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30 Years After Tiananmen

DISSENT IS NOT DEAD

Elizabeth Economy

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Thirty years ago, tens of thousands of Chinese university students descended on Beijing's Tiananmen Square—a landmark of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) power—to advocate democracy and transparency. More than a million Chinese citizens eventually demonstrated peacefully over a period of six weeks. While the charismatic students in Beijing claimed the international spotlight, Chinese citizens from all walks of life, in both cities and rural areas, also took to the streets to call for political and economic reform.

In his profound essay, dissident and historian Wang Dan reminds us what, precisely, these citizens were asking for. They wanted Chinese history to be accurately recounted and Chinese people to enjoy the basic freedoms of speech and assembly. They also wanted more money to go to education, and—as a way of addressing official corruption—they wanted transparency with regard to officials' pay. In the China of 1989, these were significant asks. Today, given the formidable security apparatus that the current CCP leadership has built, they seem almost unimaginable.

The government's approaches to quelling dissent form a highly effective mix. They include the restoration of Maoist-era mobilization techniques, the widening use of ever-advancing surveillance technologies, and the launch of a nationwide experiment in social engineering—the Social Credit System. Despite these fierce deterrents, however, Chinese intellectuals continue to call for political reform and opening; interest groups, entrepreneurs, and reform-minded economists question the heavy hand of the party-state; and broad nationwide movements seek large-scale social change.

Thus, in critical respects, the political values and spirit of collective

action embodied in the 1989 democracy movement have endured and even thrived. As the world's market-based democracies debate the relative success—or failure—of thirty years of “engagement” with China, the continuing calls for political reform and expressions of citizen activism within the country should factor into any assessment of engagement's impact and value.

It is easy to look at the current climate of political repression and assume that little has changed in state-society relations since 1989, or even that the democracy movement of that year was for naught. In fact, however, while the movement failed to reach its stated goals, the political values and spirit of action embraced by those who took part in it have persisted. During the thirty years since Tiananmen, China has experienced a profound transformation in the nature of civil society and collective political action.

From the mid-1990s through the early 2010s, Chinese civil society blossomed. Thousands of NGOs, often working with Western counterparts, emerged to tackle a wide array of social challenges, including the environment, domestic violence, food safety, and the education of migrant children, among others. (One Chinese NGO even helped to train citizens to run as independent candidates in local elections.) Political debate flourished. Groups of lawyers and others held monthly dinners in cities throughout the country, where they strategized on how to achieve legal and broader political reform.

Most notably, in 2008, a group of Chinese intellectuals and others—many of them veterans of 1989—drafted Charter 08 to call once again on the CCP to undertake political reform.¹ The effort was ultimately unsuccessful, and its architects paid a steep price: Some went to jail; tragically, some even spent their last years in prison. Liu Xiaobo (1955–2017), the winner of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, was among this last group.

Yet the push for political reform continued in myriad ways. The internet became a virtual political space for netizens calling for greater transparency, the rule of law, and accountability in China's political system. Several well-known billionaire entrepreneurs, with tens of millions of online followers, lent their voices to causes such as environmental protection, political reform, and the fight against corruption. Renowned Chinese sociologist Sun Liping estimated that the number of citizen protests throughout the country doubled between 2006 and 2010, reaching a striking 180,000 in the latter year. Many were successful.²

The Revival of Repression

In 2012, the expansion of space for speech and action came to an abrupt end. In November of that year, the CCP at its Eighteenth Party Congress chose new leaders. Incoming general secretary Xi Jinping moved quickly to consolidate his power while solidifying the CCP's pri-

macy, showing scant tolerance for debate or activism regarding political reform. He and the rest of the CCP leadership launched an ideological campaign to root out Western thought and values, firing professors critical of CCP policies and replacing top university administrators with CCP loyalists.³ The media was placed under new restrictions: Some independent journals were shuttered; others quickly adapted their content to the new regulations. The CCP also ramped up internet censorship, more tightly controlling the nature and flow of information, and sought to silence the popular billionaire bloggers with political attacks. In January 2017, Beijing implemented a new law on foreign NGOs, causing the number of them operating in China to plummet from more than seven thousand to about four hundred.⁴ Many of these NGOs had played key roles in funding and building the capacity of their Chinese counterparts.

