

# **DENG XIAOPING IN 1989**

**BY DAI QING**

## **FOREWORD**

### **(1) 1989**

1989 was a year of turmoil in many parts of the world. Why, then, did events in China's capital that year attract so much international attention? Essentially it was because in June the People's Liberation Army was sent into the city centre to attack ordinary Chinese people, the Republic's citizens. That drew the eyes of the world onto events in China.

During just three critical days in the middle of 1989, from May 31 to June 2, 85-year-old Deng Xiaoping summoned all of his remaining strength to make a decision that would have major ramifications for himself, his party, his country, and ultimately the whole world.

### **(2) Politics reorganized, rebellion suppressed**

Absolutely nothing that endangered Deng Xiaoping's great enterprise would be tolerated. Deng would do anything to safeguard it. In the space of just six and a half weeks, there had occurred major shifts in China's senior leadership for which Deng, China's second-generation red emperor, was largely responsible. His first protégé, Hu Yaobang, had been Deng's close partner in the grand adventure of 'reform and opening' launched in the late 1970s. He was briefly 'Chairman' of the Chinese Communist Party, CCP (1981-1982), and became General Secretary of the Party when the 'Chairman' position was abolished in 1982. Pressure from conservative Party elders forced him to resign in 1986.

Hu died suddenly in April 1989. His replacement, Zhao Ziyang, had been carefully selected as a Deng loyalist and energetic reformer. However, he was quick to fall out with Deng on key policy issues and was finally removed from office in June 1989. Zhao's replacement was Jiang Zemin. For Deng, it didn't matter who the replacement was, as long as he did not dare disobey him. Jiang chose to fall in behind Deng and not rock the boat. As well as the three protégés, there were senior political elites whose main concern was their own careers, and who judged that their loyalty to Deng would serve their own political and pecuniary interests; examples are Li Peng, Li Ximing, Yang Baibing.

By late May, Deng knew that his decision to 'call in the PLA' had temporarily put an end to the tangled political infighting of previous months; personnel at every level of the Party and government had sworn their loyalty to him. It was now time to draw in those who would soon move into the spotlight, making it clear that although the face of the leadership might change when new leaders became influential, the core of the political system would remain intact.

It was now May 31. The next day, June 1, we see an old familiar drama being re-enacted: just like on April 25, Deng's old comrades and subordinates (such as Beijing municipal officials and Yang Baibing), loyalists whose interests were personal and pecuniary and who were confident that they understood Deng's intentions, delivered to him reports on the chaos in the capital, the rampaging behaviour of the mobs, the unwavering foreign imperialist desire to destroy China, and the threats to the stability and authority of the Party and the state posed by the mass movement. A new factor was the might and readiness of the 200,000-strong army (this was in the report submitted by Li Peng after Party headquarters had made the final decision to order the army to act).

The army was waiting for Deng's decision.

Sure enough, on the third day, June 2, Deng Xiaoping acted decisively. He set up a powerful decision-making body, a body that can be described as having ‘Chinese characteristics’; that is, it had a convoluted authority structure that made it uniquely Chinese). It was composed of six Party elders and three Politburo Standing Committee members (who agreed with Deng). It finalized the plan to clear Tiananmen Square square in two days.

Yang Shangkun was tasked with chairing a meeting of the Central Military Commission and the Martial Law Command. The top-secret order it issued was as follows: "At zero hour on June 3, the martial law troops gathered in the suburbs will enter the city and advance towards their targets." The martial law targets were the so-called ‘counter-revolutionary mobs’ gathered in Tiananmen Square – an area that is 880 metre long and 500 metres wide. By early June, the ‘targets’ numbered less than a few thousand at the most. 200,000 armed soldiers with guns loaded with live ammunition against 3,000 unarmed demonstrators! Were they joking?

It was, at root, Deng Xiaoping’s decision. Would he really be joking at a time like this? His message was clear:

- The gun commands the Party.
- The Party holds absolute power over the state.
- The great enterprise of reform and opening-up initiated by Deng Xiaoping will continue to move forward.

### **( 3) A New Perspective**

*Deng Xiaoping in 1989* was first published in 2019, 30 years after the events of 1989. This second edition is being published in 2025, 36 years after the suppression of the 1989 protest movement. What does the book tell us? It uses newly available sources to throw new light on developments leading up to the

1989 crisis, and offers new insights into the role that Deng Xiaoping played in the crisis.

