



The Legacy of the 1989 Beijing Massacre: Establishing Neo-Authoritarian Rule, Silencing Civil Society⁺

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Abstract

The significance of the 1989 military crackdown on the broad social movement for political liberalization in central Beijing was enormous. In retrospect, the outcome of the violent crackdown was earth-shaking for both China and the world, as the ideology of technocracy and economic growth spurring a market society was given unprecedented momentum, aided by pragmatic Western political and economic elites. Silence over human rights issues and benefits of cooperating with authoritarian capitalism and neo-authoritarianism in China has led to a slow convergence of logics of authoritarian power in global politics today. China gradually attained political stability and high economic growth – albeit at a very high cost. Neo-authoritarian political repression and predatory state capitalism entailed delaying democratic development and improvement of human rights, while deterioration of political accountability, corruption and the natural environment increased. Today, Chinese youth know little about the events of the Beijing 1989. Effective state censorship has turned the vast majority of Chinese youth into “amnesiacs”, while their parents and others of their generation keep silent about the recent past. After June Fourth, it was crucial for the Party-state to quickly take the initiative to write history to inscribe its version of the events into the collective memory of China. The powerful





memory politics of the Chinese Communist Party managed to silence an incipient civil society for more than two decades. Yet, under its new leader, Xi Jinping, championed as a new neo-authoritarian ruler, social stability is at risk if deepening market reforms are carried out.

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JEL classification: *A14, H11, H12, Z13*

1. The Rise and Fall of the Broad Social Movement of 1989

On 3 June 1989, horrific scenes took place at Muxidi in central Beijing. When thousands of students, workers, and ordinary citizens attempted to halt the advance of the People's Liberation Army toward Tiananmen Square, they realized in disbelief, that the soldiers were using live ammunition against them. The martial law troops had been given a direct order by Deng Xiaoping, China's elderly and "paramount leader" behind the scenes, that the square must be cleared on the night of June 4 (Brook, 1998; Nathan *et al.*, 2002). As the bloodied bodies fell to the ground, people screamed: "fascists", "murderers", and "gangster government". Muxidi on Chang'an Avenue was the main site of the Beijing massacre, the bloody end of nearly seven dramatic weeks of marches for democracy in the capital and across the country. It was a broad social movement, whose ranks and supporters were not limited to young students and the capital alone. What had begun as mourning over former General Secretary Hu Yaobang, who died on April 15, quickly turned into a strong movement against corruption and expanded civil liberties (Calhoun, 1995; Chai, 2011; Shen, 1998). Tiananmen Square, the symbolic heart of China, soon became the headquarters of the mobilization. It was not immediately crushed because the one-party state did not speak with one voice. The demonstrations had further widened the rift between the more lenient approach of General Secretary Zhao Ziyang and the hardliner Premier Li Peng, who orchestrated the publication of a strident editorial on April 26 in the Communist Party's



mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*. It accused the students of concocting “a planned conspiracy intent on confusing and poisoning the minds of ordinary people”, echoing the class struggle rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution. This was an insult to the students, who insisted that their marches and intentions were peaceful and patriotic, and they demanded that the government retract its sharp words.

It was when the students were met with complete silence that they began to occupy Tiananmen Square around the clock. When the government's rebuff continued, thousands of students began a stakes-raising hunger strike. Therefore, a long planned welcoming ceremony in the square for the leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, had to be cancelled on May 15. The “party elders”, including Deng Xiaoping as the power behind the scenes, lost face and were aggravated. To the detriment of Zhao Ziyang and triumph of Li Peng, Deng “suggested” that martial law be declared. Wishing no formal part in carrying out a violent crackdown, Zhao resigned, but the citizens' resistance was so determined that the army groups that entered the city centre on May 20 had to withdraw. Tensions further increased and a frustrated Deng Xiaoping, backed up by a nervous Li Peng, ordered the elite troops to clear the square by June 4.

