

Deadly Decision in Beijing

Three decades after 1989, historical materials are now available for understanding the Tiananmen protests in a new light. In a play-by-play account of the elite politics that led to the military crackdown, Su addresses the repression of the protest in the context of political leadership succession. He challenges conventional views that see the military intervention as a necessary measure against revolutionary mobilization. Beneath the political drama, *Deadly Decision in Beijing* explores the authoritarian regime's perpetual crisis of leadership transition and its impact on popular movements.

YANG SU is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Irvine and a scholar of social movements, revolution, and political violence. His book *Collective Killings in Rural China during the Cultural Revolution* was a winner of the Barrington Moore Book Award and an Honourable Mention of the Charles Tilly Book Award of the American Sociological Association.

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*Succession Politics, Protest Repression, and the
1989 Tiananmen Massacre*

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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 . . . Whatever government or party has the full allegiance of a country's armed forces is to all intents and purposes politically impregnable . . . If it [the success of a popular uprising] is rare in the study of actual overthrows of dictatorship, it is very common in the romantic literature. The Bastille was actually taken by a regiment of regular infantry, but it is still the legend that it was a Paris mob.

Gordon Tullock, *Autocracy* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2012), 9–10

I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me . . . With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster.

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, chapter 41

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[More Information](#)

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv
<i>List of Main Characters</i>	xvi
<i>Chronology</i>	xix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xxii
1 Introduction: A Decision to Kill	1
Part I Party-State Leadership in the Deng Era	
2 The Coming of the Deng Era (1976–1987)	29
3 The Fate of Two Successors (1980–April 15, 1989)	47
Part II Elite Politics and the Making of the Tiananmen Protest	
4 Early Response and the Growth of the Protest (April 15–April 26, 1989)	75
5 Where Was Deng Xiaoping? (April 15–May 11, 1989)	95
6 How a Moderate Approach Failed (April 26–May 17, 1989)	114
Part III The Decision for Military Intervention	
7 Was It a Revolution? (April 15–June 3, 1989)	143
8 The Martial Law Decision (May 13–May 19, 1989)	166
9 Military Operation as Symbolic Display of Power (June 3–June 4, 1989)	187

viii	Contents	
	Part IV The Political Impact	
10	Deng’s Long Game (1989–1992)	223
11	Conclusion: Tiananmen and China’s Communist Authoritarianism	245
	<i>Notes</i>	262
	<i>Index</i>	308

Figures

7.1	Volume of student protest participation over time, April 16–June 3, 1989	<i>page</i> 152
7.2	China’s economic achievements in comparison with other communist countries, 1978–1989	160

Tables

1.1	Comparing the assumptions of three models	<i>page 20</i>
7.1	Mobilization frames in the Tiananmen Square movement in 1989	147

Preface

The tragedy shocked the world. Since then, the military suppression of a peaceful protest has been minutely and thoroughly documented by able historians.¹ Few can summarize the gist of the event better than Timothy Brook:

On the night of June 3, 1989, tens of thousands of soldiers armed with assault rifles forced their way into the city of Beijing and drove unarmed student protesters from the central square at Tiananmen. When hundreds of thousands of citizens and students blocked their paths, the soldiers opened fire. On the morning of June 4, thousands lay dead and dying in the streets, the hospitals, and the homes of Beijing.²

The most extraordinary aspect of the event is a decision to deploy conventional combat troops to pacify a protest. The scale of tragedy was a result of the scale of the operation, one that involved 24 group armies, more than 180,000 men, and untold numbers of tanks and assault rifles. While Brook and his fellow historians focus on the military operation itself, my investigation in this book is about how the state leaders made that extraordinary decision in the first place. A closer look shows that ending protest was more a pretext than it was the real cause.