### The Lead-up to 1989.

Deng Xiaoping's original idea was that 1989 would see the conclusion of a ten-year plan for his great 'reform and opening' enterprise. After this he would be able to step back with dignity to begin a well-earned and glorious retirement. He had relied on intuition and experience when navigating the reform path, not theory or think tanks. His approach was to gradually loosen and disentangle the strict controls of 'Red China' bequeathed by Mao, particularly in foreign affairs and economic domains. Perhaps some of the reformers judged that authoritarian means were needed to end authoritarianism and to construct a new system. There is little doubt, however, that the aim of Deng's frontline team was to pursue *gradual* economic and political reforms.

Even so, within all sectors of society there was impatience, anxiety and confusion. This applied to Deng himself and his team, to his political enemies, to 'enlightened' intellectuals, to the general public. It also shaped the mood of the most radical leaders, who were basically muddled and agitated.

### Deng Xiaoping's ambitions and aspirations

What helped shape Deng Xiaoping's thinking before June 4th 1989?

- Deng regarded as particularly important the work being done by the leadership team appointed by the 13th Party Congress in late 1987. This team, led by Zhao Ziyang, was working vigorously to push forward economic reform as well as political reform.
- Deng had a scheduled meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev on May 16th 1989.
- He said that his plan for himself and his old comrades was to completely retire at a time when the old order still prevailed but within a 'new framework' (在老秩序、新局面下).

However, the ‘student movement’ came to weigh heavily on his mind. It had to end! Deng prescribed four steps: intimidation by means of propaganda, violent intimidation, large-scale troop deployment, and suppression of the ‘riots’.

#### The Problems Facing Deng Created by ‘Riot Suppression’ and its Aftermath

- Deng saw that the result of riot control was social repression and economic regression.
- He had not expected in 1989 that, in 1992, he would make at Zhuhai a decision to put pressure on the Party’s new top leadership team; he warned in 1992 that if these leaders did not change their mindsets, they would be replaced.
- This explains, in part, the demotion of the Yang Family Generals (Yang Shangkun and his brother) in 1992. Their removal was seen as an attempt to deflect the blame for the 1989 crackdown away from Deng’s closest allies. However, dreadful damage had already been done. To the bloody suppression in 1989 was added the complete deprivation of ideological and political freedom in China; this seeded the growth of the crony capitalism we find in today’s China.

#### Who were Deng’s rivals and opponents?

- From top to bottom of Chinese society, from officials to civilians, people seemed to be aware that reform was happening, but they did not fully understand what reform was or what makes a society ‘modern’.
- All parties, whether Deng or his opponents on both the left and right, were familiar with the old tricks that Emperors had typically used when dealing with their subjects, whether officials or commoners. It might be that the old forms of political game-playing are the only ones that those engaged in political struggle today know how to play. No matter how much Deng’s

opponents attacked him and his team, his responses still looked like that of an Emperor, supreme ruler of a 'red dictatorship'.

- Careful examination of the progress of every power struggle consistently finds the emperor-official pattern of behaviour at every level, with little variation. People with political ambitions know that they should hang back, observe, and only then use force. The force should be sharp, intensive, like a fish in water! (Li Peng on April 24, Li Xiannian on May 17, Wan Li on May 25).
- Hu Yaobang's death in April 1989 saw students taking to the streets (the mergings of street groups eventually led to a real student movement). Hu's death was perhaps unpredictable, but the ways in which the government responded to the public mourning and what followed was inevitable.
- Enlightened political actors who behaved and expressed views different from Deng's (for example, Zhao Ziyang, Hu Qili) were judged by Deng to be "not listening" to him.
- To be fair, Deng was never as all-powerful as Mao Zedong had been. He had to deal with power struggles and powerful opponents at the highest levels of the CCP. His rivals 'held the pen tightly'. They were the ideologues who shaped CCP ideology and policies. This, in fact, is what constitutes the soft underbelly of the M-brand legacy that Deng inherited. An imperial power autocracy 'under the banner of Marxism-Leninism' was firmly in place when Deng came to power.
- Civil society was also growing at this time. Within all spheres and strata of Chinese society we find a growth of energy and activism. Intellectual elites are at the forefront of this development, but their knowledge is limited, and their hearts are full of vague hopes about 'saving the world'. Openness conflicts with Mao Zedong's legacy; leaders of civil society are typically

judged to be ‘rightists in form but leftists at heart’形右实左. It just so happens, however, that these people gained the moral high ground in the 1980s and have won support all over the world. They have been able to ‘emotionally kidnap’ Chinese citizens.

- In addition, CCP leaders for decades have vigorously propagated the ideal that all PLA soldiers are ‘people's soldiers’ since they are people’s sons and brothers.