2. The Unknown Recent Past

In 1993, government figures stated that 241 people had been killed (quoted in Berry, 2011), whereas the Chinese Red Cross had initially put the death toll at 2,600. Yet today, few of China's young generation know about any number of casualties. Effective state censorship has turned the vast majority of Chinese youth into “amnesiacs”, while their parents and others of their generation keep silent about the recent past. In 2014 efforts to silence activists wishing to commemorate the massacre have redoubled, as the arrests of lawyer Pu Zhiqiang, writer Liu Di, and philosopher Xu Youyu in May 2014 indicated.¹ However, it is important to note that Western political and economic elites have also played their part in the powerful memory politics of the People's Republic. On May 17, 1989, Deng let slip his opinion that: “The Westerners will forget.”



(Nathan, Zhang and Link, 2002) He was responding to other cadres' fears that foreigners might impose sanctions and force China into the freezer if the army was used. Only too well did he understand the Western dream of China's market potential and their geopolitical fear of Beijing realigning with Moscow. Two months later, on a secret visit to Deng, Brent Scowcroft carried a message explaining that President George H. W. Bush would do everything he could to maintain the relationship (Kluver, 2010: 83). It is clear that isolating China was never a serious issue among the pragmatic leaders of the Western world. Sanctions were short-lived and already by the beginning of 1990, foreign direct investment started to pour into China, regarding a safe destination for foreign money. The words of Deng Xiaoping that "development is a hard truth" and that the People's Republic more than anything needed stability did not fall on deaf ears. When Sweden's former social democratic prime minister, Göran Persson, visited China in 1996 he bluntly compared the situation in authoritarian China and newly democratic Russia. In a speech in front of hundreds of businessmen he said: "To me, it is enormously striking what political stability means for economic growth when you look at the Chinese case." In retrospect Deng Xiaoping's decision to use tanks against civilians sent a clear signal to the Chinese people that, paradoxically in light of the enforced collective amnesia, still pulsates throughout society: never oppose the party-state.

3. Re-launching the Party-State's Powerful Memory Politics

Immediately after the crackdown the government's counter-offensive to win the struggle about memory was in full swing: in the mass media, at work places, and in classrooms (Béja, 2010). As has been pointed out by the late dissident and astrophysicist Fang Lizhi, due to the memory politics of the Communist Party, every new generation in the People's Republic grow up unaware of the atrocities suffered by the older generation (Fang, 1990). To the patriarch Deng Xiaoping it was important to re-launch the party-state's longstanding techniques of enforced collective amnesia. He was intent to hammer through the long-





term “truth” what the events on June 3 and 4, before the shooting of unarmed people, were really about: overthrow and subversion of the existing political order. The Party was not embarrassed to embrace one core demand of the democracy movement: to combat systemic corruption to turn the tables and increase its legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary citizens (Hsu, 2001). The official explanation of the Communist Party for the events of June fourth takes as its point of departure Deng’s speech on June ninth to the officers responsible for the clearing of Tiananmen Square. A mere five days after the crackdown Deng regained the initiative in what he foreshadowed to be a long and hard struggle with the conservatives inside the Communist Party. Most important to Deng was the imminent struggle against the stubborn leftist conservative faction of the Communist Party. Deng began by saying: “Comrades, you have been working very hard,” then he offered a deterministic analysis:

This storm was bound to come sooner or later. This is determined by the major international climate and China's own minor climate. It was bound to happen and is independent of man's will. It was just a matter of time and scale. It is more to our advantage that this happened today.²