As my writing came to completion in 2020, the faraway events described in the book found poignant resonance in the news in the United States. In Beijing in 1989, a general secretary of China's Communist Party was in a precarious position and his patron was under pressure to unseat him; then a former general secretary's death triggered a student protest, which met brutal suppression by the military. In Washington, DC in 2020–2021, a defeated president of the United States refused to concede the election and instigated a citizen insurrection, and before his successor took over as the commander in chief of the United States military, he pressured generals to stage a coup.³

Both moments featured a disputed political leadership transition, popular unrest, and the actual occurrence or the possibility of military interference. In the case of China, the army was sent in and armed assault by the troops killed thousands, while in the case of the United States, top military generals felt the

pressure from the commander in chief but resisted.⁴ That the two countries represent two fundamentally different political systems only underscores an important point. That is, military transgression into domestic politics is a peril hung over modern governments of all types, as real for a mature democracy as for an authoritarian regime.

It is a widely acknowledged norm among modern nations that some level of separation between the military and domestic politics is desired.⁵ “Because we fear others, we create an institution of violence to protect us, but then we fear the very institution we created for protection,” as noted by a scholar.⁶ That is, the military as a force is created to deal with external threats, not for domestic politics. The fact that it is powerful makes it all the more important to keep it at arm’s length. If it is used at all in the domestic realm, it should be used like an “airbag,” only for emergencies.⁷

The decision rests on the political figure at the top, a supreme leader in China, for example, or a president in the United States. Even as the civilian commander of the military, however, he cannot bring the army into the civilian sphere at will. Before he can use the “airbag,” so to speak, he needs to first make the case of an “emergency.” To a large extent his rule is beholden to the regime’s elite factions, the public, and the international community. He would endeavor to proclaim disorder so severe that military restoration is justified.

Social unrest often serves as a perfect pretext. The method of billing a popular protest as a menacing revolution has an automatic appeal. That was exactly how Deng Xiaoping and his supporters made their case in 1989. But under the surface, there was another real “emergency” at work. That is, a crisis in the octogenarian leader’s succession plan: his current candidate had been endangered and a new heir must be chosen, but in the meantime he found himself in a position of diminished power. Military action would be a political play to reset the power dynamics. In other words, while the protest appeared to trigger the military decision, in reality both the protest and the military action were advanced by a third underlying factor – the crisis of succession politics.

Such moments of “contention triangle,” as this book calls it, are all too familiar in our time. Other examples include the 2011 Tahir Square protest in Egypt, and the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine and its subsequent replays. With those past episodes in mind, one may wonder, what could happen if major world powers such as Russia and China experience new rounds of succession crisis? For that matter, we must also remember that nondemocratic governments account for more than two-thirds of political systems in the world. Therefore, special cycles of social unrest caused by leadership transition, frequently so severe that the military is involved, deserve urgent and serious scholarship.

From that perspective, a calendar of leadership transition is in the central place of analysis. It traces an exogenous source of social unrest in a regime's seasonal changes – its electoral cycle or the life cycle of strongman rulers. While lessons can be drawn from the failures of democratic systems, particularly useful are the lessons learned from authoritarian systems, where succession politics – leadership transitions that follow no democratic rules – becomes the subject matter. How does the ruler designate and raise a successor? Before power changes hands, can the ruler and the chosen successor get along? Will others contest the successorship? At what point can such contests disable the system?

Answering these questions faces two obstacles. The first is mental. We scholars need to move away from a tendency to treat those authoritarian systems as something simply “bad,” devoid of the politics that we normally understand. We should overcome such a bias and restore them to terms we normally use to describe a political system – government officials’ “re-election” prospects, a top leader’s concern for his legacy, elite alliance and partisanship, policy disputes, interaction between the elite and the public, and, finally, institutional boundaries and transgressions.

A second obstacle is informational. We normally lack data about elite politics from those closed systems. During China’s Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, for instance, journalists and scholars had to rely on information such as the order of leaders’ appearances at a public event to decipher the “power struggles.”⁸ The secrecy of North Korea’s regime in the 2020s is such that a round of international news coverage was aroused when the supreme leader, Kim Jong-un, appeared to have lost a significant amount of weight.⁹

This book benefited from an unusual amount of information that has accumulated since the Tiananmen Square movement. With thousands of innocent lives lost, the gravity of the tragic event inspired intense public interest and gave rise to a small industry of information gathering and publishing. Among the wide range of contributors are a former general secretary of the party, a former premier of the government, former officials privy to government dossiers, and numerous journalists and independent researchers. This richness of materials allowed me to present the “politics” in terms that we normally use and comprehend. The result is a detailed account of elite contentions taking place inside government compounds, and an analysis that looks beyond the assumption that a “bad” government would automatically suppress social protest.