### Deng’s Team

- Senior officials such as Wang Ruilin and Ding Guangen were servile. On big issues such as reform, opening and the political system, they basically held their tongues.
- Yang Shangkun had opinions, and extensive official connections. Noteworthy, first, is that his public statements always conformed to the emperor-official pattern of behaviour. Secondly, his own ambitions were carefully hidden behind a complaisant demeanour.
- Zhao Ziyang was savvy, competent and honest; he was not a lackey, but a pragmatic, good man who failed to see the cunning of his opponents on the extreme left and the extreme right.
- However, Zhao placed too much emphasis on his own ideals and convictions, and was too eager to push the reform project. Because of this, he forgot or deliberately flouted an unwritten rule in Chinese politics regarding the authority and power of a *retired* ‘father emperor’. Zhao should have adopted the way in which the Jiaqing Emperor treated his father, the retired Qianlong Emperor, after Jiaqing succeeded his father in 1796. Emperor Jiaqing felt obliged to obey his ‘father emperor’ completely. Furthermore, when he did well and received the plaudits of his

peers, all of his achievements would have been attributed to the ‘father emperor’.

### How Did Deng Treat Zhao Ziyang?

- At the beginning of the year, Deng protected and trusted Zhao. In fact, he genuinely intended to hand over full power to him. His doing that would not have been just a test or a temporary arrangement.
- At the time of Hu Yaobang's funeral on April 19, Deng expressed his dissatisfaction with Zhao. “He is rejecting me,” he complained. The disagreements, however, were resolved through normal procedures.
- On May 17, Chen Yun and Li Peng fiercely attacked Zhao. Their aim was to regain control of the ‘three sticks’; that is, control of propaganda, the planned economy, and decisions about personnel.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the student movement grew more intense. A hunger strike began, and Tiananmen Square was occupied by protestors. This directly interfered with Deng’s meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev and the media reports of that event. Deng temporarily reduced Zhao's power (he lost responsibility for dealing with the student movement but retained his position as Party General Secretary). Zhao’s handling of the students was judged to be too ‘liberal’; he was seen to be acting too independently.
- On May 20, as Chen Yun and Li Peng kept on attacking Zhao, Deng took a backward step. He removed Zhao from the Party’s Standing Committee.
- On June 20, Deng, thoroughly disappointed with Zhao, expelled him from the CCP Central Committee.

### How did Deng Deal with the Student Unrest.

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<sup>1</sup> This draws on Mao's famous saying: "the Chinese Revolution depends on the two sticks (gun and pen)". After the establishment of the PRC, the operation of power actually expanded to "four sticks" - the gun, the pen (propaganda and education), planning and finance, and personnel decisions.

- Generally speaking, he did not take the young students seriously. His view was that, after making a lot of noise and causing trouble, they should be willing to go back to their studies. The only protestor he took seriously and personally disliked was Fang Lizhi.
- On April 25, Deng adopted his opponents' strategy. Chen Yun and others succeeded in escalating the crisis, requiring the use of 'political intimidation' (see the April 26 editorial in People's Daily).
- On May 17, when it was obvious that political intimidation in the form of propaganda was not working, Deng decided to use 'military intimidation' (he authorised the sending of 30,000 troops to the Square).
- When military intimidation failed, Deng made another concession to Chen Yun on May 20 by removing his frontline political protégées just before a major battle. It is likely that he anticipated how those hard-line ultra-left opponents within the Party would use street protestors to make trouble for him. The 'third step' (that is, the military siege) taken by this veteran CCP leader suggests that he really understood how well the CCP knows how to use a student movement to change a political regime. However, this study cannot provide sufficient evidence to show that this was how Deng was thinking in April-May 1989.
- On June 1, he took the bait again and made a decision that would result in a bloodbath on Chang'an Avenue in Beijing. Deng's repeated 'falling into traps set by his political opponents' (or committing tactical decision-making errors) was due to the political environment in which he found himself, and also his own beliefs and personality.

#### **(4) What is New in this Study**

A careful reading of newly available sources has led to a better understanding of the events of 1989 in China and of Deng Xiaoping's role in those events.