One can question Deng’s fatalism, i.e. it was an inevitable tragedy with him as lead character, since he was in fact off-stage during the most intense phases of the drama in April and May. It is only on June ninth that he came forth as the saviour who rescued China: first from the ashes of the Cultural Revolution and poverty, and at this moment later in his life the country from destruction in the form of the 1989 threat of counter-revolution. In his speech Deng was also abundantly clear about how he viewed domestic development: the planned economy and the evolving market economy had to become more integrated, China could never again become a country isolated by the outside world. After having explained how the “dregs of society” had betrayed the students by wanting to overthrow the socialist system of China and the Communist Party he moved on to observations of everyday politics, which was not at all that deterministic. Deng forcefully asked two questions. The first question was: “Is it the case that because of this





rebellion the correctness of the line, principles, and policies we have laid down will be called into question?” Deng answered himself: “In answering the first question, we cannot say that, at least up to now, we have failed in the strategic goals we laid down. After sixty-one years, a country with 1.5 billion people will have reached the level of a moderately developed nation. This would be an unbeatable achievement.” The second question was “Are the two basic points – upholding the four cardinal principles and persisting in the open policy and reforms – wrong?” Again Deng had found the answers within himself: “In recent days, I have pondered these two points. No, we have not been wrong.” The thrust of Deng’s answers to the two questions was directed against the conservative elders Chen Yun and Deng Liqun, and the younger Premier Li Peng, even if he did not name their names. Chen Yun accused Deng of being a rightist in economic affairs, but a leftist in terms of using military violence against the counter-revolutionary student uprising. Thus, Deng well knew that the Party’s conservative faction mobilized for an attack against him, and as the June ninth speech indicates he did not pause to strike the first blow. Sicker and older, this was the battle he had to fight for three long years, from June 1989 through June 1992. The struggle was one he had inherited from his former disgraced protégés Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, whom he had protected from leftist attacks throughout the 1980s.

Deng now had to step down from his comfortable referee position in between leftist and reformist forces within the Party. The latter were in utter disarray after the crackdown, whereas the former felt they had a new momentum. Deng had to gather a new team of strong-willed technocrats, market friendly experts to finally conquer the conservatives who wished to turn back the clock to pre-reform time of 1977. This drawn-out battle was in many respects much more dangerous to Deng than the challenge of the democracy movement had been. The students were young and inexperienced intellectuals with limited networks. The Party’s old orthodox masters had vast and strong connections throughout the party-state apparatus, including the military. They were a formidable enemy, which the three-year long imbroglio illustrates. Yet, without the student demonstrations and subsequent revelations of the basic lines of



conflict within the Party, this struggle would quite likely have continued for far longer. Deng's programme of market reform was now under constant sniper attack from the conservatives, who wanted to discredit him for the debacle of not dealing resolutely with the democracy movement at an earlier stage. Regarding the issue of military violence to solve the crisis, growing numbers within the Party sided with Deng's official version. But concerning the economic reforms, there was not a unanimous chorus about his professed policy of continuing along the blueprint. In his speech to the army on June ninth, Deng demonstrated clearly how well he perceived the lurking danger of market opponents.

4. The Impact of Memory Politics on Social Activists

A common argument for the long-established status quo in state-society relations in China is that year-on-year economic growth won back the legitimacy lost in the aftermath of the Beijing massacre. Yet selective appropriation of the students' discourse on corruption, and appealing to state-sponsored Chinese nationalism through the "patriotic education campaign" were also meant to enhance legitimacy. From then on, people were encouraged and compelled to focus on personal wealth creation and to refrain from collective political participation. As a result, the technocratic and pragmatically oriented party-state has dominated the formal political process and been able to stem any threat of challenges from a dormant Deng Xiaoping and the other Party elders to all activists of what was then a budding civil society in the making: take heed and never oppose the Chinese Communist Party. After June Fourth, it was crucial for the Party-state to quickly take the initiative to write history to inscribe its version of the events into the collective memory of China. Interpretations of history concerns also visions about the future, and who is to design and decide over them. Thus, the Chinese propaganda system as well as schools and institutes of higher learning were given huge resources by Deng Xiaoping after the crackdown. On several occasions in May and June Deng deplored how the Party, under the leadership of the two successive General Secretaries Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, had neglected political education and therefore made Chinese youth the



victim of Western “bourgeois values”. To counter years of neglect, “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and patriotism would be emphasized in education and in the mass media.

