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LETTER FROM BEIJING

## How Tiananmen Changed China

The regime bought off the protesters with riches and a new nationalism. And it's still working.

By MELINDA LIU | June 03, 2014



**S**tudent leader Wuer Kaixi was ringed by four concentric circles of “security monitors” in Tiananmen Square when I first met him 25 years ago in a throng of pro-democracy demonstrators. I had to get paper slips bearing the official stamps of protest leaders in order to approach Wuer, who was propped up against a pile of jumbled clothes and bedding and weak from a hunger strike. Known back then to have flashes of arrogance, Wuer gave me an irritated look when I joked, “You guys are as security-conscious as the Politburo.” During those heady days in May 1989, neither of us knew how futile his fresh-faced bodyguards would soon seem, faced with the horrific repression, the gunfire, the screams, the roaring military tanks which took over Beijing’s bloodstained streets on June 4.

We were naïve, confessed Wuer, now a Taiwan-based exile, when I interviewed him last week in a Tokyo coffee shop. “In those days we didn’t even know too much about democracy. Our understanding was superficial. But we knew very well our *lack* of democracy; we knew very clearly it was something we didn’t have.”

And what they still don’t. After People’s Liberation Army soldiers opened fire on demonstrators that day a quarter century ago, many Westerners predicted the regime would shortly implode. Chinese society was traumatized, the ruling Communist Party nearly split, the international community aghast. In those years democratic movements were percolating up all over the world; the Tiananmen protests seemed part of an irresistible tide of freedom that eventually engulfed the former Soviet Union, the Eastern bloc nations and other autocratic regimes in East Asia, such as Taiwan, Indonesia and Mongolia.

But the Chinese Communist Party, with a combination of military brutality and political savvy, managed to defy that trend—and today remains proud of that achievement. The party isn’t going to be commemorating the 25th anniversary of the crackdown, of course, but it’s hard to believe that some of the communist mandarins in Beijing won’t stop and reflect, with quiet satisfaction, on one of the most enduring successes in the history of oppression. After the regime killed at least 1,000 Tiananmen protesters—no one knows exactly what the death toll was—it effectively co-opted the survivors with an even more powerful weapon than tanks: astonishing economic growth, which continued steadily for the next 25 years. To inspire fresh loyalty to the party, the regime also disseminated a new ideology to replace communism: fervent nationalism.

Indeed, it is possible to draw a direct line between the regime’s successful suppression of the Tiananmen generation then and the assertive China we see today. Thanks in large part to the policies the regime adopted during and after Tiananmen, China is now widely perceived as an aggressive rising power, cracking down on its people while picking maritime fights with its neighbors in the East and South China Seas, even challenging the United States for influence in the Pacific.

What’s not well understood is that the Communist Party leadership believes it *has* to behave in this bullying manner abroad, in part as a way of satisfying the patriotic sentiments it set in motion to quell Tiananmen-era discontent. Thus, Americans and

other foreigners who are wary of China's future power would do well to observe this anniversary, if only as a way of comprehending the roots of China's new confidence. And that means understanding how an acutely defensive regime used nationalism, a growing mastery of public opinion and social safety valves such as social media to help regain its footing.

Tellingly, the memory of the Tiananmen protests is not revered in China as it is in the West. Authorities still ban all public mention of June 4, and have detained or questioned dozens of activists, victims' relatives, media workers and others in a pre-anniversary clampdown. The only Chinese city where candlelight vigils are allowed is the former British colony of Hong Kong. Many Tiananmen exiles who sought refuge abroad have been marginalized and in many cases forgotten. Wuer says he is still firmly committed to democratic reform. He keeps trying to return to China, saying, "I want to stand trial," so as to "open a public conversation on Tiananmen." But Wuer's four attempts have been unsuccessful, so for now he remains abroad. Last year he began assisting a newly launched online messaging platform called KwikDesk, providing translations and marketing advice. Kwikdesk features a Twitter-like interface from which users send anonymous messages of up to 300 words, with a hashtag. The messages are designed to self-destruct, and vanish online, at specified dates. "In the fight for freedom, we need platforms such as KwikDesk to anonymously exchange ideas." Wuer says. "I'm looking for ways to use it."

Others believe their reputations were damaged by lies told about them by the regime. In 1989, activist Wang Juntao turned down offers to help him escape into exile because he knew it would be held against him in the eyes of many Chinese. While Wang was hiding in the countryside after June 4, a friend offered to help him flee to Hong Kong via an "underground railroad." Wang said he didn't want to go. Pressured to betray Wang by authorities or face arrest himself, the friend managed to lure him straight into a Chinese police trap. Domestic media spread the story that Wang was arrested while trying to escape to Hong Kong. "That was a lie," he recalls. "The authorities lied in order to damage my image. They wanted to make Chinese people hate me."

