1 Happy

At first glance, Lu Decheng and Chai Ling's trajectories in the 1980s could not have been more different. Lu, who turned eighteen in the summer of 1981, was a bus mechanic in a quiet town in Hunan Province. Volatile and moody, he had gotten in trouble with the police after putting a drop of pesticide in his coworker's thermos.[1] Lu was a skilled mechanic but his prospects seemed limited.

Chai Ling, who was three years younger than Lu Decheng, had a much brighter future. She was an academic superstar from an ordinary town in Shandong Province; in 1983 she tested into Peking University, China's top school. Chai had many opportunities to learn and grow in what she called the "vibrant, dynamic" university atmosphere of the 1980s. She studied psychology, ran track, wrote for the school newspaper, joined student government, worked at a coffee shop, and went to dances on Saturday nights.[2]

China's 1980s offered increased freedom and opportunity for many, but also anxious uncertainty for others. In this environment, Chai Ling was poised to be a winner. Lu Decheng was not. But Chai and Lu had at least one thing in common: their lives would be dramatically thrown off course by the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Chai became the face of the student movement in Beijing. She was a motivational speaker who inspired hundreds to join a pivotal hunger strike and who became the self-styled "commander in chief" of the protest site in late May 1989. During the People's Liberation Army's violent crackdown of June 3 and 4, 1989, Chai stayed in the square with the last group of students until the army allowed them to walk away. Chai fled Beijing, eventually escaped China, and started a new life in the United States.

[1] Denise Chong, *Egg on Mao: The Story of an Ordinary Man Who Defaced an Icon and Unmasked a Dictatorship* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 2009), 74.
[2] Chai Ling, *A Heart for Freedom: The Remarkable Journey of a Young Dissident, Her Daring Escape, and Her Quest to Free China's Daughters* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2011), 38.

Lu Decheng also gained prominence in May 1989. Stirred by the students' hunger strike, Lu traveled with friends from Hunan to Beijing, where they planned to attack the symbolic heart of the Communist Party's dictatorship. On May 22, 1989, Lu and his friends threw paint-filled eggs at the official portrait of Mao Zedong overlooking Tiananmen Square. Afraid that the outsiders' vandalism would invite a violent response from the government – or that the egg throwers themselves might be government instigators – students turned Lu and his friends over to the police. Lu was sentenced to sixteen years for the crime of counterrevolutionary sabotage. He was released after nine years in prison; a few years later he fled China and ended up in Canada.

Involvement in the Tiananmen Square protests, however, is not the only thing that connects Lu Decheng and Chai Ling. People like Chai and Lu are useful guides to understanding China's 1980s. Their experiences shed light on what made people in China happy and what annoyed or angered them during the years before 1989. Their happy moments raised their hopes. But like many others, they suffered traumatic setbacks that tempered their high hopes and made them predisposed to plunge into the protests of 1989 when the opportunity presented itself. To understand the Tiananmen protests, we must first explore what made people happy and what made them angry in the preceding decade.

On September 18, 1976, Lu Decheng's middle-school teacher sharply criticized him. Lu was in trouble because he had failed to cry at a mass memorial service for Chairman Mao Zedong. Mao's death did not change everything in China, but the end of the Mao years and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) did usher in new personal and political freedoms. During the 1970s, schoolchildren like Lu Decheng had to participate in political rituals – including orchestrated crying – or face criticism. People who dared to openly criticize Mao, and even those who unintentionally defamed the leader, faced prison sentences. During the late 1970s, local courts reexamined these "counterrevolutionaries," set them free, and compensated them for their losses.[3] The crime of counterrevolution remained on the books during the 1980s, but for the most part people in China no longer had to fear that their coworkers, neighbors, or family members might denounce them as a political enemy.

The end of the 1970s also brought freedom from the official class-status label system that had stigmatized millions of families since the

[3] Daniel Leese, "Revising Political Verdicts in Post-Mao China: The Case of Beijing's Fengtai District," in *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism*, ed. Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 102–28.

