

## Student Protests in Fin-de-Siècle China

It was springtime in China and, once again, students were taking to the streets and making headlines. Some youths held aloft official flags bearing the names of their schools, while others carried banners covered with passionate phrases written out in Chinese characters or Roman letters. Campuses throughout the country were festooned with wallposters, also in varied languages, the contents of which ranged from elegant poems to crude caricatures, some of which likened a current political leader to Hitler. The propaganda accompanying the movement had a decidedly cosmopolitan and contemporary feel, since students employed the latest technologies of communication, borrowed symbols from protest movements that had taken place recently in other parts of the world, and made allusions to current Eastern European events. Nevertheless, there were many things that the students did and said that linked them to China's past. For example, when they called on all Chinese to help *jiuguo* (save the nation), they were echoing a cry of earlier generations. It had been heard, for example, in 1903 (when Tsarist Russia threatened Manchuria), 1935 (when

Japanese incursions into North China triggered the December 9th Movement), and 1947 (when the Anti-Hunger, Anti-Civil War Movement broke out). When they worked the phrase 'blood debts must be repaid in blood' into their posters, they were doing something that their predecessors of the 1920s had often done as well when there were patriotic martyrs to be honoured. And some of the march routes they followed and songs they sang were well-known to educated youths of the pre-1949 era.

Links between the new protests and those of the past were established through more than just this common—no doubt sometimes unconscious—reliance on a longstanding, though ever-changing, basic repertoire of rhetoric, symbolism, and action. Some participants and observers also made conscious use of historical analogies. There were students, for example, who took pains to link this struggle to specific moments in Chinese history. Most notably, protesters insisted that they were following in the footsteps of those who led the May 4th Movement of 1919, the anniversary of which had just been marked with considerable fanfare, as it always is in China, especially in years like this that end with a nine. Sympathetic journalists accepted and promoted this idea, but critics of the movement countered by looking for parallels between the present and a discredited part of the past. Contemporary youths, they argued, were not comparable to the heroes of 1919, enlightened patriots who had protested against the terms of the Treaty of Versailles that transferred control of parts of China from Germany to Japan and called for the dismissal of corrupt and oppressive Chinese officials. Instead, these students were acting just like the violent Red Guards of the 1960s who had plunged China into the darkness of the Cultural Revolution. To reinforce this negative image, instead of describing mass marches as 'spontaneous demonstrations', these opponents of the students referred to 'riotous' gatherings in which gullible youths were being 'manipulated' by nefarious hidden hands.

### Differences Concealed and Revealed

I have chosen my words carefully above, so that it is impossible to tell whether the spring being described is that of the famous 1989 protests or the one that has just passed, during which students demonstrated against NATO's destruction of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. This is, I admit, a rhetorical sleight-of-hand. Had more details been provided, it would have been clear whether I had meant the period leading up to and immediately following the June 4th Massacre or the aftermath of what is now sometimes called the 'May 8th Tragedy', in honour of the date, Beijing-time, that three Chinese journalists were killed. A comment about the size of the marches would have been enough to indicate which spring I had in mind: the largest recent demonstrations involved a few thousand people, those of 1989 approximately a million. So, too, would have a mention of whether it was a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader (Li Peng) or an American President (Bill Clinton) whom the students were most

fond of likening to Hitler. Also revelatory as to which year was being described would have been a reference to whether the educated youths taking to the streets had ever protested before. A series of short-lived student struggles—anti-Japanese rallies in the autumn of 1985, demonstrations triggered by varied grievances in the winter of 1986–87, and so forth—preceded and helped set the stage for the June 4th Movement. But the marches of 1999 were the first student-led protests in almost a decade.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, any number of specific details about propaganda would have shown clearly which spring was in question. Had students rallied around a Goddess of Democracy figure, which was modelled in part on the Statue of Liberty as well as on various Chinese icons? Or had students carried banners that showed the Statue of Liberty with blood on her hands? When looking abroad for slogans and symbols, had the Chinese protesters borrowed the originally Philippine term ‘People Power’ (1989) or placed Serbian-style target signs on their T-shirts and posters (1999)? When it comes to references to specific Eastern European events and people, was it the spring when angry Chinese mused about the injustice of Heaven having provided Russia with a Gorbachev, while they only got a Deng Xiaoping, or the one when ‘Resist America—Support Yugoslavia’ was a slogan? Just what sorts of ‘technologies of communication’ were novel that year? Was it the spring when international news reports faxed from abroad were first distributed on campuses, or that when wallposters began to contain URL addresses that students were encouraged to visit either to disrupt (US government websites) or to obtain information ([www.serbia.com](http://www.serbia.com))? Were the ‘blood debts’ alluded to ones that had been acquired by foreign powers (May 1999) or China’s own leaders (June 1989)? And when the phrase *renquan* (human rights) was used, was it often placed sarcastically in quotes—as in a 1999 banner I saw that asked if ‘bombing embassies’ was the American meaning of this term?

References to history could have been used as well to indicate whether I was referring to 1989 or 1999. Perhaps most importantly, I could have stated whether it was clear that the protests in question had earned a place in the historical record as a major turning point. This is definitely the case with the 1989 protests, which continue to stand out, along with the crackdown that followed them, as marking a watershed moment in China’s recent history. It is doubtful, by contrast, that the anti-NATO struggle will be looked to, a decade from now, as an event of the first importance. It is possible that it will not even be remembered then as the most significant series of demonstrations of 1999, since the long-term impact of the Falun Gong sect’s sit-ins and related events remains to be seen.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the 1990s, small-scale demonstrations broke out, but before this past May, workers and farmers, not students, played the central roles in all of them. Students were likewise a minor presence in the largest single protest of the 1990s to take place before the anti-NATO marches—the April 1999 Beijing sit-in by an estimated 10,000 members of the Falun Gong sect.

## Spectres from the Past

A different sort of turn toward history could also have clarified things: namely, I could have pointed out in my opening which sorts of commentators had employed which kinds of historical analogies to make sense of the student protests I was describing. A decade ago, the journalists and broadcasters most likely to associate the students on the streets with the protesters of 1919 were Americans and West Europeans. The PRC official media, by contrast, went to great lengths to deny that there was any meaningful connection between the current protests and the May 4th tradition. They did this in spite, or rather because, of the fact that a ‘New May 4th Manifesto’ was one of the most important texts produced by students of the June 4th generation.<sup>2</sup>

It was in part because of a desire to undermine the impact of such student texts that the spectre of the Red Guards was invoked so often by officials seeking to discredit the 1989 demonstrators. Editorials in leading newspapers such as the *People’s Daily* played a key role in this symbolic battle of historical analogies. There was a brief but important period when the PRC media’s coverage of the 1989 protests was so sympathetic that many readers became convinced—with good reason—that there must be people high up in the Party who thought the demonstrations a good thing. But this exceptional time aside, the *People’s Daily* and other official publications harped on the idea that the student occupation of Tiananmen Square and related actions in scores of other cities were a rebirth of Red Guard-style extremism.<sup>3</sup>

In 1999, on the other hand, the official media in the PRC endorsed the claim by students to be reviving the May 4th tradition, while Western European and American reporters countered with Red Guard analogies. Had the Cultural Revolution not also been a time, they asked, when anti-foreign youths had gathered menacingly near consular buildings and shouted ‘Down with American Imperialism!’? Unsympathetic commentators sometimes likened the anti-NATO protests to other events in China’s past—the Boxer Uprising or the state-sponsored ‘Resist America—Support Korea’ demonstrations of 1951—but the Red Guard parallel was again the most commonly used negative characterization.