Acknowledgments

This book is based on source materials already available in the public domain. But its writing has been greatly assisted by my numerous conversations with a particular group of China experts. They are former leaders and activists of the Tiananmen Square movement who live in exile in the United States. Some of them have become scholars themselves. Although they are no more privy to China's elite politics than a researcher such as myself, their deep knowledge of the system affords me penetrating insights. If the thesis I present here sounds familiar to them, that should come as no surprise, for my thinking has been stimulated, transformed, and shaped by listening to their views. I thank them for their support for my research, and for their sacrifices in pursuing an ideal to make China a better place. For reasons that I hope can be appreciated by my readers, I can only acknowledge them collectively without using their names.

At different stages of my research and writing, I enjoyed assistance, advice, and encouragement from four leading authorities on the history of Tiananmen. They are Timothy Brook, who generously shared his research materials, Andrew Nathan, Jeff Wasserstrom, and Perry Link. When this project was presented at various seminars, I also benefited from the comments of students and four pre-eminent sociologists: Michael Mann, Craig Calhoun, Ching Kwan Lee, and Min Zhou.

For intellectual as well as moral support, I would like to acknowledge my wife Junling Ma; my colleagues Wang Feng and Edwin Amenta; and my former mentors Andrew Walder, Doug McAdam, and John McCarthy. They make themselves constantly available to me. Wang Feng's unfailing faith and genuine interest in the project was a constant source of motivation and assurance. Andrew Walder lent his expertise and kindness at a number of critical junctures; a teacher with high standards, his praises can do wonders.

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the index and footnotes. For his expert copyediting in the final stage, my deep appreciation goes to John Gaunt of Cambridge University Press. I thank three anonymous reviewers for their constructive suggestions as well as their recognition of the value of the manuscript. Finally, my debt of gratitude is owed to Lucy Rhymer, Rachel Blaifeder, and Michael Watson, three editors of Cambridge University Press.

If my previous book on China's Cultural Revolution was about human sufferings inflicted by Maoism, this new book, in a sense, is about a cast of characters working hard to move China away from that monstrous system. Those efforts include Deng's reform on the government's side and the pro-democracy movements on society's side. Much has changed in China since then, and in retrospect the work of those people now looks even more valuable. I see many of them as my heroes. I dedicate this book to them.

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Main Characters

Chen Xitong (陈希同) (“x” is pronounced as “s” as in the English word “see”) Mayor of Beijing and a member of the Politburo of the central government. A conservative ally of Premier Li Peng, he actively promoted a hard line against the student protest.

Chen Yun (陈云) Aged eighty-four in 1989. One of the most respected older leaders and the head of the conservative faction. He and Deng Xiaoping formed “Twin Politics” in the reform era. His official title was chairman of the Central Advisory Committee.

Deng Liqun (邓力群) (“q” is pronounced as English “ts”) (no relation to Deng Xiaoping) A party ideologue with clear conservative views. Instrumental in waging attacks against Hu Yaobang and then, after Hu’s dismissal, Zhao Ziyang. Reportedly a conservatives’ candidate to replace Zhao Ziyang as general secretary.

Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) Aged eighty-four in 1989. The supreme leader. While having nominally retired from the state and the party, he held the title of Central Military Committee (CMC) chair. According to a rule that later came to light, all party leaders were required to defer to him on the most important issues.

He Dongchang (何东昌) Chair of the nation’s Educational Commission. A conservative ally of Premier Li Peng, he presented the student protest in a negative light to support a hardline policy and to undermine General Secretary Zhao Ziyang.