Communists came to power in 1949. Originally intended to monitor and punish landlords and capitalists who had exploited peasants and workers, over the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s class-status labels evolved into a caste system that limited education and job opportunities for the children of political enemies, who became targets of persecution and violence during the political movements of the Mao years. In 1979, top Communist leaders declared an end to the use of such negative labels as "landlord" and "rich peasant"; all villagers would simply be called "commune member."[4] Modernization, rather than class struggle against the former exploiting classes, became the Party's main focus.

Pursuing modernization was a cause for happiness in the 1980s. For many people, especially students and intellectuals, it meant freedom to seek higher education, debate controversial issues, read foreign articles and books, and travel abroad for academic conferences. This was a major change from the 1970s. The physicist Fang Lizhi, who had been condemned and "reeducated" through hard labor in coal mines during the Mao years, began to challenge classical Marxism in lectures throughout China during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Fang wrote about the experience, "I concluded that the main problem facing modernization in the late 1970s was not that people were ignorant but that they did not even know that they were ignorant."[5] Marxism was still the dominant official ideology in China, but pursuing modernization during the 1980s meant that it was no longer the only game in town.

Professors and students alike found it exhilarating to challenge orthodoxy in what writer Frankie Huang has called

> an explosion of expression that served as catharsis for years of repression. In this environment, people felt free to give their own points of view without fear of reprisal. My father recalls testing the waters by saying, "The Communist Party is not sacred" in front of a party secretary at his university. He was not even reprimanded, much less punished.[6]

Students like Chai Ling were deeply affected by this shift. Had she been born a few years earlier, Chai might have been sent to the countryside to toil as a peasant instead of having the opportunity to gain admission to China's most prestigious school during a time of intellectual ferment and

[4] Jeremy Brown, "Moving Targets: Changing Class Labels in Rural Hebei and Henan, 1960–1979," in *Maoism at the Grassroots*, 73.
[5] Fang Lizhi, *The Most Wanted Man in China: My Journey from Scientist to Enemy of the State*, trans. Perry Link (New York: Henry Holt, 2016), 186.
[6] Frankie Huang, "China in the 1980s, When People Felt Free to Speak Their Minds," *Goldthread*, August 1, 2019, www.goldthread2.com/culture/china-1980s-censorship/article/3021028.

openness to new ideas. At Peking University during the 1980s, Chai attended lectures introducing American psychological theories. Her mind was blown.[7]

Beijing was a world apart from Hunan's Liuyang. In Hunan, Lu Decheng did not read books for fun, nor did he attend academic lectures. In 1980, however, as an eighteen-year-old, he experienced a different type of freedom: the freedom to fall in love and have sex. The norm in Liuyang was for parents and family friends to arrange relationships for young adults, but Lu and his girlfriend Wang Qiuping became a couple after a chance meeting at a badminton match. Over their parents' objections, Lu and Wang began a sexual relationship and went into hiding, shacking up on the outskirts of town.[8]

Sexual norms had already started changing during the 1970s, when some rural families encouraged young couples to have sex before marriage – as part of a strategy to foster a long-term, stable relationship – and when city kids had clandestine dance parties. These trends continued in the 1980s.[9] Shen Tong was a first-year undergraduate student at Peking University in 1986. Shen recalled that when he and his girlfriend Xiaoying started having sex, "It was very liberating because all my life I had heard that sex was something to be scorned and was done only to have children." Shen linked sexual freedom to a broader sense of personal liberation. He wrote, "Since we lived in a restrictive society, I naturally felt that having sex was somehow an anti-government activity."[10]

Chai Ling also became sexually active as an undergraduate student at Peking University. She got together with a physics student named Qing. Overcoming the logistical challenges of gender-segregated dormitories and restrictions on dating, Chai and Qing became physically intimate. Two years later, Chai and Qing broke up and Chai began a relationship with the intense, politically active Feng Congde. They got married in spring 1988. Couples in love such as Chai Ling and Feng Congde, as well as Lu Decheng and Wang Qiuping, found ways to stay together by circumventing or avoiding state restrictions intended to reduce China's

