

# Introduction

From April to June 1989, the Chinese Democracy Movement introduced a glorious chapter in China's history.

—Yan Jiaqi, 1990<sup>1</sup>

Between the spring and summer of 1989, a world-shaking turmoil and counter-revolutionary rebellion took place in Beijing.

—Che Muqi, 1990<sup>2</sup>

Like 1789 and 1917, 1989 will almost certainly go down in history as a key year. The *importance* of what happened in Beijing, Berlin, Bucharest, Budapest, Moscow, Prague, and Warsaw—indeed in the capitals of most of the existing socialist countries—can scarcely be doubted. The *significance* of those events—their origins, nature, and implications—on the other hand is not so obvious. As the preceding quotations suggest, the meaning of 1989 is already subject to debate among Chinese. The two sides of the debate may not be equal in number or strength. That will depend on the attitudes of the vast majority of the Chinese who live in the countryside and whose views are still little known to outsiders. But the debate is vigorous and genuine, and it is likely to be prolonged. It is merely one result of the extraordinary mobilization of hundreds of thousands of urban dwellers during that tumultuous spring.

In 1989, China was in crisis. As in some previous years of the recent past, such as 1898, 1911, 1927, and 1949, forces for continuity confronted pressures for change and resulted in a moment of great danger and opportunity, the very constituents of the Chinese term *weiji* (crisis). On the one hand were the dangers of corruption and inflation, political paralysis and social demoralization, declining productivity and growing population. On the other hand were opportunities for reform of policies and institutions, more domestic debate and openness to the world, more individual autonomy and prosperity. In Spring 1989, as in 1958, 1966, and 1978, China faced the question whether to address problems and consolidate achievements through readjustments from the top down or through mobilization from the bottom up.

In the event, as more and more students, teachers, reporters, industrial workers, civil servants, and common citizens went into the streets of Beijing and dozens of other cities, as more and more hunger strikers fell and were

carried off to hospital beds, the inability of top leaders in Zhongnanhai to provide effective solutions led to an escalation of demands. Starting as a few hundred petitioners for changes in government policy, the demonstrators grew in number beyond their wildest expectations. They soon began to doubt not only the leaders' ability to reform but also the state's capacity to govern and even the system's right to survive. The state and party were challenged to prove their legitimacy without recourse to Marxism-Leninism-Maoism; the students and workers were required to come up with alternatives without having the time to reflect or organize; the military was forced to choose between loyalty to the party leadership and sympathy for the urban population; and millions of ordinary Chinese were compelled to develop their own views on controversial issues of the day.

At the end of the 1980s, as at the end of the previous four decades, the People's Republic of China stood at a crossroads. Even more than in the past, there were many roads to choose among and many people demanding to participate in making the choice. Some in the movement for more democracy depicted the choice as one between good guys and bad guys or between "democracy" and "dictatorship"; some in the government saw it as a choice between order and disorder or between "socialism" and "capitalism." These two groups played key roles in 1989 and will undoubtedly continue to do so in the future. Yet many—perhaps most—Chinese viewed the choices in more complex terms; their interpretations of what happened in 1989 are also more sophisticated. In any case, there is a need to analyze carefully all of the evidence now coming in on the vast movement of spring 1989 and to place the events in the broadest possible temporal and spatial perspective.

This book is a collective effort to contribute to this ongoing project. It juxtaposes the reflections of Chinese and Americans from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines. Chinese contributors include some who were very active in the reforms of the 1980s and others who have done advanced training at American universities. Americans include some who were "foreign specialists" or researchers in China during the early stages of the movement and others who have devoted their lives to understanding China and interpreting it for Westerners. Disciplines represented include history, political science, philosophy, sociology, economics, literature, and journalism. (For more information on the contributors, see the brief biographies on pp. 349–351 below.)

We have organized the book into three main sections. The first seeks to place the events of 1989 in the context of Chinese history from earliest times through the reforms of the 1980s. It asks such questions as, What was the nature of the Chinese state over the centuries and what implications does that have for the quest for more democracy in our time? Were there forms of "civil society" during the Republican period, and if so, what happened to them in the People's Republic? If, as is commonly said, Deng Xiaoping emphasized economic reform over political change, how did he get away

with it for so many years? How did the successes as well as the deficiencies of the reforms contribute to the crisis of 1989?

The second section analyzes the rise and demise of the movement in Spring 1989. It considers the roles of various groups, ranging from high cadres to ordinary citizens. It asks such questions as, What was General Secretary Zhao Ziyang's vision of democracy, and what did he do to try to realize it? How effective was he in managing the transition from a socialist-planned economy to a more market-based one? Were students inspired by prominent intellectuals behind the scenes or did they organize spontaneously in response to the death of former General Secretary Hu Yaobang? Why did workers support the students' demands and pose a threat to the Communist Party which claimed to speak in their name? Why did the People's Liberation Army delay for so long in enforcing martial law in Beijing and then move so brutally against unarmed civilians in the center of the city? Given the experience of movements for more democracy in China and other "Third World" countries in recent years, what is the likelihood that China can become more democratic in the near future?

In the final section, we address issues related to culture, values, and the media. We examine the shift in consciousness which lay behind the movement and which may well have survived its demise. We discuss such questions as, What attitudes did the authors of the influential television series *River Elegy* have toward Chinese "tradition," and what hopes did they hold out for the future? How did some members of the Chinese media get around the party leadership to express their sympathy for the demonstrators? To what extent did their relative "autonomy" stem from the larger process of "professionalization" that affected journalism during the 1980s? How likely is the party to be able to persuade the Chinese people that the movement was a "counterrevolutionary rebellion" and that its suppression was a victory for the masses as well as for the party?

In the conclusion, we will summarize our collective answers to these questions and compare our findings with those of other observers of the Chinese crisis of 1989. We will indicate fundamental issues—such as the utility of the Marxian and modernizationist paradigms for the study of Chinese history—which require further attention and discussion. Finally, we will touch on controversial issues—such as the status of Taiwan and Tibet—that, although not subject to extended treatment in this book, are highly relevant to the prospects for more democracy in China as a whole.

This book originated in a conference held at the State University of New York at Buffalo in February 1990. Twenty-five of the twenty-nine papers given at the conference, together with a summary of the three days of discussions and three other papers from outside, were later printed by the university for limited circulation.<sup>3</sup> The present volume includes thirteen of those papers, now considerably revised to take account of information and

views that have surfaced in the past two years. It also incorporates three other papers that examine the origins of "civil society" in the Republic, the nature of student organizations during the Beijing Spring, and the role of the People's Liberation Army in suppressing the movement. We would like to thank again the many organizations that cosponsored the conference and the many participants who helped to make it a success<sup>4</sup>.

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## Notes

1. Han Minzhu, *Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. vii.
2. Che Muqi, *Beijing Turmoil: More than Meets the Eye* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1990), p. i.
3. Roger V. Des Forges, Luo Ning, and Wu Yen-bo, eds., *China: the Crisis of 1989, Origins and Implications*, Special Studies nos. 158, 159 (Buffalo: Council on International Studies and Programs of the State University of New York at Buffalo, 1990), 2 vols.
4. For a complete list, see *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 1–5.