The differences noted above between 1989 and 1999 are important. So, too, is the very basic one: that hundreds of students and even larger numbers of workers were massacred in Beijing and Chengdu ten years

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<sup>2</sup> One of the authors of that document was a history student at Beijing University named Wang Dan, who had already established himself as a leading student activist at the school that had played the central role in the May 4th Movement. For a translation of this text, see *Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement*, edited by Han Minzhu, Princeton 1990, pp. 135–37.

<sup>3</sup> This was done directly at times—as it had been in 1986, when notices appeared on campus bulletin boards after a series of demonstrations had taken place, warning of the re-emergence of Red Guardism. At other times, it was done indirectly via code words, such as *dongluan* (turmoil), which were linked to the Cultural Revolution.

ago, but no protesters were killed this past May. Nor was there a campaign of mass arrests, aimed at participants in student-led demonstrations this year, as there was in 1989.<sup>4</sup> The contrasts noted above—and there are many others as well—are significant enough that, had my opening been intended to lay the groundwork for the argument that 1999 witnessed a replay of 1980s events, it would have been a foolish way to start. My goal, however, was different and more modest. I simply wanted to prepare readers to accept the idea that the student protests of the 1980s, including those that immediately preceded the June 4th Massacre, and those of this past May were not completely dissimilar.

It may seem that this goal was modest enough that there was no need to resort to a grandstanding opening that left it unclear which spring was in question. A dramatic beginning seemed in order, however, since the seemingly commonsensical notion that protest patterns of the 1980s and 1990s might be similar challenges what has quickly emerged, both in China and much of the West, as the conventional wisdom on the anti-NATO movement. Foreign commentators harshly critical of the recent protests and CCP spokesmen intent on defending these marches as justified have staked out opposite positions on virtually everything associated with the May 8th Tragedy. There are, however, two things about which they have been in accord: that the events of 1989 and 1999 should not be compared or connected, and that the June 4th generation and the current one are poles apart politically.

### A Critique of the Conventional Wisdom

As someone whose first book was a history of Chinese student activism and who happened to be in the PRC when the anti-NATO protests took place—ironically, because I had just taken part in a May 4th commemorative conference—I find the emerging conventional wisdom alluded to above deeply troubling. One reason is that it misrepresents many things about the course of recent events. In addition, it contributes to a misleading view of the general dynamics of Chinese student protest movements, past and present alike—and to misunderstand the role of campus unrest in China is to misunderstand a major feature of that country's political life. This is because, as Wang Dan, one of the leaders of the June 4th Movement, recently reminded the readers of this journal, in the 'Dialogue on the Future of China',<sup>5</sup> Chinese students have long served as a 'klaxon on public issues', just as they did several months ago. This role of issuing wake-up calls to the nation is rooted in a hallowed tradition, stretching back for millennia, of China's intelligentsia—and university students have been regarded as part of this group—acting as a moral conscience for society and being looked to by other classes for political inspiration. This is one

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<sup>4</sup> Some dissidents were arrested this past May, of course, but not because they had organized anti-NATO protests. In addition, as I am writing this (in late August), a campaign of repression against Falun Gong is underway.

<sup>5</sup> Wang Chaohua, Wang Dan and Li Minqi, 'A Dialogue on the Future of China', NLR 235, May–June 1999.

reason why, during the past century—which, admittedly, has seen student movements in various parts of the world, especially in less developed countries, achieve impressive results at specific points in time—the track record of Chinese campus activism still stands out as something very special. The May 4th Movement of 1919, after all, is not remembered just because the students involved did noble things but also because they succeeded in mobilizing workers and merchants and accomplishing certain goals. The Treaty of Versailles may never have been modified in the way that the students hoped that it would be, but the May 4th Movement did lead to the dismissal from office of the ‘Three Traitorous Officials’, the hated trio that educated youths claimed had sold out the country’s interests. And this was not the first time, as CCP leaders were well aware in 1989 and remain cognizant of today, that protests by students contributed, albeit sometimes not quite so directly, to the fall from power of high officials.

How exactly does the conventional wisdom on the anti-NATO demonstrations distort understanding of student protests? Perhaps the easiest way to explain this is to look at four specific things that disturb me about the way many commentators have dealt with the connections—or lack thereof—between the protests of the 1980s and of 1999.

The first element is simply that many of the things I witnessed recently reminded me vividly of events from the 1980s that I had either watched firsthand (I was in Shanghai during the 1986–87 protests) or followed long distance (as I did the June 4th Movement). The campus unrest of 1999 often seemed to me to be less a dramatic departure from than a revised and updated version of the patterns of the 1980s. I frequently felt a sense of *déjà vu* this past May, when I watched students engage in acts of symbolically charged street theatre derived from the repertoire that youths had turned to and helped develop since 1903—and that has links to intelligentsia struggles of even earlier epochs. To be sure, there were some very important differences between the student actions of 1999 and those of preceding decades, including the 1980s, in part because new protest scripts are always being added into the mix and each generation inevitably improvises when it adapts old tactics to suit novel needs. It was still striking to me, however, just how many echoes of the student movements of 1985–89—as well as of earlier periods—there were in the demonstrations that followed the May 8th Tragedy.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Documentation for many of the specific points made here about historical events can be found in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *Student Protests in Twentieth-Century China: The View from Shanghai*, Stanford 1991, which contains a bibliographic essay that describes some of the most interesting and useful texts on Chinese youth movements by other authors. Where 1989 itself is concerned, see also the documentary film, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, which is discussed in a later note, and various contributions in *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China*, edited by Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry, Boulder 1994, second edition. Comments on the 1999 protests are based mainly on personal observations and conversations with participants and observers, as well as on continual, though obviously selective, reading of English and Chinese press reports, sometimes via newspapers, sometimes via the internet, while I was in Beijing May 9–10, Shanghai 10–17 May, and Hong Kong 17–20 May. For helping me make sense of the protests as

## Against the ‘Big Lie’

A second disturbing feature of many recent discussions of 1999 is that they reveal the extent to which the June 4th Movement, which was revisited in such intriguing ways by the contributors to the NLR dialogue on China’s future, continues to be misunderstood. What is still lacking in many quarters is an interest in recognizing it as a multifaceted and complex historical event. There seems to be, instead, a shared determination within the official PRC media and the mainstream Western press, albeit it for diametrically opposed reasons, to reduce the June 4th Movement to a stand-off between forces representing pure good and pure evil. There are certainly foreign commentators, including some of the best China correspondents employed by major English language magazines and newspapers—such as Susan Lawrence of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and John Gittings of the *Guardian*—who have resisted the tendency to simplify the meaning of 1989. And there are also former participants in the struggle who have done the same, including Wang Dan and the two other former June 4th leaders interviewed in the NLR forum, Wang Chao-hua and Li Minqi. It is still all too easy, however, for those with a casual interest in China to mistakenly conclude they have only two choices: accepting the Chinese régime’s ‘Big Lie’, or embracing a romanticized vision of all members of the June 4th generation as saintly fighters for democracy.