[7] Chai Ling, *Heart*, 36, 38. [8] Chong, *Egg*, 98–106.
[9] On rural patterns, see Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 65–66; on city parties, see James Farrer, *Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 66–67; and Paul G. Pickowicz, "High-Rise Counterculture," in *China Tripping: Encountering the Everyday in the People's Republic*, ed. Jeremy Murray, Perry Link, and Paul G. Pickowicz (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 66–68.
[10] Shen Tong, *Almost a Revolution* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 111–12.

birth rate. When Chai and Feng attempted to register their marriage, they learned that newlyweds had to have a combined age of forty-eight. They were four years short. Undeterred, Feng altered their identification documents and managed to trick the clerk.[11]

One of the most influential changes of China's 1980s was the one-child policy, the repercussions of which would contribute to severe unhappiness for Chai Ling as well as for Lu Decheng and Wang Qiuping, as we shall see in the following chapter. But for rural women who had lived through the 1950s and 1960s, the state's restrictive family planning regime was a cause for celebration. The one-child policy was the result of an intense political debate about how China's population growth hindered economic development.

China's leaders felt troubled by rapid population growth but were not sure how to address it. In 1979, missile scientist Song Jian created complex models and graphs to argue that uncontrolled population growth was a threat to China's national survival and that the only answer was to reduce China's average birth rate to one child per woman by 1985 and to stay at that rate for twenty to forty years. When demographer Liang Zhongtang of the Shanxi Party Academy saw Song Jian's plan, he quickly realized that the only way to implement it was through coercion and violence. Liang argued that the costs were too high and that an excessively low birth rate would lead to adverse consequences such as labor shortages and a rapidly aging society. Liang advocated for capping births at two children per family. But in the end, Song Jian's flashy scientific model, along with his government and military connections, convinced China's top leaders to implement a one-child policy.[12]

Older rural women did not know about the political battle that led to restrictive birth planning, but many supported the policy and worked hard to implement it during the 1980s. According to historian Gail Hershatter, who interviewed women in villages in Shaanxi Province:

> As birth planning work intensified in rural areas after 1979, women who had borne many children in the 1950s and 1960s became its strongest supporters, many of them serving as local birth planning cadres. Their personal experience had led them to feel, passionately, that it was difficult to support and care for many children properly.

Feng Sumei was a women's team leader responsible for convincing villagers to restrict births. Feng said that "in most families, women

[11] Chai Ling, *Heart*, 80.
[12] Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

agreed with the family planning, but men did not … How heavy the housework and sewing burden is for women if they have too many children!"[13] Some rural women during the 1980s saw the state's campaign to limit family size as more of a liberation than a violent intrusion.

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China entered the 1980s with a mostly healthy, mostly literate population. These improvements in life expectancy and education had occurred during the Mao years, and they contributed to rapid economic growth after Mao's death.[14] Other elements associated with China's economic takeoff during the 1980s, including family farming plots, a more mobile workforce, rural markets, and township-and-village enterprises, also had roots in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

Lai Changxing's family in Fujian Province was uneducated – Lai himself, who was born in 1958, was barely literate – but during the Cultural Revolution Lai's father illicitly appropriated a swamp to use as his own vegetable plot.[15] Privately farming land outside the collective system was a politically risky survival strategy during the Mao years, but many rural families decollectivized before the state told them they were allowed to do so in the 1980s. Families that had farmed for themselves rather than for the collective had a leg up when it became possible to go into business and make money in the 1980s. So did officials, who were advantageously positioned to obtain goods at low prices set by the state, which allowed them to profit by reselling the items at much higher market prices.

Officials also had the power to make life easy or difficult for businesspeople, which encouraged a culture of bribery in which bosses greased the palms of authorities in exchange for permits and tax breaks. Lai Changxing learned this the hard way. After working as an apprentice blacksmith for two years, in 1979 he set up his own auto parts workshop. Lai invested his profits in a shoe factory, clothing shops, and a television import business, among other enterprises.[16] "You could start a business in the morning and make money by the evening," Lai told journalist

[13] Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 208–9.
[14] Barry Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 82.
[15] Oliver August, *Inside the Red Mansion: On the Trail of China's Most Wanted Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 101.
[16] August, *Red Mansion*, 102.