Hu Qiaomu (胡乔木) A party ideologue with clear conservative views. He was instrumental in waging attacks against Hu Yaobang and then, after, Hu’s dismissal, Zhao Ziyang.

Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦) General secretary between 1980 and 1986. His death on April 15 triggered the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement. A former protégé of Deng Xiaoping, a reformer, hence a target of the conservative faction. He was removed from his post after his sympathetic handling of a wave of student protest in 1986–1987.

- Hu Qili** (胡启立) A reformer leader in charge of ideology and propaganda in the Standing Committee, an ally of General Secretary Zhao Ziyang. Instrumental in formulating the moderate policy in Zhao's "New Take." Dismissed along with Zhao's removal.
- Hua Guofeng** (华国锋) No official position in 1989. Mao's designated successor. In 1976 he led a coalition of leaders to arrest the Gang of Four, including Mao's widow. He was ousted from leadership by Deng by 1980.
- Jiang Zemin** (江泽民) Formerly the mayor and party secretary of Shanghai, tapped by Deng and his conservative rivals as the Zhao Ziyang's replacement as general secretary.
- Li Peng** (李鹏) Premier, second in the Standing Committee after General Secretary Zhao Ziyang. Representative in the first line for the conservative camp led by Chen Yun and Li Xiannian.
- Li Xiannian** (李先念) Aged eighty in 1989. An elderly leader and one of the key allies in the conservative camp with Chen Yun. He advocated a hard line against the protest and was an instrumental in unseating General Secretary Zhao Ziyang. He promoted Jiang Zemin as the new party chief.
- Li Ximing** (李锡铭) Party secretary of Beijing City and a member of the Politburo. A conservative ally of Premier Li Peng, he was one of Beijing City leaders for a negative report on the student movement, which was the basis for the April 26 editorial.
- Qiao Shi** (乔石) Reformer leader in charge of public security. Ally of General Secretary Zhao Ziyang in the Standing Committee.
- Yang Shangkun** (杨尚昆) Aged eighty-two in 1989, de facto chief commander running the CMC for Deng. One of the key leaders in carrying out the June 4 operation, along with Li Peng. Eased out in 1992 to make way for new General Secretary Jiang Zemin's military control.
- Yao Yilin** (姚依林) A conservative leader in charge of the economy, ally of Premier Li Peng in the Standing Committee.
- Wan Li** (万里) A reformer ally of General Secretary Zhao Ziyang. President of the National Congress.
- Wang Ruilin** (王瑞林) Deng Xiaoping's chief aid, a position similar to the chief of staff in other systems.
- Yan Mingfu** (阎明复) Minister of Civil Affairs. A progressive leader and an ally of General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, he worked to facilitate communication between the government and the students in the hope of defusing tension.
- Ye Jianying** (叶剑英) Died in 1986. A marshal and the highest-ranked military officer in 1976 when Mao died. He assisted Hua Guofeng

xviii List of Main Characters

to arrest Hua’s rivals, the members of the “Gang of Four,” including Mao’s widow. He then helped Deng Xiaoping return to power.

Yuan Mu (袁木) A spokesman for the State Council. Served as a key figure in the student–government dialogue. An ally of Premier Li Peng, trying to turn a dialogue into an attack on General Secretary Zhao Ziyang.

Zhao Ziyang (赵紫阳) (“zh” is pronounced “j” as in the English word “John”) General party secretary at the outset of the 1989 student movement and number one in the organizational chart of the “first-line” leadership structure. He is the leader of the reform faction with Qiao Shi and Hu Qili as his allies in the Standing Committee. He took a reconciliatory approach toward the student protest. Removed from his post after he refused to support the martial law decision.