Of course, although each view is flawed, the Chinese régime’s version of 1989 does a much greater disservice to the historical record than that which presents the June 4th generation in hagiographic terms. The CCP’s ‘Big Lie’ is based on erroneous and distorted ideas. The régime continues, for example, to dismiss completely the idea that the protesters of 1989 were inspired largely by patriotism, as they definitely were. The CCP insists that the generally peaceful occupation of Tiananmen Square was a ‘counter-revolutionary riot’ that was supported by ‘foreign’ agents, and official spokesmen will not admit that the degree of popular support that the students earned at the time was enormous. Most despicably of all, the régime continues to assert that, while a small number of ‘trouble-makers’ were killed, the bulk of those who died that June were brave soldiers, young men who showed considerable restraint in dealing with the rabble and deserve to be honoured as revolutionary martyrs.

Many Western European and American commentators, responding to an image created and perpetuated by Li Lu and some other former activists who have been much less self-critical than the participants in

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they were unfolding, I am particularly grateful to Barbara Mittler, Steve Smith, David Kenley, Adam Brookes, and Susan Lawrence. I am also very grateful to several Chinese colleagues in Shanghai who shall remain anonymous and to Kate Edgerton. And I would like to thank John Gittings, Seth Faison, Stephanie Ho, Ted Plafker, Scott Savitt, and Maggie Farley, journalists with whom I exchanged information and ideas at one or another point.

the NLR forum, present 1989 in a much less grossly misleading but still overly simplistic way. They do so by treating the protests of that year as an unambiguously virtuous struggle to transform China into a liberal democracy essentially like that found in the United States or the United Kingdom. Claims by various sympathetic though critical observers that some student leaders behaved at times in arbitrary or élitist ways are swept aside by defenders of this vision of the June 4th Movement. So, too, are comments by former participants that more might have been accomplished if the students had tried harder to find common ground with agitated workers. There is no room in this vision for the self-critical comments of influential June 4th activists such as Liu Xiaobo, who have argued that protesters should have tried harder to combat the tendency to replicate within their own movement some features of the régime they opposed. Liu has suggested that he and other activists sometimes fell into the trap of treating their ‘revolutionary’ struggle as a sacred mission and treating anyone who opposed a tactic or position as a ‘traitor’ to this holy cause.<sup>7</sup>

The positive image of the June 4th Movement alluded to above is obviously very different from that associated with the PRC’s ‘Big Lie’ campaign, but it shares with it several tendencies. One is to treat 1989 as a Manichaeian struggle. Another is to present a group of noble youths of a particular sort—students in the one case, young soldiers in the other—as the main victims of violence, when many workers and other citizens of varied ages were also slain that June. A third tendency, which is of more direct relevance to the issues at hand here, is to see issues other than patriotism as the central driving force behind the June 4th Movement.

The downplaying of patriotic motives—by both CCP officials who insist that June 4th activists were endangering China by creating turmoil and by foreign analysts who claim that the 1989 protests were only about ‘democracy’—is problematic in varied ways. Not the least important of these is that it makes it hard to understand how students proved so successful at generating support among large groups of ordinary people a decade ago.

### **The Role of Patriotism**

Why did hundreds of thousands of ordinary urban citizens turn out to show support for the educated youths who had gathered in

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<sup>7</sup> For a sense of Liu’s views, see the June 2nd ‘Hunger Strike Manifesto’ that he co-authored, which is translated in Han, ed., *Cries for Democracy*, pp. 349–54. Interviews with Liu, as well as with many other former participants who express divergent views, can be found in the Long Bow Group’s 1995 documentary, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, a prize-winning film that has provoked controversy. For more about that film, for which I was a consultant, and links to both positive and harshly critical reviews, see the very creative website designed by the insightful China specialist Geremie Barmé and the Long Bow Group: <http://www.nmis.org/Gate/>. This site contains an extensive bibliography and the full text of several works, including an essay by Liu taken from Wasserstrom and Perry, eds., *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China*.

Tiananmen Square in 1989? They did not do so because they were part of a secret plan hatched by a small handful of malcontents and some foreign enemies of socialism, as the 'Big Lie' would lead us to believe. But neither did they come because they were passionate about the need to speed up the pace of political reform, as the extreme interpretation of 1989 as democratic movement would have it. Some students certainly had a lot to say about the need to democratize China, but even they often argued that democracy was needed not just or even primarily because it was a good thing in and of itself but because it would help strengthen the nation. More generally, the main vision students articulated in their wallposters and manifestos in 1989 was that China's well-being was endangered by the behaviour of leaders who had become so corrupt that they no longer cared about the ideals that had brought them to power. This notion that high officials had ceased to put the interests of the people above their own and that something had to be done to save the nation was an appealing one to many Chinese. When students showed, through actions such as hunger strikes, that they were ready to make sacrifices to achieve their patriotic goals, the attraction of the June 4th Movement became stronger still. Even workers, whose main complaint was not that political reforms were coming too slowly, but rather that the economic ones were coming too fast, were moved by the dramatic gestures of the students. Adding to this effect was the fact that, though the specific gestures were often novel in their details, they reminded observers of the things that young heroes had done in the past to prove their willingness to risk their lives for the nation.

In thinking about the place of the June 4th Movement within the general history of student activism during the Reform era, the downplaying of the role of patriotism in 1989 by many Western analysts and PRC commentators alike becomes even more problematic. It sets the June 4th Movement apart from, rather than locating it within, important trends. It helps obscure the connection between events such as the anti-Japanese protests of 1985 and the demonstrations of 1989. It also hides a key link between the protests of 1989 and 1999, the role that love of country played in leading students to take to the streets in both years—a connection that Wang Dan quite rightly stresses in his contribution to the recent NLR forum.

A third disconcerting aspect of many discussions of the anti-NATO protests is that they reveal how understandings of Chinese mass movements, past and present alike, are continually distorted by a fundamentally erroneous idea. This is the notion that each struggle can be placed cleanly into one of two categories: some are spontaneous efforts that deserve to be celebrated as contributing to a noble tradition, it is supposed, while others can be dismissed as manipulated pseudo-movements. The PRC official media places the 1999 protests in the former category and the 1989 ones in the latter, while the mainstream press in Western Europe and North America tends to do the opposite. Each side typically takes for granted,

though, that there are only two boxes and that it is easy to decide what goes where. And they agree on the placement of some events. For example, there is a consensus that the anti-Gang of Four April 5th Movement of 1976, which began with expressions of grief over the death of Zhou Enlai, should be viewed as part of the May 4th tradition but that Red Guard rallies should not.

### The Complexity of Motivations

One problem with this is that there is no clear line to be drawn between movements that are and are not genuine. Historical reality, in China as elsewhere, tends to be messier than that. The divide between ‘spontaneous’ and ‘orchestrated’ demonstrations is often fuzzy, and the two sorts of events not only can look a great deal alike to outsiders but feel very similar to those taking part. One reason is that there are always participants in even the most stage-managed events who join in for reasons of their own. Participation in a loyalist movement provides opportunities—and, in a one-party state, these are particularly precious—for people to express feelings of anger that have nothing to do with the cause being promoted by the régime. Some people also use the outbreak of state-sponsored marches as an excuse to revel in the break in routine these provide, as well as the possibilities opened for them to express their creativity through wallposters. Conversely, again especially in one-party states, some people end up joining even the most originally spontaneous of struggles, if these movements seem to have any potential to succeed, because of a calculated concern with appearing politically conformist. The logic here is that, if the movement does indeed achieve its goals, it may later be re-assessed as a loyalist one. This occurred in China with the April 5th Movement, which was first dubbed ‘counter-revolutionary’ and then officially re-baptized a ‘patriotic’ struggle in the Deng Xiaoping era. Hence, taking part in an opposition movement, if it seems to have already gained, or have the potential to gain, some support within the régime, can be seen as the safest political course to take, even for loyalist members of the population.