Hannah Beech. "Everything was so free and open back then that everyone had lots of businesses. You would be stupid not to."[17]

According to his family, Lai's success eventually attracted attention from local officials. Two officials Lai had refused to bribe visited his home to audit his television import business. When Lai's sister rebuffed them, they beat her up, charged Lai with tax fraud, and started investigating his other businesses. Lai suffered so badly from official scrutiny that he liquidated his businesses in Shaocuo, moved to the big city of Xiamen, and started over. He had learned his lesson. In Xiamen, Lai's success in building a massive business empire was matched – and facilitated – by his newfound ability to keep officials happy with favors and gifts.[18] By cultivating officials, Lai was able to make a fortune.

This type of corruption became widespread during the 1980s. The officials who benefited from it felt happy that they could finally milk their positions for privilege instead of constantly being the target of political campaigns, as they had been during the Mao years. A village Party secretary in Guangdong Province named Qingfa appropriated land for his own use, let locals know that he was happy to trade favors for "gifts," and channeled profits from village enterprises to his relatives. Most villagers, who themselves were benefiting from the economic changes of the early 1980s, accepted Qingfa's behavior: "A number of them felt they would do likewise if they were in his shoes," wrote three scholars who did fieldwork in the village near Hong Kong. "Qingfa's abuses seemed in keeping with a widely shared mood of cynical privatism and advantage seeking."[19]

The nexus of corrupt officials and bribe-paying citizens increased incomes for some people during the 1980s, but many others stuck with what they had known during the Mao years: the *danwei* (单位), or work unit, system. After graduating, university students like Chai Ling could expect an assignment to a work unit – usually an office, factory, or school – that would not only pay a salary but also provide housing, health care, child care, and schooling for children, and grant permission to travel or buy rationed goods. There were many downsides to life in a work unit, but Lu Decheng's family celebrated his hiring at the Liuyang bus station because it meant security and stability. Work unit life seemed less risky than going into private business. Even after putting poison in a

[17] Hannah Beech, "Smuggler's Blues," *Time*, October 14, 2002, content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2056114,00.html.
[18] August, *Red Mansion*, 105.
[19] Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village: Revolution to Globalization*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 278–80.

rival's thermos, Lu Decheng kept his job. It would take a far more serious act to get fired.

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During the 1980s, many people did not spend much time worrying about elite politics. China's top leaders, however, spent hours thinking about how to modernize the country while keeping the Chinese Communist Party in power. Finding the right balance between the benefits of private enterprise and the control and surveillance role of the work unit system was only one of the puzzles that occupied central officials in Beijing.

One major puzzle that top leaders grappled with and that also excited people who had suffered during the oppressive 1970s was how to reform China's political and economic systems. Journalist Yang Jisheng has written that leaders grappled with four different possible paths, each one dependent on a political variable, dictatorship versus democracy, and an economic variable, planned versus market. One path was to continue the Cultural Revolution, combining an authoritarian dictatorship with the socialist planned economy that had prevailed during the 1960s and 1970s. This meant prioritizing heavy urban and hinterland industry oriented toward national defense, fueled by extracting grain from farmers tied to rural communes while prohibiting private markets and entrepreneurship. In October 1976, Mao's successor Hua Guofeng decisively blocked this path when he ordered the arrests of its primary advocates: Jiang Qing, Wang Hongwen, Yao Wenyuan, and Zhang Chunqiao, who became known as the "Gang of Four."[20]

Another possible path was to continue the Communist Party's dictatorship alongside a more flexible planned economy akin to that of the pre-1957 period. Chen Yun, who led economic policy during the mid-1950s and who returned to political prominence as a seventy-three-year-old in 1978, was the main proponent of this view. Historian Julian Gewirtz argues that Chen Yun has been "caricatured as an exclusively conservative force in China's reform," but Chen in fact advocated for accepting markets in a "supplementary and secondary" role alongside a socialist planned economy.[21]