It goes without saying that processes involving collective memory are far from static. The German historian Reinhart Koselleck described their dynamic and wave-like character. He argued, for example that the events of 1933 have occurred once and for all, but the experiences that they are based upon may change over time. The memory of an event, as for example the victory of Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Party on 5 March 1933 and the following rapid march toward total usurpation of power and full dictatorship on 23 March, shift over time just as individuals’ interpretations of the past does. Their memories have been adjusted to adhere to their own or others’ perceptions of the future past and present. One such example, pertinent to illustrate the oscillations over time regarding how to evaluate the events of June 1989 in Beijing is the views of Han Dongfang. Today Han is a well-known labour rights activist based in Hong Kong. In 1989 he was one of the leaders of the autonomous labour union that was formed during the dramatic days and heyday of the democracy movement in Tiananmen Square. After the army had taken full control of Beijing after June Fourth, the net was cast wide around the leaders of the student and worker demonstrations. One of those who was caught and put into prison was Han Dongfang. While incarcerated he fell ill and lost one of his lungs. In the past twenty-five years his views of the activism of the Beijing Spring has changed dramatically, as has his strategy to attain the goals of his current organization *China Labour Bulletin*. In the run-up to the commemoration of June Fourth in 2009 Han told *The Telegraph* that campaigning for democracy is pointless: “In the last 12 years of my radio show, I have used the word ‘democracy’ fewer than five times. I realized that when you talk about how to make people’s lives better, that is enough.”³ Han Dongfang also argued: “There is no good or bad, black or white, right or wrong. To sum up China in one sentence, you can only say: It has changed.” Perhaps most interesting is his argument of the lack of civil society, or rather the lack of a “proper” civil society. On the issue of the broad social movement that took to the streets to vent their



frustration with corruption and dictatorial rule in 1989 Han said: “I really believe this kind of excitement in the streets is not constructive. If there is another choice other than this, I would choose it, rather than what happened in 1989. It’s based on anger and excitement and release of pressure, particularly in a country like China without proper civil society.”

In response to this argument one could ask: how is a so-called proper civil society produced? The histories of both the West and other East Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea show that neither a vibrant civil society, nor a democracy can be brought by subservient attitudes toward political power and elites. The fostering of powerful public opinion and joint collective action in which a variety of different groups make an effort to counter and protest power is necessary to attain progressive victories. The pragmatic idea that China can be “changed from within” and that all confrontation is by definition is self-defeating can in fact be the most self-hurting and counter-productive strategy of all for a citizenry that aspires to both more autonomy for associational groups and inclusiveness in terms of political decision-making, building civil society, rule of law, and democracy. The unwillingness of Han Dongfang to make a distinction between black and white is an echoing of the “cat theory” of Deng Xiaoping, i.e. “it does not matter if the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice.” A similar story, also proving how effective the party-state’s counter narrative had become over the past twenty years, appeared in an article in *The New York Times* on 7 January 2010. In it, a former student from Tsinghua University, Shi Yigong, who took part in the movement on Tiananmen Square said he doubted if a multiparty system “would ever work in China.”⁴ Having worked eighteen years as a natural scientist at an American University he had returned to Tsinghua as a leader of research – and just like labour activist Han Dongfang his views had changed. In the United States he had been an active citizen, who had voted for the Democratic Party in elections to Congress and the Presidential election. He regarded democracy and multiparty system to be perfect for America. However, he also claimed that: “Multiparty democracy is perfect for the United States, but believing that multiparty democracy is right for the United