In addition to the murkiness of the spontaneous/orchestrated divide, there is never a clear line to be drawn between movements motivated by virtuous as opposed to distasteful impulses. Though there are ample reasons to admire some movements more than others, if we look closely enough and honestly enough at the historical record, here, too, we will find ambiguity. The May 4th Movement may be a struggle that people with widely varying political views treat as a paragon of virtue, for example, but it had a seldom mentioned xenophobic aspect to it. Beijing students of the time who happened to have Japanese girlfriends were sometimes taunted for this by even the most ‘enlightened’ of their May 4th activist classmates, and some Japanese nationals were beaten up in Shanghai. Meanwhile, though there may be good reason for contemporary protesters to try to distance themselves from the violence and extremism of the Red

Guards, the student activists of the Cultural Revolution era did have a praiseworthy interest in promoting egalitarianism and ridding the CCP of corruption.

What also unsettles me about recent discussions of the anti-NATO protests, which troubled me a decade ago about instant interpretations of the June 4th Movement, is that commentators have tended to be too narrow in their search for meaningful historical analogies. In both my previous studies of the campus unrest of 1985–89 and my recent observation of the 1999 demonstrations, I have been struck by the way Reform-era protests typically contain elements drawn from virtually every previous wave of student activism. What gives individual struggles of recent years their special character is in part the process by which genuinely novel symbols and tactics are incorporated into a familiar repertoire. Head-bands covered with slogans were a new technique in 1986—at least as far as I have been able to tell—that seems to have come to China via South Korean student protests, which were sometimes shown on state-run television. The Goddess of Democracy was among the novelties of 1989, while the new things to appear in 1999 included banners that showed drawings of the American flag with swastikas where the stars should be and the American Eagle with missile-like feathers. But these innovations of the moment are not the main thing that gives individual Reform-era protests their distinctive air, for just as striking has been the varied ways that elements of street theatre and imagery developed in earlier epochs have been reworked and recombined.

There are, as already indicated above, echoes to be heard in events such as those of 1989 and 1999 not just of the Warlord era (1912–1927) and the Maoist period (1949–1976), but also of every other part of this century. One could even argue that the single best period to focus on when looking for parallels with Reform-era protests of the past fifteen years is neither the May 4th period nor the Cultural Revolution. Instead, it is the Nationalist period (1927–1949) when Chiang Kai-shek governed China in particular, two four-year stretches within that epoch, 1931–35 and 1945–49. Those were also times when a variety of different sorts of student protests took place, some partially or fully supported by members of the régime, others much more oppositional in nature, some triggered by international conflicts, others by domestic concerns. To look only to 1919 or 1966–68—or even to note some continuities with each of these times—when trying to make historical sense of Reform-era student activism is thus too limiting. It can also be misleading, since there are some things which members of the May 4th and Red Guard generations did and said that lack Reform-era equivalents.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For example, the May 4th era was a time when many educated youths criticized patriarchal ideas and practices. Neither the students of the June 4th generation nor of the current one have echoed this interest. For May 4th era feminism, see Wang Zheng's excellent new study, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories*, Berkeley 1999.

## Moving Beyond the Misconceptions

Keeping the points raised above in mind, it should be easy to understand both why I found the NLR forum on China's future a welcome addition to the literature on Chinese student protest and why I found it wanting in some ways. When reading that forum, I was pleased, among other things, by the tendency of the participants to avoid falling into some of the main traps that have bedeviled most discussion of both 1989 and 1999. Many of the thoughtful and self-critical, though not necessarily apologetic, responses that Wang Chaohua, Wang Dan, and Li Minqi gave to questions put to them at Harvard help us move beyond overly simplistic ideas about 1989. The diversity of the opinions they express should, at the very least, dispel any lingering misleading sense among readers of these pages that the students at Tiananmen Square had an unambiguous agenda. Their attention to often neglected issues such as worker participation was commendable, and I found things to agree with in at least some of the answers that each participant gave, with Wang Chaohua's fitting in particularly well with my own vision of 1989. Most notably, where the topic of this article is concerned, the responses participants in the forum gave to the final written question regarding the 1999 protests were helpful. In stressing continuities as well as ruptures between the demonstrations of the 1980s and the 1990s, the contributors to the forum avoided drawing too sharp a line between the periods.

I had, nevertheless, some misgivings. Some related to matters of detail, but one that touched on a matter of larger concern is worth mentioning here. This was that, when it came to placing the events of 1989 and 1999 into historical context, too little attention was paid to two particularly relevant periods in China's history. Too little was said about the events that occurred between 1985 and 1988, which helped reacquaint students with the collective action repertoire alluded to above and generally prepared the ground for the June 4th Movement. In addition, the struggles of the Nationalist era that so closely paralleled those of the Reform period were ignored.<sup>9</sup>

The rest of this article examines more closely three misconceptions about Chinese student movements that are linked to the emerging conventional wisdom on the 1999 protests as a complete departure from patterns of the 1980s. In doing so, I will provide more detailed information about the anti-NATO demonstrations and elaborate upon some of the themes introduced above. I will then end with some speculative concluding remarks on the extent to which student activism continues to pose a threat to the CCP, as the legitimacy crisis that began in 1989 continues to evolve as it enters its second decade.

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<sup>9</sup> In terms of more detailed problems, I found perplexing Li Minqi's claim that 1999 witnessed a healthy revival of interest in 'socialist' terms. I saw no evidence that students involved in the protests viewed these terms, when used by the régime, as more than hollow slogans. I saw no signs, in other words, that a concern with socio-economic equality was re-emerging as a major force on Chinese campuses.

## **Misconception I: This Generation Is Xenophobic Whereas the Last One Was Internationalist**

It is true that the students who took to the streets in the 1980s often employed American and West European symbols and quoted slogans by internationally renowned figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. It would be a mistake to conclude, however, that members of the June 4th generation were untouched by anti-foreign impulses or that their movements were free of xenophobic tinges. It is important to keep in mind, for example, what some of the students who would be swept up into the mass demonstrations against official corruption and for political freedom in 1989 were doing six months earlier. Although the image many have of the June 4th generation is of people who wore T-shirts covered with phrases such as 'We Shall Overcome', the campus event that made the news at the end of 1988 was an anti-African riot inspired by deeply embedded racist ideas. This event took place in Nanjing, where Chinese educated youths, angered among other things by the fact that their government provided larger living stipends to students from Africa than to those from within the PRC, turned violent. One factor that added to the volatility of the situation was the longstanding tendency of African countries invited to send students to China to choose mostly or only male ones. This, in turn, typically creates a situation in which some African male students establish sexual liaisons with Chinese women. The immediate trigger for the 1988 riots, in which some African students were beaten and many others threatened with violence, was a series of parties where black men and Chinese women were the main participants.