Reaching more deeply into Chinese political and economic life, Xi called on all NGOs and private businesses—including joint ventures with multinationals—to establish CCP cells and hand them power over major decisions such as where to invest. In this way, Xi has further blurred the distinction between public and private and made every organization more than ever an extension of the party-state.

The Xi leadership has also married technology to traditional forms of political control to create a fearsome surveillance state. For example, the government has revitalized systems of informants in classrooms, neighborhoods, and workplaces who report on others' "incorrect" thoughts or suspicious political behavior. In the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where Beijing has launched a campaign against "terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism," the CCP has dispatched more than a million officials to live in the homes of the region's Uyghur Muslims, subjecting them to political education and reporting on their political, cultural, and religious practices.⁵ The regional government has also detained as many as a million Uyghur Muslims in "reeducation" and forced-labor camps.⁶

What this human monitoring network does is magnified tenfold by the network of electronic eyes that blankets the country. The government has placed more than two-hundred-million cameras—about one camera for every seven people—on street corners and in train cars, shopping malls, and classrooms to keep watch on every aspect of Chinese daily life.⁷ The plan, reportedly, is to triple the number of cameras by 2020. Alongside this staggering surveillance infrastructure, the CCP regime is already deploying additional recognition technologies that can identify people by their voices or the way they walk.

Then there is the Social Credit System—a massive social-engineering project designed to shape the behavioral preferences of Chinese citizens across a wide range of measures. Underway in more than forty pilot programs, it calculates the aggregate "trustworthiness" of citizens based on such considerations as whether they have repaid their loans, jaywalked,

or otherwise misbehaved in public places. Some of the pilot programs account for how many hours of video games a citizen plays or whether someone purchases Chinese as opposed to foreign-made goods.⁸ Failing to repay one's debts is rated as particularly egregious. Stirring memories of Mao-era public shaming, some cities are plastering the faces of debt defaulters on large billboards.⁹ There is a phone app that can tell its user when a debt defaulter is nearby.¹⁰

A poor social-credit score can bar one from buying property or boarding a plane or train. (Already more than ten-million people with low scores cannot travel by plane or high-speed rail.)¹¹ High scores, by contrast, can bring benefits such as priority boarding at the airport or deposit-free access to bike-shares.¹² The Social Credit System also uses social pressure to encourage desired behavior; in some pilot projects, for example, score reductions hit not only people who take part in protests but their friends too. Beijing has vowed that by 2020 the Social Credit System will encompass every Chinese citizen.

The Irrepressible Chinese

The space for dissenting voices and action has narrowed considerably over the past six years. Topics once open are now closed. In 2012, for example, devastating floods in Beijing brought an outpouring of altruism. Residents of the capital used the internet to reach out to one another and to open their homes to stranded strangers, as well to criticize local officials for their handling of the crisis. In 2018, major flooding in Shandong Province led the government to censor unofficial reporting and even to arrest two women who, in private emails, had discussed their worry that the carcasses of the quarter-million pigs drowned in the deluge might transmit disease.

