lens of "factionalism." Key moments – such as Budapest in 1956, Prague in 1968, and the tidal waves of 1989–1990 – are understood as conflicts between the "reformers" and the "conservatives." They are stories of reform heroes, such as Nagy of Hungary, Dubček of Czechoslovakia, and Yeltsin of the USSR, who fought the hardliners.[75] The tradition is particularly well heeded among scholars of China's elite politics,[76] and many accounts of Tiananmen have been written in this vein.[77]

Three-Way Contention in Communist Succession

Supreme leadership is a fact in the history of communist states, although it is given no official title. Just as real is the politics of transferring its authority. The system forsakes hereditary rules and rejects democratic election; hence it relies heavily on the incumbent ruler to choose and then groom a successor. Fatal failures visited major figures such as Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Tito. It is an exacerbated version of the "crown prince problem" known to autocrats.[78] Committing too early and growing a powerful heir as a result, the ruler's own

authority might be threatened; choosing too late, the heir might not be strong enough to head off rivalry.

In a communist system, such as the USSR and China, the supreme leader might designate a candidate but put him under the check of one or multiple "counter-heirs." In his old age, a ruling "triad" – as experts of Soviet communism such as Myron Rush and Robert Conquest call it – is formed, which includes the ruler, the heir, and the counter-heir.[79] This arrangement is still precarious, as the ruler can still lose confidence and dispose of the heir. Mao sequentially disposed a Liu, a Lin, and a Deng, then on his deathbed appointed a Hua. Hua indeed succeeded Mao, who died, but he could not survive his rivals' challenge.

Deng was someone who vowed to break the cycle. By the eve of Tiananmen, however, the system under him had followed the same script. It was a three-way contention for the top, a "triad" of collective parties that featured Deng himself, his reform protégés as "heirs," and a conservative faction operating as "counter-heirs." Also reminiscent of the past, the crown prince problem confronted Deng as well. He had just disposed of a general party secretary and was about to remove another during the 1989 Tiananmen events. In doing so, he often enlisted help from the conservative "counter-heirs."

My three-way depiction of the polity is, to a large degree, an extension of previous factionalism models. I will continue using labels such as "conservatives" and "reformers," but I will take into account factors outside ideological commitment. Most importantly, I stress the fluidity of identities, alliances, and divisions.

Three Models Compared

Three theoretical models can be summarized from the discussion so far. The revolution suppression model draws inspiration from classical events such as the French Revolution, in which the rebellious nature of the revolt was unambiguous to political elites. It is essentially a "society-versus-the-state" narrative, with political elites being more or less united. Its explanation of Tiananmen's military crackdown treats such crackdown as the default solution of a repressive political machine.

Another model, the two-way factionalism model, on the other hand, splits political elites into two factions, viewing one of them as possible allies of the social movement. It is a modified version of the previously mentioned "society-versus-the-state" narrative, with the society having a sympathizer from within. It is also one of the most common frameworks used to understand elite politics in authoritarian systems. Its explanation for Tiananmen's military crackdown considers such a crackdown as a result of the protest's reformist allies losing to its hardline adversaries.

The third model I propose in this book, called the three-way succession model, incorporates another significant element, rather than relying on the protest itself, to explain the decision. This alternative model places the supreme leader at the center of elite politics due to his unmatched power and the important role that succession concerns played in the contentious episode. The protest certainly was not separated from these succession concerns, but it also did not replace them as the top priority for political elites. Instead, the protest changed the political landscape, transforming the means through which political elites can fight for control and in effect becoming a resource. To allude to what will be covered in the following chapters, among the other key players under Deng, the incumbent heir used it to maintain "good graces" with Deng, while his rivals used it to undermine such trust. Deng eventually used the protest as a justification to demonstrate his military power. This is the three-way succession model's explanation for Tiananmen's military crackdown.

The three models are built on differing assumptions, as summarized in Table 1.1. The revolution suppression model starts with the assumption that a revolutionary situation has arisen, and that the regime is in danger of collapse. As such, the defining issue of elite politics at that time is to fight this possibility – that is, to suppress the protest. Since they are confronted by a common threat, the elites react to the situation more or less as a united front – see the first column of the table under the revolution suppression model.

By comparison, the two-way factionalism model does not assume that the government is already in an unstable situation. The two-faction framework applies to both normal times and periods of great upheaval. Even during large protests, the top priority is still less clear-cut. However, what is rigid about this model is that it presumes a two-faction divide and uses this divide as the key to understanding individual behavior (see the second column of Table 1.1).

The three-way succession model questions whether a revolutionary situation has occurred. This model identifies political succession as the defining issue. It

Table 1.1 *Comparing the assumptions of three models*

	Revolution suppression	Two-way factionalism	Three-way succession
A revolutionary situation?	Yes	Not assumed	Not assumed
Defining political issue	Protest suppression	Protest suppression and succession	Succession
Elite alignment	United front	Two factions	Evolving alliances

is based on historical conditions and theoretically draws inspiration from studies of elite politics where "re-election" is considered central.[80] Compared to the two-way factionalism model, this new model also rejects the static view of factionalism. It depicts a process of factional alliance in a three-way contention, in which groupings are fluid (see the third column of Table 1.1).

As formulated, the three models offer contrasting sets of empirical predictions about elite politics during the historical 1989 Tiananmen incident.