Another example of a series of events from the 1980s in which anti-foreign impulses played a central role, and in which the parallels with 1999 are in some ways much more striking, is the anti-Japanese protests that have already been mentioned. In 1985, youths in Beijing and other cities took part in a short-lived and partially government-supported series of rallies and marches. The idea driving this movement was that the Japanese had begun to dump inferior goods onto the Chinese market (a form of 'economic imperialism') and refused to apologize appropriately for past acts of aggression against China (the so-called 'textbook controversy'). The similarities between these protests and those of 1999 are obvious. One thing to note is simply that each involved students shouting 'Down with Imperialism!' and calling on a foreign power to apologize for killing Chinese nationals. Another is that anniversaries helped set the stage for each event. The 1999 protests unfolded, as noted above, in the immediate aftermath of commemorations of the May 4th Movement's eightieth anniversary, while the 1985 protests began when events were held to mark the anniversary of the 18 September 1931 incident, in which Japanese troops invaded Manchuria. In addition, students played on the fact that efforts were being made to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the December 9th Movement,

another anti-Japanese struggle and one that is second in importance only to May 4th in the official history of pre-1949 student activism. Further rallies were held in 1985 as that anniversary date drew near, and the wallposters that appeared then, like those that had been put up a few months earlier, were often virulently anti-Japanese.

The demonstrations and rallies that took place during 1986–87 and 1989 were not, of course, fuelled primarily by anti-foreign sentiment. Indeed, some foreigners who reported on the June 4th Movement insist they were treated very warmly by all the Chinese protesters they met in and around Tiananmen Square in 1989, and I would say the same thing about the demonstrators I encountered in Shanghai three years earlier. This is worth noting because none of the various foreigners I have met who covered or watched at close hand the recent demonstrations in Beijing has said comparable things. Due to a combination of factors—the timing of my arrival, the fact that the movement seems to have generally been less stridently anti-foreign there than elsewhere—I did not meet with any hostility in Shanghai this year between 10–17 May. In Beijing, however, on the evening of 9 May, members of the small group of Americans and West Europeans I was with were spat at, cursed, and verbally threatened by some of the people we passed on the streets near the British and US embassies.

### **Presence of Xenophobia**

As stark as this contrast with the June 4th Movement in particular seems, it is worth pointing out that some other foreigners who observed or covered the 1989 protests have claimed that they met with a good deal of ambivalence or even hostility near Tiananmen Square that year. Moreover, it is crucial to reiterate here the argument made above about the entwining of nationalistic and democratic impulses in the June 4th Movement. The variety of patriotism involved may have been more cosmopolitan in 1989 and more xenophobic a decade later, but it is important to think of them as standing near different ends of the same continuum.

My choice of wording is intentional: I wrote ‘near’ not ‘at’ different ends of this spectrum for a reason, and some statements made during the 1989 and 1999 protests suggest that participants in each movement actually fell at varied places along it. There was, for example, an explicitly internationalist cast to even some of the most virulently anti-American of 1999 wallposters. These texts stressed that the United States had proved itself a bestial nation with an immoral leader not just by waging war against Milosevic, but also by doing so in a manner that circumvented the United Nations. Clinton, these posters claimed, had violated the clauses relating to national sovereignty in various UN documents and failed to seek prior approval for NATO actions from the Security Council—a particularly sore point to many Chinese, owing to China’s position as a permanent veto-wielding member of that body. Conversely,

there was sometimes a jingoistic aspect to the statements made by June 4th activists. Some wallposters suggested then that the Chinese people did not merely deserve to live in a country that was governed in a more just way, but also one that held a pre-eminent position in the world.

## **Misconception II: The 1999 Mass Actions Were State-Run, Those of the 1980s Were Spontaneous**

Here, as already indicated, there is more than meets the eye. Throughout the 1980s, one thing that allowed movements to grow was a sense that some members of the régime thought it appropriate for students to protest. The 1985 anti-Japanese demonstrations had an unusually high degree of régime support, but even those of 1986–87 and 1989 enjoyed some, and the precedent of the April 5th Movement—first denounced, then later praised—was on many people’s minds. The June 4th Movement was not one created or orchestrated by members of the CCP, but one thing that encouraged people to take the risk of marching was a belief that to do so might at least be tolerated. And, at specific points during 1989, it even seemed to some that participation was more prudent than apathy. There were instances in which entire work units marched together in 1989, with the leaders of these work units in the front, as well as cases in which middle school teachers took all of their students to demonstrations. In moments such as these, the line between orchestration and what might be called collective spontaneity is impossible to draw with any sense of certainty.

The ambiguity of the 1999 case is different but demonstrates even more effectively that this not a black-and-white issue but rather one riddled with grey zones. It is worthwhile, therefore, to look at the officially sanctioned and unofficial sides of the anti-NATO protests in some detail.

There is clear evidence that the government and official youth groups helped facilitate student activism in the immediate aftermath of the bombing by providing buses to help students get to the American Embassy and so forth. It is also undeniable that the students were given clear cues—the language of official editorials, the passivity of the police even toward those throwing rocks, and so on—that some acts of protests would be tolerated. I also know, from firsthand experience, that, by the evening of 9 May, as groups representing different campuses followed one another through the streets of Beijing—stopping in turn at a spot near the American Embassy to hold a short rally—many were using the same list of approved slogans. It is also undeniable that the official media, by reporting on Kosovo in a particular fashion—namely, saying very little about Milosevic’s abhorrent policies toward ethnic Albanians and a great deal about NATO violence—helped create the context for

the protests even before the Chinese journalists in Belgrade were killed. Both the stage-setting and stage-managing roles of the Chinese régime are important to keep in mind when thinking about recent events, since they explain many things about them, including the uniform nature of some of the wallposters and banners. Nevertheless, to conclude from all this that the whole affair was carefully orchestrated and hence completely different from the protests of the 1980s is wrong.

The source of the error lies in the fact that this view glosses over the extent to which the recent protests were shaped by spontaneous anger, involved elements of bottom-up innovation as well as top-down direction, and, at times, moved towards—if never quite adopting—anti-official positions. It is still unclear, for example, whether the efforts of official organizations should best be seen as attempts to steer a movement that was already taking shape on its own in a particular direction, or at least jump ahead of one about to unfold. The buses were provided quickly, but some observers on Beijing campuses have said that students began to march toward the city's centre before this was done. There have also been reports that, just prior to the bombing of the Belgrade Embassy, some students had applied to the government for permission to stage a protest against NATO's activities in Yugoslavia and had this request denied. And Wang Dan claims in the NLR forum that applications were made by students earlier in the 1990s to hold patriotic rallies when incidents had happened abroad, such as when Chinese residents of Indonesia had been victims of crowd violence. In all these cases, apparently, officials, nervous about protesters taking up other kinds of issues once on the streets, denied the youths permission to demonstrate.