Wang was sentenced to 13 years in prison and freed after five, when he was allowed to travel to the United States on medical parole. There he remains. While in exile, Wang has launched hunger strikes in Times Square on behalf of political prisoners back in

China. He says that while in the United States he's reveled in the opportunity to finally learn what democracy really is (or isn't) and how it really works (or doesn't). "Outside of China, you have a chance to learn about the political game of democracy," he explains. "In 1989, many people thought democracy was just an academic issue. But in reality it's a little dirty. It involves a lot of struggle." (Chinese leaders themselves are doing their homework on the messiness of Western democracy as well; Beijing's anti-corruption czar, Wang Qishan, reportedly recommended his colleagues watch the TV series "House of Cards," which highlights skullduggery and horsetrading on Capitol Hill.)

While Wang and Wuer are among the best known, the Tiananmen generation is not restricted to famous exiles. Many thousands of other Chinese were indelibly affected by the drama of the Tiananmen protests in 1989. But most won't allow their names to be published because of the continuing sensitivity of the topic. They include a young Chinese film director who recalls accompanying his father, a low-level bureaucrat, on a work trip to the Chinese capital during the early days of the 1989 Beijing Spring. "No public transport was running, so we walked for hours to get to Tiananmen," he recalls. "My father held me up to his head level, so I could witness the demonstrations. It was amazing; I'll never forget it." Today he channels his idealism into producing documentary films, mostly on historical topics, and tries not to pull any punches: "I just want to talk to people, and film them, and have them tell me the truth."

Other members of the Tiananmen generation have sought to sublimate some of their fervor into economic success. After 1989, Hou X. Tian spent five years lobbying to protect the rights of Chinese political prisoners. She was detained four separate times while advocating for then-husband Wang Juntao's release from prison. Hou shared a tiny jail cell with more than a dozen female criminals, forced to sleep under a fetid quilt smelling of cabbages, on the floor near a stinking hole that was the communal latrine. But after Hou emigrated to the United States in 1993, she went to Harvard for a master's degree in public administration and spent more than a decade with a Wall Street firm.

Now, Hou says, she's no longer a full-time activist (though she makes no secret of her past advocacy, which helped win the release of six of the most prominent leaders of the 1989 protest movement and 300 others). In 2011, Hou set up her own

independent research and advisory firm specializing in U.S.-listed stocks, and opened its Beijing office in 2012. She says it has doubled its revenue year by year. “I teach my employees the need for a work ethic, a value system,” she says. Still, Hou adds, after she returned to Beijing in 2012 she was startled by how morally empty nearly everyone seemed. “We’re better off economically, but not in terms of fairness, happiness, equality,” she says.

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**How did authorities succeed** in replacing the gauzy idealism of 1989 with today’s strident nationalism? After the Tiananmen bloodshed, authorities retooled the educational system to expose students to heavier doses of “patriotic education.” That, compounded by China’s more muscular international profile, has boosted national pride. President Xi Jinping now uses this to his advantage. Shortly after becoming president last year, he unveiled as his slogan: the concept of a “Chinese Dream” of national rejuvenation. And Xi has been strutting his stuff abroad. Recently Chinese and Japanese fighter jets went eyeball to eyeball over islands that both sides claim in the East China Sea. Beijing is pressing its claim to nearly all of the South China Sea, despite competing claims by neighboring nations. And in May Beijing deployed an oil rig in waters disputed by Hanoi, triggering violent anti-Chinese riots in Vietnam.

These moves have boosted the regime’s popularity, but they represent a double-edged sword. Today’s Chinese youth are more likely to take to the streets denouncing perceived international slights or foreign aggression than they are championing this thing called democracy. Several times in the past decade and a half, nervous Chinese police have allowed angry protestors to trash U.S. diplomatic facilities and Japanese-owned retail outlets. Authorities now see “nationalism as a bigger danger than [the lure of] liberal democracies” as a trigger for provoking unrest, says James Reilly of the University of Sydney, author of a book about the rise of Chinese public opinion on Beijing’s increasingly vexed relations with Tokyo.

To keep a lid on, now many officials compulsively monitor public opinion, via social media and the Chinese version of Twitter, called Weibo. Their aides scurry to check out what sort of damaging exposés or images have gone viral that day, providing an early warning system to help prepare for damage control when volatile issues are about to blow up. (Censorship prevails, too; when a tweet mentions a politically taboo

subject, such as June 4, it usually disappears very quickly.)

Many political scientists see Weibo also functioning as a safety valve, allowing malcontents to vent without doing too much damage to the system. “Weibo helps keep people off the streets,” agrees author Reilly. But Hou thinks there’s more to it. For one thing, officialdom is now listening —and some of them are tweeting themselves. “Back in 1989 we wanted to bring issues from the streets into the Great Hall of the People,” says Hou. “Now Weibo is a mechanism to do that, even if it isn’t the channel we had expected.” She claims to be optimistic about China, but “I’m disappointed that so many young people seem to care only about money. The soul of China feels missing, and so far nothing has been able to bind it together, not even nationalism.”

A quarter century after the brutal suppression of the astonishing protest movement that brought thousands of Chinese together, members of the Tiananmen generation continue to seek their own answers, in their own ways. As does the regime. What is undeniable is Tiananmen Square never entirely went away. For better or worse, it was an event that fundamentally changed China.