Important new sources are:

- i. The Letter composed by Seven Generals. I recount the origins of the letter and the process of composing it up to its submission to the Central Military Commission. Key figures include Ye Xiaoqi , the son of Ye Fei, and Zhang Sheng, the son of Zhang Aiping.
- ii. An eyewitness account of the 'Tank Man' incident on June 5<sup>th</sup> 1989. Three men holding guns emerged from the cockpit of one of the army tanks that helped suppress the protest movement. The 'Tank Man' ran away; shots were fired into the bushes.
- iii. Firsthand experiences of soldiers:
  - Stories by Jiang Lin, a reporter of the *People's Liberation Army Daily*
  - The Lhasa riots in early 1989, which were almost a rehearsal for the 1989 Tiananmen Incident. Lhasa authorities gave priority to the riots' 'political significance'. Regular troops were deployed without hesitation.
  - A person with a military officer's ID was assaulted at Meridian Gate. He said that he felt ashamed to be a member of the military. Zhang Aiping's son and grandson were beaten and suffered broken bones.
  - Yang Baibing personally supervised the situation: He saw it as a means of earning credit for himself and thereby advancing his career.

New sources now provide us with evidence that gives us a better understanding of the debates among army officers about the decision to use military force

against the protestors in 1989. The book documents the opposition within the PLA to the military suppression measures. Examples are:

- On May 20th, the regimental Commander of the 65th Army said to the protestors: "As long as you are in front of the armed vehicles, I will not move my troops forward."
- A staff officer of the General Staff Department declared that the vast majority in the military knew that 'riot control' should not be done in this way. He said, however, that the CCP's Central Committee insisted on using military force; it had its own agenda.
- A platoon leader of the 38th Army tells us that the 'no shooting' order only applied to troops 'inside the fence' that had been built around the perimeter of Tiananmen Square.
- The editorial in the June 4th edition of the *People's Liberation Army Daily* is an important source. Details of how the editorial was published and circulated is discussed in this book.
- Deng Xiaoping's order to the Armed Police Headquarters Duty Room to take action. Someone from the Armed Police Headquarters Duty Room has said that Deng Xiaoping gave the order that authorised the army to act and suppress the Tiananmen movement.

### Additional insights

The book throws new light on the following:

- Reactions to Zhao Ziyang's 'Asian Development Bank Speech' on May 3<sup>rd</sup>. Li Xiannian, when he learned of it, got extremely excited about it. Deng later had things to say about the speech. What was it that concerned Deng?

- The denial by senior leaders Chen Yun and Li Xiannian that they had any responsibility for the bloodshed. They said: "We heard the gunshots, but did not know what was happening."
- A careful examination of the Zhuhai Meeting. Its decisions can be seen as the CCP reaffirming 'the gun commands the Party' principle.
- The two consecutive 'Martial Law Cadre Training Classes' that were organized by the National Defence University after the protest movement was suppressed

### What kind of book is *Deng Xiaoping in 1989*?

The book is a narrative based on accounts by first-hand witnesses and investigative journalists. It has also used accessible documents and interviews with people who were involved in events in 1989. Conclusions are reached by means of cross-verification of sources and, to the greatest extent possible, through the application of logic and commonsense.

The aim of the book is to provide new perspectives on the events of 1989. It is different from studies that make the student movement their main storyline and it abandons dichotomies such as 'autocracy versus democracy', and 'government versus students'. These dichotomies have dominated most evaluations of 1989 over the past 35 years. The author of *Deng Xiaoping in 1989* seeks to show that Deng's actions that year reflected the essence of 'Red China'."

The author judges the events of June 4th to be a great tragedy at a time when China's transition from 'backwardness' to modernity was only just beginning to speed up. Contributing to the tragedy were the thousand-year-old tradition of imperial autocracy, the 50 years of red authoritarianism, and the 'rawness' of inexperienced players on China's political stage whose responsibility it was to lead the transition to a 'socialist market economy'. Key players were, of course Deng himself and then Zhao Ziyang, Fang Lizhi, and

representatives of grassroots forces such as Chen Ziming and Wan Runnan. Other important players were the 'right-leaning but actually leftist' leaders of the democratic movement.

### ***Deng Xiaoping in 1989***

This book is dedicated to future generations who are seeking a path forward for China, who seek to explore Chinese civilization, and who are seeking a place on this earth where Chinese people can survive. We leave them with limited historical materials but endless questions.

The author judges the events of June 4th to be a great tragedy at a time when China's transition to modernity was just beginning to speed up. Contributing to this tragedy were the thousand-year-old tradition of imperial autocracy, the 50 years of red authoritarianism, and the 'rawness' of inexperienced players on China's political stage during its transitional period. Key players were, of course Deng himself and then Zhao Ziyang, Fang Lizhi, and representatives of grassroots forces such as Chen Ziming and Wan Runnan. Other important players were the 'right-leaning but actually leftist' leaders of the democratic movement.