In addition to all this, in contrast to the homogeneity of the slogans shouted out on 9 May, I know from reading wallposters at Beijing University of the following morning, and on Shanghai campuses after that, that there was a great deal of diversity amongst the student propaganda. Some wallposters clung closely to official lines, but others veered away from them. The very crudeness, in both language and material used, of some banners and wallposters seemed out of character with official pronouncements, as did some in their use of caricatures and poetry. Many were made with whatever old paper or sheets were at hand, as opposed to being constructed with officially provided supplies, and many were covered with swearwords—giving them anything but a made-by-official-order appearance. Students from different departments and different schools expressed their distinctive visions of what it meant to be patriotic at this particular moment, giving yet another sort of diversity to the posters.

### **The Freedom of Crudeness**

All in all, the posters I saw—or, in some cases, later heard about or saw photographs of—that veered from official motifs provide a

window onto an unofficial rhetoric protest that remains hidden if one relies merely on officially published accounts. No evidence of them is provided, at any rate, in works such as *Zhongguo renmin bu ke wu* (*The Chinese People Can't Be Bullied*), an instant history of the protests that the *People's Daily* rushed into print. Works such as this—and at least four others like it were published within a month of the May 8th Tragedy—give the impression that the movement was one in which students stuck to a few basic themes and motifs in their propaganda. They called for an end to hegemonism, extolled the virtues of China, sang the national anthem and the Chinese version of 'Solidarity Forever', gathered in front of photographs of the three 'revolutionary martyrs'—as the journalists have been labelled—to mourn and express outrage, and so forth. Students did all these things, but they also expressed their feelings in other ways that diverged from this imagined official script.

One poster I saw at Beijing University that seems best thought of as part of the unofficial—though not *anti*-official—rhetoric of the 1999 protests was a text, all in English, focusing on Clinton's status as a 'bi-raper'. The author claimed that the American President had ravished Monica Lewinsky and then, still finding himself unsatisfied, set out to rape the world.<sup>10</sup> Covering that same campus on 10 May were many posters that said the initials 'U.S.A.' really stand for 'Ugly Shameless Assholes', not United States of America—again, not something that is mentioned in the *People's Daily* account of the movement. A smaller one below and to the right said, again in English, 'We Want Peace,

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<sup>10</sup> The fascination with Clinton's sex life that manifested itself on many posters would make an interesting topic for analysis in and of itself. There is a very tempting line of feminist interpretation that could be explored. This would pick up on recent work by literary critics such as Chen Xiaomei and Lydia Liu, anthropologists such as Susan Brownell and Dru Gladney, and historians such as Tani Barlow, Geremie Barmé, Gail Hershatler, and Prasenjit Duara. Some of these scholars have focused on the linking of the Chinese nation, symbolically, with the female body, in various discourses, others on the theme of a sense among some male Chinese of their county having been emasculated by foreigners. In moments of national crisis, such as the Belgrade bombing, this line of interpretation suggests, there is a tendency to focus on the damage done to female Chinese bodies by foreign men and the passivity or impotence of China's male population. This trope goes back, in its modern form, at least as far as the beginning of this century. Then, revolutionary critics of the Qing Dynasty made much of the idea that, in the 1640s, the Manchu conquerors had violated Han Chinese daughters, sisters and wives while Han Chinese fathers, brothers and sons proved unable to protect the nation's women. The Revolution was presented as a way to avenge the rape of Han Chinese women and enslavement of Han Chinese men. Similar imagery was reworked during the Japanese invasions of the 1930s and 1940s. The motif of Clinton as a 'bi-raper' fits in here perfectly—as does the appearance in the Embassy district of Beijing of a giant, very phallic, model of a cruise missile, during a demonstration I witnessed—but there is more to a gendered reading of 1999 propaganda than these things. This is because, even though some attention was given initially to the grief of the mothers as well as fathers of the three martyred journalists, the dominant television image accompanying stories about the May 8th Tragedy became that of the distraught father of one of the female victims. He was shown, over and over again, weeping over the body of the daughter he had been unable to protect from foreign missiles. Needless to say, the line of analysis is particularly attractive to those who see links, as I do, between the 1999 protests and an earlier Reform era event in which nationalist sentiments were linked to anxieties associated with sex and gender: the 1988 anti-African riots.

We Want Justice’, while the one next to that had as its main slogan, yet again in English, ‘No More Cola, No More Nike.’

The poster referring to a boycott of foreign goods calls attention to another non-official—though, again, not necessarily anti-official—side of the movement, in this case related to questions of tactics rather than crudeness of expression. There were calls for action on some wallposters that diverged from official policy, and, as a result, there was some tension between the movement officials wanted to create and that which actually emerged. It remains hard to tell, for example, whether there was ever any official support for either boycotting foreign goods or boycotting classes, but there were calls made by some students to others to do both of these things. These calls were still being made, moreover, even after the government issued clear directives that neither course of action should be taken. It is also unclear whether anyone in the government really wanted the windows of foreign businesses smashed, although this was done in various cities. The government appears to have wanted a dramatic show of mass outrage, but it is very difficult to resolve how many of the events that took place were part of the official as opposed to spontaneously created plan. The police often worked to limit the size of crowds and level of violence, even as, by their inaction, they sanctioned some attacks.

### Snow in June

One thing that the government clearly did not want to happen, but which took place regardless, was for anyone to link the many martyrs of 1989 and the three of 1999. Relevant here are not just the attempts some dissidents made—later punished by jail—to explicitly state that, to honour the victims in Belgrade, the anniversary of June 4th should be marked. Rather, one could also cite indirect allusions to the June 4th Massacre that appeared on a couple of wallposters. On the evening of 9 May, I saw one of these, the meaning of which was explained to me by a colleague whose familiarity with Chinese artistic and cultural nuances I respect. The poster in question contained a poetic allusion to the deaths in Belgrade being the kind of terrible event that brings ‘snow in June’. This phrase has a long history of referring to something that disturbs the natural order, but it has recently become so closely associated with mourning the victims of 1989 that its mention would have inevitably made many Chinese intellectuals think of 4 June.<sup>11</sup>

Other kinds of divergences from the official game plan also occurred, which had nothing directly to do with the 1980s. For example, there was a widening of the scope of the movement to include the expression of discontent about Japan as well as NATO countries. During the movement itself, for example, threats were made against Japanese students in Hangzhou. It is still unclear whether this

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<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to Barbara Mittler for alerting me to this connection.

happened because a Japanese youth kicked a soccer ball that hit a protest poster, started dashing around tearing down banners, hit a Chinese girl, or made jeering statements about it being better that China's Embassy had been bombed than Japan's. I have heard all four of these explanations offered. What is interesting here is not the why but the what. There is no reason to think that anti-Japanese sentiment was something the government had a desire to foster. Economic ties with Japan are very important to the régime presently, Japan has been quite supportive of Chinese efforts to enter the World Trade Organization, and Japan has, if anything, tended to be critical rather supportive of NATO's actions in Yugoslavia.

After the protests wound down, anti-Japanese sentiments continued to be expressed, sometimes quite vociferously, in on-line chat rooms operating within the PRC. Impassioned statements on those sites indicate just how deeply entrenched feelings of resentment toward Japan—relating to the invasions of the 1930s and perceived slights in later decades—remain among some Chinese. One such posting read: 'The American government is the enemy of the Chinese government, but the Japanese people are the enemies of the Chinese people.' It left no ambiguity as to which was the bigger cause for patriotic concern.