States does not mean it is right for China.” It is important to note that the above views are pronounced not by Mainland Chinese who have not spent a considerable time of their lives abroad. These are the words of former activists who have lived for a long time in the United States and Hong Kong. Then imagine how the non-existence of alternative views and voices inside China has made collective amnesia possible and narratives that compete with the official version of history and contemporary policy almost impossible to gain a foothold in public conversations. As a journalist of Chinese Central Television (CCTV) confided to me in 2012: “Us journalists at CCTV are under a tight leash. Discipline is strict. We cannot even travel abroad as ordinary tourists. We become brainwashed: as soon as we start working at CCTV our leaders tell us that the interest of the nation is number one to us.”⁵ It goes without saying that the Chinese media system plays a significant role as transmission belt for regime-vetted arguments. Control of its nuts and bolts, the journalists and editors, is crucial to the staying power of the Party-state’s narrative and continued hold on power. The above arguments are at the heart of the matter if one wants to fathom why former student and labour activists were later also bought into the discourse of the late patriarch Deng Xiaoping.

5. Curbing Civil Society

A common argument in favour of the status quo in state-society relations is that economic growth won back the legitimacy that was lost during the 1980s, especially after the Tiananmen massacre in 1989. From then on, people were encouraged or compelled to focus on personal wealth creation and to stay out of politics. As a result, the market-oriented party-state has dominated the formal political process and defeated those challenges that occasionally popped up from the dormant civil society beyond. To reach that conclusion the Party-state had to prove it could raise the people’s living standard considerably. Before that was proved, however, China’s people were unsure if the increasingly repressive state could deliver. During the second half of 1989, despite its harsher tone and behaviour, the government had a hard time to put down labour



unrest in different parts of the country. The internal security services and the police had to mobilize considerable energy and resources to quell the ventilating of discontent that had been set in motion by the expanding democracy movement. It took further repression, easing of Western sanctions, increasing inflow of foreign direct investment, and a re-launch of market reforms in 1992 for the previously incipient civil society to accept a politically more oppressive and closed atmosphere, amidst further market liberalization of the economy.

Critiques against unreserved faith in civil society as the golden key to open up locked-in authoritarian political systems come from many angles. A main point is that idealizing social organizations as per se contributing to the public good is too simplistic. Associational and non-associational groups such as violent biker gangs or racist organizations are anti-social and non-inclusive in their attitudes and behaviour. Pertinent post-colonial arguments hold that the idealized schemata of state, market and civil society is of standardized Western European origin and fits poorly with realities in non-Western countries and cultures. A state and its bureaucracy need not be polarized in tension against civil society. Several China scholars have argued against shoe-horning the People's Republic into a model that do not take account of the country's particular history and circumstances. Such arguments, however, do have a resemblance of the words of Chinese government spokespersons. While it is a fact that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in China do not seek autonomy from the state, this situation is to be attributed less from a cultural inclination to lean to the state, than the impact of silencing a civil society that was in a budding state in the late 1980s, whereas today its benefits are substantial if they align with the government. Registering an NGO does elevate the status of the organization in the eyes of the community and citizens. A registration is proof of support, recognition, and protection. It is a fact that not even the jailed Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo, the oppositional person who more than most other political dissidents has not shunned confrontation, argued for subversion of the Chinese political system from *outside* its perimeters. In the manifesto, Charter 08, that he and other intellectuals authored in 2008, political changes were to be implemented in concert with the



Communist Party and within the demarcations of the existing political structures. Therefore, anti-communist organizations such as Falun Gong and the Chinese Democracy Party that both clashed sharply with state power in 1997 and 1998 were exceptions to the general rule of seeking “within-system change”.