The differing predictions of the revolution-suppression model versus the three-way succession model are as follows:

- The revolution-suppression model presumes a large-scale protest to be revolutionary in a communist regime, while the three-way succession model treats this issue as an empirical question and calls for investigation.
- For the revolution-suppression model, state leaders are mainly concerned with how to end the protest, while the three-way succession model predicts a wide variety of choices over time and across groups, whose goal is mainly to frame and channel the protest to their advantage.
- For the revolution-suppression model, the martial law troops were employed to restore order, while the three-way succession model suggests that the troops were called in to serve a greater purpose and for a long game, but foremost to strengthen Deng's position. His use of military power was to carry out his removal of Zhao and to enhance his bargaining power in his contest with his conservative rivals over the direction of the country, including the choice for a new leadership.
- For the revolution-suppression model, the scale and manner of using the military are a response to the protest, while the three-way succession model suggests that the military operation was disproportionate in its scale, and that its purpose was to showcase symbolic power.

The differing predictions of the two-way factionalism model versus the three-way succession model are as follows:

- The two-way factionalism model presents an elite alignment of two factions, while the three-way succession model suggests that Deng the supreme leader forms a faction of his own, hovering over the two factions.
- The two-way factionalism model implies a static lineup of two camps throughout the course of Tiananmen, while the three-way succession model suggests the fluid nature of the elite alignment, as players could always change sides to take advantage of an opportunity or retain power, often at the expense of a prior allegiance or ideological preference.

- The two-way factionalism model suggests an alliance between a reformer and the protesters, while the three-way succession model predicts that the protest could be poorly connected to potential elite allies.
- The two-way factionalism model reasons that suppression is a result of the elite allies losing out to the hardliners, while the three-way succession model suggests that the driving force behind the policy was the supreme leader.
- The two-way factionalism model casts Deng, for his military suppression, as a conservative politician, while the three-way succession model posits that he remained a reformer despite all, which was made clear by his trajectory in post-crackdown events.

The Organization of the Book and Summary of Chapters

After this introductory chapter, I will divide the historical narrative into four parts to offer evidence for evaluating the above three models.

Part I, Party-State Leadership in the Deng Era (Chapters 2 and 3): The Limitations of Deng's Power as Supreme Leader and the Crown Prince Problem

In Chapters 2 and 3, I describe the party-state leadership under Deng, the communist supreme leader. He enjoyed exceptional power and authority, but just as important, his power had limits, which is the key to understanding why he needed to "play politics" as others did. Chapter 2 narrates his ascendance to power and, on his way up, how he was helped by his future rivals. Chapter 3 explores the crown prince problem, another limit on Deng's power that came with old age. Already in his eighties, Deng's succession plan was constantly endangered by factional infighting and the elusiveness of his own trust in the potential heirs. The background presented in these two chapters is important because succession politics would take center stage in the 1989 saga.

Part II, Elite Politics and the Making of the Tiananmen Protest (Chapters 4, 5, and 6): How Elites Coproduced the Tiananmen Protest with Students

In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I show how the party leaders ended up coproducing the Tiananmen protest movement. Chapter 4 chronicles the fight between General Secretary Zhao and Premier Li over how to label the unfolding events, while no action was taken to stop the protest. Chapter 5 turns to Deng to explain the meaning of his two long spells of silence and his private reassurance to Zhao, and his later alliance with former rivals to condemn the protest. Days before his final decision,

his conversation with his military man shed light on his true intentions. Chapter 6 returns to the two rivals, General Secretary Zhao and Premier Li. While briefly in charge, Li did not order any real action against the protest but encouraged "dialogue," which in effect lent legitimacy to student organizations. Zhao experimented with a conciliatory approach, but his plan was snarled by elite infighting and student radicalism. In sum, in one way or another, the leaders' actions inflamed the movement to new heights.

Part III, The Decision for Military Intervention (Chapters 7, 8, and 9): Martial Law Was Overkill, but Mainly Not Aimed at Protesters

In Chapters 7, 8, and 9, I address the martial law decision itself. Was the protest serious enough for the extraordinary measure? Chapter 7 presents evidence that it was not. China in 1989 was fiscally sound and internationally independent. The student movement was reformist in nature and lacked broad support, and, if not prompted further, would have declined and died. Chapter 8 explores Deng's decision in its political context, including dismissing General Secretary Zhao and appointing a new leadership. Chapter 9 narrates the military operation on June 3–4. The spectacular display of military might was an overkill, and the clearing the of square could have been done by a small fraction of the troops.

Part IV, The Political Impact (Chapter 10): Deng's Succession Plan Prevails in Post-Tiananmen Events

Chapter 10 uses post-Tiananmen events further illustrate the meaning of the Tiananmen decisions. Deng chose Jiang Zemin as the new leader, but he was a compromise candidate who was also backed by the conservatives. Deng pushed for his reform agenda and through a spectacular Southern Tour in 1992, triumphed over the conservative offensive and won over Jiang. In hindsight Deng played a political long game in 1989, and his Tiananmen decision figured prominently in his favor.

Conclusion (Chapter 11): Tiananmen and China's Communist Authoritarianism

The last chapter juxtaposes the empirical patterns of Tiananmen with the three alternative models of China's elite poltics. I conclude that the three-way succession model aligns with the historical facts better than the other two models. I end the book by exploring three institutional features of China's communist authoritarianism. By placing succession politics front and center, this book glimpses the future through the lens of the past.