

Workers & Students - Tiananmen Square & the March into the Institutions

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Excerpt from “Red Dust,” part 2 of our economic history [1] of modern China, from *Frontiers* [2], the second issue of the *Chuǎng journal* [3]. Print copies of *Frontiers* are currently being distributed to our sustainers [4] and will soon be for sale via AK Press. The complete contents will also be published on our website for free this summer.

By the mid-1980s, a small but increasing number of urbanites had broken out of the iron rice bowl of the *danwei* (state work unit) system, with its guaranteed employment and state grain rations, jumping into new opportunities created by an expanding urban consumer market. Small business was encouraged by the state to fulfill increasing demand. Shops opened up all over Beijing, for example, selling cheap goods usually produced by the TVE (township and village enterprise) sector and/or by new migrant labor, such as workers from Wenzhou who produced popular leather jackets in small, family-run businesses in Beijing’s Zhejiang Village. In Haidian, Beijing’s university district in the northwest of the city, the morning brought a train of peasants on donkey-drawn carts carrying produce to sell on the open market. Street vendors also proliferated, creating a much more vibrant nightlife in the city. Families started privately run restaurants by breaking holes in the walls separating the sidewalk from small *danwei* buildings. Customers stepped through the hole in the wall into a restaurant that focused on serving good food marketed to changing urban tastes, markedly different from the bland taste of state-run restaurants with terrible service.

This was the point at which marketization could clearly be seen to be transforming the fundamental spaces that composed the socialist-era city. Markets bustling, new migrants settling and the literal opening of the autarkic *danwei* walls all seemed to symbolize a new era of free movement. On one level, this echoed traditional patterns of urban development on the East Asian mainland, such as the shift from the ward system of the Tang dynasty to the open cities of the Song. Such cities had always been marked by a tension between cloistering and openness. At the same time, the space began to mirror new structures of power and inequality that were only just emerging. The slow trickle of escapees from the *danwei* system created an emergent class of urban entrepreneurs (known as *getihu*), who could be seen travelling the city on motorcycles and even in private cars. Meanwhile, peasants entered urban spaces more regularly, both as small-scale produce vendors and as new migrant workers. This broke down one of the fundamental spatial divides that had existed in the socialist era, beginning the transformation of the *hukou* system from a method for sealing the cities off from the countryside to a method of segmentation used to enforce labor discipline on a new proletariat. The spaces inhabited by peasants in the city made clear that they didn’t enter on equal terms: the informal character of the street vendors’ carts and the ramshackle quality of new migrant settlements signaled this, and began to stoke fears among urbanites of the possibility of growing urban slums—something rendered in the official literature as a risk of “Latin Americanization.”

For the vast majority of urban workers, who were still dependent on the *danwei* system, living standards improved only slowly. Meanwhile, the changes led to shifting class formations and

alliances that destabilized the urban political scene. Stories and complaints about corruption proliferated. The foreign cars that appeared on the streets, passing urbanites riding slowly to work on buses and bikes, became a particular object of scorn, and stories spread rapidly about leaders driving around the city in Mercedes. Discontent was at first largely held in check by a combination of state repression and improved living standards. But as price reforms and high inflation (especially on food) began to cut into incomes from the mid-1980s, it became increasingly difficult for the state to keep criticism of the party from turning into open protest. When inflation first began to spike in 1985 and 1986, students began a series of protests for political reforms and against corruption. These protests spread from Anhui Province, where they began in early December of 1986, to 17 major cities around China, including Beijing. Yet the protests failed to gain support outside of universities (the largest protests occurred in Shanghai and Beijing, and yet even there only about 30,000 students participated in each) and were quickly suppressed. [5] Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang, seen by other CCP leaders including Deng Xiaoping as too lenient on the movement, resigned a few weeks later in mid-January 1987.

As the old *danwei* system continued to strain under the reforms, however, dissatisfaction among urbanites erupted into the largest reform-era protests in the spring of 1989, with the participation of up to two million people in Beijing at the peak of the movement in May. This time urban workers joined a stage initially set by student protestors, but the alliance was temporary at best. While there was a diversity of opinions among both groups, interests generally pushed students in one direction and workers in another. As the politics rapidly unfolded, individuals were caught up in a movement that none really controlled. Students—representing a rising class of entrepreneurs and managers in the expanding market economy—were mostly critical of the way that the reforms were being implemented. Workers were more directly critical of the content of the reforms. Following the repression of the movement in June of 1989, students would never again unite with workers in the old socialist industries. The educated class of managers became key beneficiaries of the reforms, while workers lost out, left to protest sporadically and alone, until the remnants of the socialist-era working class were finally extinguished in a wave of deindustrialization at the turn of the century.