Deng Xiaoping, who pushed aside Hua Guofeng to become China's top leader at the age of seventy-four in 1978, ended up pushing for a different path: a market economy open to foreign investment and still

[20] Yang Jisheng, 中国改革年代的政治斗争 (Political conflict in China's reform era) (Hong Kong: Excellent Culture Press, 2004), 4.
[21] Julian Gewirtz, *Unlikely Partners: Chinese Reformers, Western Economists, and the Making of Global China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 46.

overseen by the authoritarian CCP. Deng's central position as the unquestioned boss throughout the 1980s presented a challenge not only for Chen Yun, who Deng repeatedly sidelined by denying him chances to speak at meetings, but also for proponents of a fourth possible path for China: a more open democratic political system plus an open economy.[22] Quashing calls for democracy, while also dealing with those like Chen Yun who feared the ills of market-oriented reforms, meant that even though Deng and his chosen path won out, China's reform journey was not smooth or straightforward. Prospects for economic and political reform seesawed during the 1980s. There was a general – but not absolute – pattern of more openness and promise in even-numbered years, including freely contested elections to local people's congresses in 1980 and public discussions of system change in 1986, often followed by backlash and crackdowns in such odd-numbered years as 1981, 1983, 1987, and, fatefully, 1989.[23]

Deng's willingness to advance his reform path while cracking down on alternatives did not hamper his popularity much during the mid-1980s. By 1984, many people in China felt genuine affection for Deng and his ability to move China away from the worst aspects of the Mao years. *People's Daily* photographer Wang Dong captured this feeling on October 1, 1984, when he snapped a picture of Peking University students unfurling a banner at the PRC's National Day parade that read, "Hello, Xiaoping" (小平, 您好), a respectful but decidedly informal way to refer to a top leader. The photo ran in *People's Daily* the next day, and on October 3, 1984, the paper published what would be the first of many articles about the making of the banner and how it represented educated people's favorable opinions about Deng.[24]

The banner's creators originally planned to call Deng "Comrade Xiaoping," but they ran out of space on their cloth. "We all had some misgivings" about omitting "Comrade," said Guo Jianwei, "because this wasn't the way leaders were addressed in China … But after we continued to discuss it, we felt there was no malice in it; we just wanted to give a friendly greeting to a leader on the part of the college students." Because the banner had not been reviewed and approved by university authorities, Guo Jianwei and his classmates had to sneak it into Tiananmen Square on National Day. They worried that they might get in trouble and that the banner might be deemed counterrevolutionary. Guo even hid at a relative's house after the parade because he feared

[22] Yang Jisheng, 中国改革年代的政治斗争 (Political conflict in China's reform era), 18–22.
[23] Yang Jisheng, 中国改革年代的政治斗争 (Political conflict in China's reform era), 19.
[24] *RMRB*, October 2, 1984, 2; *RMRB*, October 3, 1984, 3.

Figure 1.1 Hu Yaobang in 1986. Michel Baret/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images.

police attention. But in the end, the students' risk taking was rewarded with positive media coverage. Students saying a cheeky hello bolstered Deng's image as a leader who enjoyed broad support.[25]

Retrospective myth making around Deng Xiaoping goes beyond celebrating "Hello Xiaoping" while forgetting Peking University students' fears that using the dictator's given name might get them arrested. The bigger myths relate to the role Deng played in reforming China's economy and opening China up to foreign investment. To be sure, Deng should be at the center of the story – he was the ultimate decider and the unapologetic dictator during the 1980s, after all. But giving Deng credit for everything erases the contributions of Hua Guofeng, General Secretary Hu Yaobang, Premier Zhao Ziyang, and even foreign economists. Mao's designated successor Hua Guofeng agreed with Deng Xiaoping about the need for economic reforms during the late 1970s, including setting up special economic zones that allowed foreign

[25] Joel Martinson, "Celebrating National Day, 1984," *Danwei*, October 1, 2008, web.archive.org/web/20160413235414/http://www.danwei.org/festivals/national_day.php.