### **Misconception III:**

#### **Reform Era Protests Are Best Compared to Those of 1919 or 1966–68**

As noted earlier, one striking feature of the discussion is that the most interesting historical parallels for recent student protests do not lie in either the May 4th era or the Cultural Revolution decade but rather in the Nationalist period. That was a time when a party structured on Leninist lines—although with a nationalist rather than socialist ideological agenda—governed China. And, in the 1930s and 1940s, as in the 1980s and 1990s, there were student-led protests triggered by major international incidents as well as others that emerged out of less obviously nationalistic grievances. In the former category, I would place two events from the Nationalist period with particularly close parallels to the anti-NATO protests. These are the anti-US imperialism demonstrations of December 1946 (set off by the alleged rape of a female student by American GIs) and the anti-Soviet imperialism marches of February 1947 (protesting against the death of a young man, in mysterious circumstances, in a section of Manchuria controlled by Russian troops). In the latter category, an event more accurately comparable to the June 4th Movement than the anti-NATO incidents would be the Anti-Hunger, Anti-Civil War struggle of 1947, participants of which directed their fury at a régime viewed as corrupt and insufficiently concerned with the well-being of the people.

There are a variety of symbolic and tactical continuities linking specific protests of the 1930s–40s and of the 1980s–90s, relating to everything from march routes to slogans. Here, however, I will focus

mainly on some general parallels between the two periods. The first of these is that, for much of the Nationalist period, Chiang found himself at the head of a ruling group whose legitimacy was tied to the idea that it alone could protect the legacy of a sacred *Geming* (Revolution), in which patriotic student activists had played celebrated roles. He was thus in a position much like that of the present CCP leaders.

Another parallel is that the Nationalist Party then, much as the CCP today, had come to be viewed by a great many Chinese as a corrupt entity that no longer had a clearly defined ideology and lacked a sense of mission. Its leaders were seen by many as motivated primarily by a desire to stay in power, with the goal of making China a stronger nation-state an often claimed but, in reality, secondary concern—as was, indeed, improving the lot of ordinary people.

Another homology, which is linked to each of the preceding two, can be found in the fact that the Nationalist era was, like the Reform period, a time when student movements with even vague ties to nationalism were viewed by the régime, for good reason, as double-edged swords. Those in positions of authority sometimes embraced youth protests as offering them opportunities to reassert their legitimacy, but, at other times, feared them as threats. They knew that patriotic outrage, even if initially directed toward foreigners, could all too easily become linked to anti-régime sentiments.

The Nationalist era, like the current Reform one, was also a time during which factions or groups of leaders sometimes turned to student movements to increase their power within the régime or further particular policy agendas. This happened in 1931, when Generalissimo Chiang's rivals within the Nationalist Party used student protests over the 18 September Japanese invasion of Manchuria to further factional ends. It occurred as well in 1947, when Chiang's rivals tried to use anti-Soviet demonstrations to both counteract communist efforts to present themselves as the most patriotic Chinese political organization and to embarrass the Generalissimo, since he was the nationalist leader with the closest ties to Moscow. The same kind of thing has happened in the Reform era, most notably during the 1985 anti-Japanese protests. Some conservative leaders within the CCP tried to further factional agendas then by sponsoring the student rallies against Japanese 'economic imperialism', hoping these would embarrass more reformist officials, such as Hu Yaobang, who had been pushing for China to open its markets more quickly to trade with capitalist countries.

### **Echoes of the Nationalist Era**

Comparisons between the Nationalist era and the Reform period should not be pushed too far, since there are some very important contrasts to keep in mind. The most significant is that there is no organized opposition that poses as serious a threat to the Communist

Party today as the CCP once did to Chiang Kai-shek's régime. Nor is there any competing group, currently holding power in a particular part of China, that inspires the kind of utopian fantasies that communist-run base areas did for some Chinese youths of the 1940s. Some of the urban protesters of that period, workers as well as students, believed that an ideal 'new society based on complete equality' and 'free of corruption' had been created in northern China. They thought that Mao's stirring vision of a community organized around principles of New Democracy was being realized in places such as Yan'an.<sup>12</sup> This phenomenon, for which there is no direct contemporary equivalent, is important to keep in mind, since members of the CCP underground based on campuses tried, throughout the pre-1949 period, to make use of student movements—and the popular image of the base areas helped them in their efforts. Both the existence of an organized opposition and the power of its appeal thus had enormous implications for the dynamics of campus unrest.

This said, the similarities between the Reform era and the Nationalist period, as far as student protest is concerned, remain striking—and are more compelling overall than are the ones that link the campus unrest of the 1980s and 1990s to that of either the Warlord period or the Cultural Revolution. A few demonstrators may have dressed up in old Red Guard outfits last May—I did not see this firsthand, but footage showing this was apparently aired on CNN—and some of the slogans on anti-imperialist banners may have been identical to those used in political posters of the mid-1960s.<sup>13</sup> In addition, many protesters may have tried in 1999, as they had in 1989, to present themselves as reviving the tradition of 1919. Nevertheless, if a single historical vein is to be mined in search of parallels between the present and the past, the Nationalist era remains that bearing the richest lode.

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<sup>12</sup> The phrases are from Yue Daiyun's stirring memoir (co-written with Carolyn Wakeman), *To the Storm: The Odyssey of a Revolutionary Chinese Woman*, Berkeley 1985, p. 21. Her account of the appeal of the CCP, transmitted mainly via reports from people who had visited the base areas, is a moving one. She shows how, as a thoughtful, patriotic youth, she was drawn to the CCP because it seemed less corrupt than the Nationalist Party and more capable of protecting China from mistreatment by foreigners. Important recent studies that pay attention to both Yan'an's mythic allure and dystopian qualities include David Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic*, London 1994, and Pauline Keating, *Two Revolutions*, Stanford 1997.

<sup>13</sup> For information on the donning of Red Guard costumes, I am grateful to Julia Andrews and Robert Stern. I have become aware of continuities relating to slogans—for example, the prevalence in 1966 and 1999 alike of phrases such as 'The Chinese People Will Not Be Bullied'—while working on a multimedia exhibition, 'Picturing Power: Posters of China's Cultural Revolution', developed at Indiana University in collaboration with the University of Westminster's Centre of the Study of Democracy. For details, see <http://www.fa.indiana.edu/~sofa/feat/index.html> and <http://www.indiana.edu/~easc/exhibit/project.html>. See also the book edited by Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald, *Picturing Power in the Peoples Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution*, Oxford 1999.

## Conclusion

It is always dangerous to prognosticate about the PRC, since there is truth to the cliché that, with China, predicting the past is hard enough these days. Still, one can hazard some remarks on where things might be heading, framing them with reference to two additional misconceptions about recent events that are worth debunking. The first of these final misconceptions is that the June 4th Movement failed to achieve its goals, while the anti-NATO struggle succeeded in accomplishing what its backers wanted to achieve. The second is that the June 4th generation of students posed a threat to the régime, but that the educated youths of today do not.

The idea that the June 4th Movement failed whilst the anti-NATO protests succeeded is suspect because it assumes that each had very particular goals that either were or were not achieved. Presumably, at least in the eyes of many pundits writing in the mainstream English language press, this was the democratization of China and perhaps a change in régime in the case of 1989, the strengthening of the government's position through loyalist demonstrations linked to nationalism in the case of 1999. If judged in these specific terms, an argument can be made that the June 4th Movement failed, while the anti-NATO protests succeeded. There is, however, as is so often the case with Chinese student protests, more to each story.

