

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

2 Introduction

“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 elder 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

4 Introduction

“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,

6 Introduction

“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

8 Introduction

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 counter-movements 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 counter-movement 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 Jiatao (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