Yet political space has not closed completely. Scholars continue to pen articles that call for political reform and opening. Tsinghua University law professor Xu Zhangrun, for example, published an essay in July 2018 criticizing personality cults and calling for Xi's elimination of the two-term constitutional limit for the presidency to be reversed. Guizhou University economics professor Yang Shaozheng publicly defended constitutionalism and the rule of law; and Zhang Weiying, an administrator at Peking University, "argued that China's economic development had occurred in spite of and not due to the 'Chinese economic model.'" ¹³

Broad social movements that cross class, gender, and geographic boundaries have also emerged in new and potent forms around issues of women's and LGBTQ rights and the environment. As China's feminist #MeToo movement took off in 2018, more than thirty-million Chinese discussed "sexual harassment" on WeChat in just one month.¹⁴ Feminist scholar Leta Hong Fincher has noted that Chinese feminists are not only speaking out on issues of violence against women or discrimination in

the workplace but also actively opposing the government's efforts to push marriage and procreation, telling women that "they have the right to control their own bodies and they should not have to marry or have babies if they don't want to."¹⁵ Importantly, Chinese activists are not single-issue actors. Some feminists, for example, are also raising questions about labor practices, the Uyghurs, and LGBTQ concerns.¹⁶ Online crowdfunding has allowed activists to reach out to the broader public to pay for things such as subway ads denouncing sexual harassment.¹⁷

Workers' rights also have engaged a broad spectrum of Chinese society. In a fascinating case, Chinese students from university Marxist societies joined forces with labor activists to assist factory workers in establishing independent trade unions. In 2018, students traveled to Shenzhen to support a protest at a welding-equipment factory by workers seeking to form independent trade unions; thousands of other Chinese citizens signed petitions supporting the workers.¹⁸ As one student stated, "Lots of fellow students say: this incident is about workers, what does this have to do with students? I'll tell them one thing: today's students are tomorrow's workers."¹⁹

Chinese workers have remained a significant source of social protest throughout the Xi period. In 2018, recorded labor protests topped 1,700. The rapid introduction of technology has already proved a new source of unrest. In June 2018, long-haul truckers launched a strike across multiple provinces over a logistics app that was forcing them to bid their fees so low that they could no longer make a living.²⁰ Labor unrest is likely to escalate as the Chinese economy slows and new technologies press workers hard or even replace them.

The 1989 democracy movement marked the apex of Chinese citizen activism and protest in the post-Mao era. It also has exerted a profound and lasting influence on the political psyche of the established democracies. The iconic images of those days—of hunger-striking students, of the papier-mâché Goddess of Democracy staring down Mao's portrait in Tiananmen Square, and of the lone man calmly confronting the tanks on Chang'an Avenue—have come to stand for both China's democratic potential and the failure to realize it so far. The Xi administration's success in reversing many of the post-1989 advances in popular political participation—whether through the media, the internet, or NGOs—has further reinforced a sense that the policy of engagement with China has failed. Efforts to draw China into the international liberal order have not turned the country into a market democracy. On the contrary, it is now a place whose president busily seeks to spread elements of an authoritarian "China model" across the globe.

Such a grim assessment, however, is short-sighted and ignores several truths. First, through engagement the market democracies have made—and continue to make—a profound impact on the development of civil society and political action in China. In addition to providing support to

Chinese NGOs, the international community has been leading by example on issues of environmentalism, feminism, and LGBTQ rights, bolstering the work that Chinese civil society is doing in these fields.

Furthermore, while the Xi government may appear all-powerful, political fissures are widening, and there are many pockets of discontent. There are liberal intellectuals and entrepreneurs who dislike the CCP's growing intrusiveness; retired Party elders who are unhappy about Xi's personality cult and his dismantling of succession procedures; workers who are losing jobs and money as technology gains ground; and nationwide social movements that demand broad changes. These actors all continue to push for political and social reform even if they succeed only rarely, and even then only at the margins.

In the end, political change is a long game. As writer Eric Fish has commented in discussing the potential of the generation of Chinese millennials to take up the cause of political reform: "When they used tanks and machine guns [around Tiananmen Square] the government sent a pretty effective message that it wasn't going to tolerate protest anymore. But they then erased, or attempted to erase, Tiananmen. The side-effect is, the next generation that wasn't around to receive that message—there's not that fear that there once was about stepping out of line."²¹ China has not yet realized the dreams of the 1989 democracy movement, and it may not even appear to be moving on the right track—but we have not reached the end of Chinese history.

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