To begin with, the June 4th Movement had goals that have been at least partially realized since 1989. One thing that brought students out onto the streets ten years ago, and which did the same thing during the 1986–87 struggle, was anger at the extent to which the CCP's influence permeated every aspect of private and public life. A call for more 'democracy' and 'freedom' could and did mean many things in the late 1980s, but sometimes it meant nothing more than a greater ability to exercise the right to be left alone and to ignore the régime. It is no accident, for example, that one Shanghai school's participation in the 1986 protests began with calls by its students for an end to compulsory morning exercises. Sympathetic foreign commentators tend to call the struggle of that time a 'democracy movement' and to note the inspirational role in the student community then of some daring speeches given by dissident Fang Lizhi in the fall of 1986. As important as Fang's lectures were, however, it is worth remembering that much more trivial sorts of issues than a desire for explicitly political reforms could be and were key driving forces behind the protests. The same was true in 1989.

### The Return of Private Lives

It is here that, in a sense, the June 4th Movement needs to be viewed as at least partially successful. To be sure, the short-term aftermath of the 1989 protests was a campaign of repression, during which personal freedoms were limited even more than had been the case

before. In the 1990s, though, an unofficial new social contract was forged between the régime and the people, part of which was that the Party would become a less intrusive force in private life, providing that it was allowed to continue to govern. This has manifested itself in a situation in which dissidents who try to create formal opposition parties to compete for power with the CCP are treated brutally, as are those who organize along ethnic or religious lines outside of very strict government-set parameters. And yet, ordinary people can tell Li Peng jokes on the streets or in crowded restaurants without worrying too much about who might overhear them, and there is a general sense that complaining about government malfeasance is not a terribly dangerous thing to do. The watchword has become, as someone put it very aptly to me during a 1996 visit, *meiyou yundong shenme dou keyi* (as long as there isn't a movement involved, anything goes). This new social contract, in which many kinds of human rights abuses continue to occur, but there is more protection than there was before for the seldom discussed but still valued—in China as elsewhere—right to whinge, needs to be understood as, in part, a reaction to 1989. Without the threat posed by the June 4th Movement, the régime would not have gone as far as it has in refraining from interfering with matters such as the ability of intellectuals to start independent or quasi-independent literary magazines. Some of the loosening of restraints on many forms of free expression—while maintaining the taboo on discussion of certain kinds of specific topics such as Tibet, Taiwan, and the June 4th Massacre—can certainly be linked to the régime's strategy to make the PRC more attractive to foreign investors. It also should be seen, however, as part of the régime's effort to minimize the chances of something like the protests of 1989 recurring.

Switching from the indirect successes of 1989 to the perhaps indirect failure of 1999, where the régime is concerned, there is an interesting parallel. The anti-NATO protests provided, in one sense, the perfect opportunity for the régime to reverse the tide set in motion by the June 4th Movement, by presenting itself as helping to lead rather than serving as the target for patriotic outrage. It also allowed the CCP to show that it had done enough to rebuild its credibility to be able to let protests occur without fearing that these would inevitably take on an oppositional dimension. This is true, and, in the short run, the régime seems to have succeeded on both these fronts. And yet, there are reasons to think that there was failure tinged success here just as there was success mixed in with the failure of 1989.

This relates not simply to the points raised above about events that diverged from the official script during the several days of protests that followed the May 8th Tragedy—though those are important to keep in mind. It is also because some frustration with the régime was generated, both throughout those days of marches and even more so when attempts were made to wind the movement down very swiftly so that it would not get out of hand. It is hard to measure how great

was the annoyance with the CCP for trying to keep the movement within very specific limits. However, there were signs on the streets and on the campuses that some people were angered by efforts to circumscribe the steps they took to express their patriotism. I have heard, for example, from a journalist I trust, that, when police tried to keep the crowds that had gathered outside of the foreign embassies from growing larger, they were taunted by some protesters: 'Don't you like Chinese people, do you only like foreigners?' Thus frustrated urbanites shouted—probably many of them workers, as students were generally allowed to pass through police blockages. And I know some Shanghai students were upset with the campus officials who told them, after two days of protests outside the American consulate in that city, that, from now on, they should limit themselves to on-campus gatherings. Having got a taste of the excitement of marches and finding much to like about being able to express their creativity as well as their anger at NATO via wallposters, at least some protesters were loathe to stop. The message that the time had come to refrain from doing these things was not always a welcome one to receive. And the fact that it was representatives of the régime who passed it on meant that, for some, the CCP leadership would be remembered not so much as the group that had encouraged the anti-NATO movement but as the force that had limited its scope.

### Loosing the Genie

This leads, finally, to the question of the threats posed to the régime by student protesters of the June 4th generation and of the current one. There are certainly no signs that the present generation will stage a movement as potentially devastating to the leadership as that of 1989, and there are some ways in which the domestic and international situations have become more favourable for the régime recently. One thinks not just of the high economic growth rates the PRC has enjoyed, but also of the negative consequences that the collapse of the Soviet Empire has had on some parts of Eastern Europe. This has provided the régime with a pre-packaged propaganda coup. In 1989, when leaders called for order, insisting that turmoil would usher in a dark period and that hence, even if the people did not necessarily like the current régime, they should rally behind it, the only readily available spectre to raise was that of the Cultural Revolution. Now, by contrast, they can make the same claim and either directly state or imply that the alternative to continued one-party rule is the post-communist turmoil currently being experienced in countries such as Russia. Needless to say, there is much less discussion in the Chinese official press of parts of the former Soviet Empire such as the Czech Republic that have been experiencing smoother transitions.

Another factor that renders the régime less susceptible to a June 4th Movement type of student upheaval is that the current generation has had a different set of experiences and now has different concerns from

its predecessors of the 1980s. Students today have undergone a more intensive period of political education, which has emphasized nationalism of a particular sort—since renewed emphasis was put on such matters because of June 4th. But there is also the ironic fact that, as noted above, the state has generally been a less intrusive presence in their lives than it was in the daily experience of the June 4th generation. Too much can be made of these contrasts—and proponents of the conventional wisdom on 1999 have done this. Still, it would be wrong to move excessively in the other direction and ignore the differences.

All this may seem to suggest that the régime can relax as far as student activism is concerned, but this is not the case. It is important to note, first of all, that, while some aspects of the domestic scene are less volatile now than in 1989, new sources of tension have emerged and some enduring ones have been exacerbated. Despite repeated anti-corruption campaigns, for example, the CCP continues to be viewed, quite justifiably, as a thoroughly corrupt organization, riddled with nepotism. Unemployment rates have skyrocketed, while the gaps between rich and poor regions and rich and poor groups of residents within individual cities have also increased dramatically of late. There is no obvious scenario whereby angry laid-off workers, or some other disgruntled segment of society, would find common cause with students of the current generation and join together in protests against the régime. But, then again, no one was predicting that this would happen in 1989. And yet, as we know, disgust with official corruption and overlapping senses of patriotism helped bring people with very different agendas and life experiences together then in surprising ways. One wonders, in fact, whether some officials are not already feeling a bit nostalgic for the time, just a few months ago, when student movements seemed to be truly a thing of the past.