Chronology

Before the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement

April 1976	A Tiananmen Square protest for which Deng Xiaoping is framed and dismissed.
September–October 1976	Death of Mao and arrest of the “Gang of Four,” including Mao’s widow, Jiang Qing.
August 1977	Eleventh CCP Congress. Deng returns to power.
December 1978	Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee criticizes Mao loyalists who advocate the “Two Whatevers” policy.
1978–1979	Stimulated by a freer political climate, thousands of big-character posters appear on walls west of the Forbidden City in Beijing (the Democracy Wall).
September 1980	Zhao Ziyang replaces Hua Guofeng as China’s premier.
June 1981	Hua Guofeng resigns as chairman of the CCP and Hu Yaobang takes the position under the title of CCP general secretary.
November–December 1986	Students in Hefei, Shanghai, Beijing, and some other major cities demonstrate in the streets.
January 1987	Hu Yaobang is dismissed from the post of CCP general secretary. Zhao Ziyang becomes CCP general secretary.

During the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement

April 15	Hu Yaobang dies of a heart attack.
April 16–17	Wreaths and elegiac couplets appear in Tiananmen Square and at many Beijing colleges. Around 2,000 university students march to the square.

xx Chronology

- April 19–20 Minor skirmishes occur between policemen and students at Xinhua Gate of the government compound at Zhongnanhai. Students in some universities start a class boycott.
- April 22 Around 50,000 students march to the square overnight to participate in Hu Yaobang’s funeral. Three students kneel on the steps and demand a meeting with Premier Li Peng.
- April 23 The Beijing Student Autonomous Union Provisional Committee is founded.
- April 23 Zhao Ziyang leaves Beijing for North Korea, leaving Li in charge.
- April 25 Outside troops begin to move into Beijing Military District
- April 26 A *People’s Daily* editorial labels the movement “a planned conspiracy” and “turmoil.”
- April 27 About 100,000 students march to Tiananmen Square to protest the editorial.
- April 29 A State Council spokesman holds a dialogue with students. Students are not satisfied.
- April 30 Zhao Ziyang returns from North Korea to Beijing, resuming his post in charge.
- May 4 Students hold a march in commemoration of the May 4th movement of 1919. Zhao Ziyang strikes a conciliatory tone and begins to experiment with a moderate policy. However, his attempt to reverse the April 26 editorial fails due to Deng’s and Li’s objections.
- May 5 The Beijing Student Dialogue Delegation is formed. Most students in Beijing return to class.
- May 11 Deng Xiaoping–Yang Shangkun Conversation. Jiang is mentioned.
- May 13 Three thousand students start a hunger strike in Tiananmen Square. A huge number of students begin to occupy the square.
- May 14 A high-level state delegation starts an emergency dialogue with student activists. The meeting goes chaotically because different students have totally different agendas in mind. The hunger strike continues.
- May 15 Gorbachev arrives. The state has to hold the welcome ceremony at Beijing Airport.
- May 17 Zhao Ziyang pleads for toleration but is overruled by Deng. The meeting at Deng’s residence that decides on martial law.
- May 18 Zhao Ziyang resigns.
- May 19 Li Peng declares martial law, but the martial law troops are blocked by Beijing residents and students. More and more students from universities outside Beijing arrive in the city.

May 22	The army orders its soldiers to pull back to the suburbs.
May 26	Troops begin to infiltrate to positions inside the city.
June 3	Military suppression starts. Students and other civilians killed on its paths of advance from the outskirts of Beijing to the square.
June 4	The remaining 4,000 students leave the square after they are completely encircled by troops.
June 9	Deng congratulates his officers on the suppression.
September 4	Deng retires from the CMC, passing the chairmanship to Jiang Zemin.

After the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement

January–February 1992 Deng’s Southern Tour.

Abbreviations

2FM	Two-way factionalism model
3SM	Three-way succession model
Beida	Beijing (Peking) University
BAAUS	Beijing Autonomous Association of University Students
BDDUS	Beijing Dialogue Delegation of University Students
BWAF	Beijing Workers’ Autonomous Federation
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CAC	Central Advisory Committee
CMC	Central Military Committee
GLD	General Logistics Department
GPD	General Political Department
GSH	General Staff Headquarters
MR	Military region
NPC	National People’s Congress
PAP	People’s Armed Police
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
PSB	Public Security Bureau
RSM	Revolution suppression model
SC	Standing Committee of the Politburo
SEZ	Special Economic Zone