Nonetheless, this general picture of symbiosis between a repressive state and a quiescent society is far from complete. As the Chinese sociologist Jia Xijing has argued the relationship between state and civil society is in a thorny dilemma, a contradiction: “In China, the relationship between civil society and the state is in a dilemma. The CSOs want to free themselves from interference from the state while at the same time they try to rely on the government.” (2008: 172) Yet, an increasing tendency of non-sanctioned social activism among many groups in society, ranging from peasants and migrant workers to city intellectuals, must also be acknowledged. Growing income equality, social divides, and a stalled political reform process are the reasons generating and fuelling discontent. Yet, the party’s increased legitimacy, reported in a number of surveys such as the Asia Barometer, says nothing about quality of life. Are Chinese people happier today than before? Arguably, rising living standards should generate more life satisfaction. However, the evidence suggest otherwise. Christian Welzer and his team of scholars analysed the puzzle of why the percentage of Chinese who described themselves as very happy plummeted from 28 per cent in 1990 to 12 per cent in 2000. The researchers explained the puzzle in terms of the party-state’s “monetization of happiness”, which created the phenomenon of “frustrated achievers” (Welzer *et al.*, 2009). In light of these numbers one can imagine the frustration of all social strata, including the have-nots, if rebalancing the Chinese economy from 2014 through 2017 enters troubled waters.

6. Today’s Neo-Authoritarian Rule and Its Blind Spots

On 16 January 2013, the Communist Party’s nationalistic mouthpiece, the *Global Times*, published an op-ed by the scholar Wang Zhanyang who after the third plenum sang the praise of neo-authoritarianism and



the new party chief Xi Jinping: “China is historically lucky to have a strongman during a nation's transformation era.”⁶ Originally, its tenets were associated with Zhao Ziyang, the former General Secretary who was put under house arrest after the bloody Tiananmen crackdown in June 1989. Zhao and his aides looked to the East Asian developmental market states for a new model to propel the century-long dream of modernizing China. It even envisaged democratization after a period of strongman rule. For three years after Tiananmen, the patriarch Deng Xiaoping stepped in to perform the role of the neo-authoritarian in a version stripped of any potential for political reform. Today party chief Xi Jinping is set to rebalance the economy, control society and reset the state using ideas of “new authoritarianism”.

The incumbent General Secretary Xi Jinping and his Prime Minister Li Keqiang have inherited the scar of June Fourth from Deng Xiaoping. It is not likely that anyone of them would risk opening up Pandora's box by allowing a discussion of what really happened during the Beijing Spring of 1989. If the victims and the student movement were rehabilitated, how would that impact on the legitimacy of the Communist Party? What other episodes of the People's Republic would be exempt to be put on the table for further investigation? Neither the Cultural Revolution, nor the Great Leap Forward with its ensuing famine has been thoroughly investigated by Chinese historians. There are oceans of repressed and forgotten history in China. That is why the leader who opens Pandora's box must be a very strong and fearless leader, intent on pursuing a mission to correct the injustices of the past to redirect energies toward a brighter future. It would take an exceptional leader to undertake such a gigantic mission of conviction, far removed from the neo-authoritarian materialism of the late Deng Xiaoping or the present leader Xi Jinping. Such a person would hardly have risen through the vetting procedures at every level of the Party hierarchy. Yet, we also know from the history of the Soviet Union that such a person, Mikhail Gorbachev, may change *after* having ascended to the top position.

Nonetheless, memory, guilt, and reconciliation are difficult processes to work with even in open societies and democracies, which



have freedom of speech and rights laid down in basic laws. In light of this perspective future evaluations of the events of June 1989, decided upon by the leadership of the Communist Party, seem highly unlikely at the time of writing. If General Secretary Xi Jinping and his Prime Minister Li Keqiang were to secretly nourish the idea to open up the archives and a process of reconciliation, they would have to actively shed ties to powerful patrons who underpin their own power bases. Thus, they are dependent on the very system they would want to hold accountable for past atrocities. Moreover, given his pronouncements on democracy, it looks unlikely that Xi Jinping, as the “new neo-authoritarian”, will usher in more inclusive politics at a later stage. Moreover, as the increasing tensions over territorial sovereignty with Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines demonstrate, the politics of Xi Jinping are unlike the policies of all his predecessors, barring the great helmsman Mao Zedong, and unafraid of taking strident nationalism offshore. Yet, despite being a stronger leader than both his immediate predecessors, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, Xi is likely to run into trouble. For all the smartness of the legions of technocrats in the party-state machinery, they, with Xi Jinping in the driver’s seat, have a blind spot in their rear-view mirror. New neo-authoritarianism is out of step with the social and technological transformations that the country is going through.

Almost a year after the third plenum of the Chinese Communist Party, the world is still trying to fathom the future trajectory of deepening economic reform under General Secretary Xi Jinping. The idea that the aim of the new liberalizations is to prolong the rule of “the ruling party”, as it is called in China, will surprise no one. Prolonging economic growth is vital for stability, and vice versa, according to the party’s mantra since the crushing of the social movement and student demonstrations of 1989. To ensure the staying power of the Communist Party, its leaders realize that a new growth model is needed. In concert with the World Bank report of 2012, *China 2030: Building a Modern, Harmonious and Creative Society*, China’s Premier Li Keqiang and his aides in the Development Research Council have advocated a freeing-up of China’s financial market. Yet rebalancing might cause serious



dislocations in society, and that is one possible reason for why implementation of the proposals in the plenum's communiqué has stalled since the end of 2013. It is understandable that capital controls have been a mainstay for controlling society and politics. Liberalizing them entails walking a new and perilous line. Therefore, alongside the decision at the third plenum to make market mechanisms "decisive" in the Chinese economy came the announcement of a revamped domestic security organization – a new "State Security Committee". Headed by Xi Jinping, it highlights the further centralization of both the powers of the security apparatus and the General Secretary himself. This indicates that the new leadership of the one-party state is cognizant of possible crises related to socioeconomic ills and ethnic tensions and therefore of the need for strong "stability maintenance". And that maintenance is getting firmer. In 2013 and 2014 the net was tightened around high-profile so-called big Vs on the twitter-like Sina Weibo platform. Celebrities such as Lee Kaifu and Pan Shiyi had their accounts briefly suspended, or were rebuked for disseminating irresponsible comments about air pollution, corruption and government censorship to their millions of followers. At the beginning of 2014, in the run-up to the Chinese New Year celebrations on 31 January, the trials of civil rights lawyer Xu Zhiyong and his associates in the "New Citizens Movement" also indicated that while the party is intent on further liberalization, marketization and pluralization of the economy, no such liberalization is envisaged for China's locked-in civil society. Yet with the rapid modernization of Chinese society and maturing use of digital communications today, preventing social mobilization according to the practices of neo-authoritarian rule, such as by cracking down on even micro-level independent political discourse, is likely to be counterproductive. Many Chinese people engage in networks beyond the effective control of the party-state. In China, the number of registered nongovernmental organizations increased from a mere 4446 in 1989 to 387 000 in 2007 and more than 490 000 at the end of 2012.⁷ Even this spectacular increase says little about the mushrooming of non-associational organizations, in the realm of the shadows, on the ground. Official statistics only include registered organizations. According to estimates,



as far back as 2004 the number of such "shadowy" and truly nongovernmental organizations was as many as 8.31 million. What might unfold from Xi Jinping making the market more decisive in Chinese society? There could be a combustible mix of more absolute losers and more frustrated achievers. If the property market implodes, which is not at all unlikely, it could further increase inequalities, bringing tensions to an all-time-high. If rising inequality is combined with declining levels of happiness in Chinese society, continued suppression of social activism, the prospect of a failed "rebalancing" and a burst property bubble in Chinese cities, you get a potent cocktail indeed. If huge swaths of non-registered associations and surveillance-sensitive urban advocacy leaders go offline to avoid state surveillance, the state would, by forcing it into the shadows, be feeding a phenomenon it desperately wants to prevent. The cumbersome registration procedures for social organizations and a general good-governance deficit in the Chinese countryside mean that a shadow civil society continues to grow. Hypothetically – just like in Taiwan in the 1980s – organizations beyond the purview of the state could prepare for an alternative social reality and an alternative future. In the years ahead, given a serious economic or political crisis, international humiliation due to a clash with American-backed Japan in the East China Sea over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, potentially large-scale demonstrations and unrest are likely to be fuelled by the continued growth of social media, which despite pervasive mass surveillance and clever censorship could mobilize people into collective action.

7. Concluding Remarks

The significance of the 1989 military crackdown on the democracy movement in central Beijing is enormous. In retrospect, the outcome of the violent crackdown was earth-shaking for both China and the world, as the ideology of technocracy and economic growth spurring a market society was given unprecedented momentum, even if Deng Xiaoping had to fight internally with party conservatives until 1992. In this way China gradually attained social and political stability – albeit at a very



high cost. Neo-authoritarian political repression and predatory state capitalism entailed delaying democratic development and improvement of human rights, while deterioration of political accountability, corruption and the natural environmental increased. There is a hard chain of causality that connects the tragic ending of the Beijing Spring of 1989 and our contemporary world. Without it and the ensuing harsh turn toward a market society and robust economic growth, a Western leader, such as Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg would hardly circumvent meeting Tibet's spiritual leader in exile, who visited Oslo in May 2014 to commemorate the Nobel Peace Prize he received there in 1989. Solberg explained "It is not as if China said that we cannot meet the Dalai Lama, we just know that if we do, we are going to remain in the freezer for even longer." Therefore, silence over human rights issues and benefits of cooperating with authoritarian capitalism and neo-authoritarianism in China has led to a slow convergence of logics of authoritarian power in global politics today (Lagerkvist, 2014a). This phenomenon will require more theorizing by social scientists and students of international politics in the future. Conventional wisdom holds Western responses to the attacks of 9/11 responsible for erosion of political liberties and human rights in Western democracies, but these only partially explain the trend. The tiptoeing of Western leaders who visit Beijing illustrates how the tables have been turned. The UK Prime Minister David Cameron brought with him a delegation of businessmen to China in December 2013. During his state visit between 2nd and 4th December his tweets well illustrate the priorities vis-à-vis China. Of twenty-seven tweets, only one tweet concerned human rights, the others were business related. Concluding his trip, Mr. Cameron tweeted: "The end of a successful trip. £6billion of deals and a step up in the relationship between the UK and China."⁸

Thus, while lip-service is paid to human rights, the world's soon-to-be largest economy continues to pursue Deng's mix of dictatorial politics and free market economics. The hope that the wind of liberal democracy would sweep the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall has been dashed. Nonetheless, Western policymakers enthusiastically promote national business interests in China, still hoping that democracy will naturally



follow on from China's embrace of capitalism. At a time when the wind has changed, we need to revisit the failed promises of 1989 and pose important new questions. As the Chinese defence lawyer Pu Zhiqiang has argued: "a certain lazy comfort" attends amnesia about the massacre. Such complacency risks letting universal human rights slide into the cold not just in China but elsewhere too. The crushing of the broad social movement in favour of political liberalization on June Fourth 1989 made it easier, especially after Deng had secured final victory against party orthodoxy in 1992, to enforce massive industry lay-offs. Powerful memory politics and market reform compelled people to redirect their energies and forget about the 1989 crackdown. As a result, China has become an economic juggernaut but also an unequal country that many citizens say lacks both solidarity and morals. Economic growth has also made non-democratic China more nationalistic and self-assured, whereas the rise of authoritarian power logic worldwide has left liberal democracies insecure, with their basic values eroded.

Notes

- ⁺ Parts of this article were previously published in the essay "The legacy of Tiananmen Square", *YaleGlobal Online*, 3rd June 2014 <<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/m/content/legacy-tiananmen-square/9299>>.
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