At the same time, the weakening of state control over university campuses created a new space for political debate, even as the state added ideological education in the aftermath of the 1986 protests. Students looked for the deep causes behind China's turbulent political past, especially the Cultural Revolution. Turning to existentialism, liberalism and neo-authoritarian ideas, students tended to argue that Chinese culture itself was to blame for political repression, arbitrary bureaucratic power over daily life, corruption and party factionalism. A new May Fourth movement was necessary, and it had to be led by intellectuals. [6] Ironically, neo-authoritarianism was one of the most popular ideologies among students. [7] Its basic idea was that a single strong leader in the CCP needed to take control of the party to stop the factional fighting and bureaucratic stasis that was holding up the progress of reform. That leader should take advice from intellectuals, who supposedly knew how to reform society. There were also liberal critics of authoritarianism among the students, along with a smaller group who were critical of the direction of the reforms for damaging the living standards of ordinary citizens. For all the vague talk about "freedom" and "democracy" at the time, however, most students seemed enamored with the idea that they alone understood how to solve China's problems. [8]

When Hu Yaobang died on April 15th, 1989, students immediately began to write posters on campuses and hold discussions. Hu was especially popular among students and intellectuals, as he was tasked with rehabilitating intellectuals and rebuilding the party's relationship with them at the beginning of the reforms. Seen as incorruptible, Hu was a symbol of correct leadership within the party sidelined by hardline bureaucrats protecting their privileges. Small student groups, especially those with good connections within the party, left wreaths commemorating Hu on the Monument to

the People's Heroes at the center of Tiananmen Square (as urban residents had done for Premier Zhou Enlai following his death in 1976, leading to the April Fifth Movement). The first student protest was a nighttime march of around 10,000 to the square from the university district on April 17th. At the lead, students carried a banner that proclaimed themselves to be the "soul of China"—an elitist formulation that would characterize their politics for the next two months. The monument at the center of the square soon filled up with wreaths left for Hu, and in the first days it became a site where anyone could jump up on the first ledge of the monument to give a speech to hundreds of onlookers. At night, protesters often gathered at the gate of Zhongnanhai, the main compound in which top CCP leaders lived.

Students and intellectuals, however, were quickly joined by young workers and unemployed urbanites, most importantly by forming the Beijing Autonomous Workers' Federation (北京工人自治联合会). [9] Yet these two social groups did not come together to form a coherent social movement even as they took part in the same events. Momentarily brought together by their shared opposition to corruption in the party, which had been worsened by market reforms, the two groups were divided by much more than what unified them. In terms of protest styles, students claimed exclusive ownership over the movement, in fear that they could not control other groups, who might use violence or provide the state with an excuse for repression. They tried to keep others out of the protests or, failing that, to sideline other groups as mere supporters and not full participants. As students and intellectuals believed that they were the only ones truly able to "save China," they often blamed "peasants" for leading the country astray during the revolution and the socialist era. In the early days, students set up a coordinating organization in an attempt to control the movement, the Autonomous Student Union of Beijing Universities (北京大学学生自治会) with an elected leadership. The student union organized a widespread boycott of university classes beginning on April 24th. As the protests developed, other student organizations formed and competed for control. The independent Beijing University Student Dialogue Representatives Group (北京大学学生对话代表组) attempted to discuss demands with party leaders, discussions broken up by other students. The occupation of Tiananmen Square was controlled by the Headquarters for Defending the Square (天安门保卫总部), yet another independent student organization. The Headquarters' leadership was elected by those occupying the square, and the main power it enjoyed was control over a loudspeaker system at the center of the protest. Further, students cordoned off the center of the square around the Monument to the People's Heroes with a hierarchical series of concentric circles. To get into the outer rings of the circles, one had to be a student, deeper towards the center required you to be a student leader with some connection to the Headquarters. The students forced the workers' organization to set up its tents across the street from the square itself.

Students also had a very different relationship to the reforms compared with workers. Students largely wanted the reforms to move faster, to be better organized and more efficient. They were afraid that corruption was leading to a weakening of the reforms. By the mid-1980s, however, workers had begun to see their interests being undermined. There was new unemployment (as state enterprises, now responsible for profits and losses, were given the right to lay off some workers), stagnating wages, and, most importantly, high inflation, reaching levels of hyperinflation by the end of 1988. For workers, the reforms had to be slowed down or significantly rethought. Price stabilization in particular was crucial, since workers were in the process of losing their guarantee to cheap, state-subsidized grain. While students at first focused largely on mourning the pro-intellectual Premier Hu Yaobang, the workers' criticism of the party and its reformist policies were more broadly political than those of students early on in the movement. For the workers, corruption was seen as a problem not because it was weakening the reforms, but instead because it indicated the emergence of a new form of class inequality. In handbills, workers asked how much Deng Xiaoping's son lost in bets at the Hong Kong racetracks, whether Zhao Ziyang paid for playing golf, and how many villas the leaders maintained. They further questioned how much international debt

China was taking on in the reform process.

The students and workers also had very different ideas about democracy. Students spoke vaguely about democracy, but often called for intellectuals to have a special relationship to the party. Most were more interested in having Zhao become a more powerful, enlightened leader for whom intellectuals could play the role of advisers, showing him how a market economy should really work. When one talked with workers, they had a much more concrete idea of democracy, one that had emerged over a long period of worker struggles in China, clearly visible, for example, in the strikes of 1956-1957, the Cultural Revolution, and the 1970s. [10] For many workers, democracy entailed workers' power within the enterprises at which they worked. Workers complained about the policy of "one man rule" in work units, wherein a factory director was a virtual "dictator." [11]

The students, unlike the workers, were intimately involved in the factional fights going on within the CCP. Students largely took the side of the more radical market reformer, Zhao Ziyang, who headed the party at the time. Zhao wanted to push the reforms through more quickly. On the other hand, the students largely reviled Li Peng, the head of state, well before he became the figurehead of martial law in late May. A moderate reformer, Li was seen as an old style bureaucrat who stood in the way of a rapid and efficient transition to a rational market economy. Workers did not really take part in this factional fight. They'd gained little by participating in factional fights before, specifically during the Cultural Revolution and the Democracy Wall movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The workers' federation warned that "Deng Xiaoping used the April 5th movement [of 1976] to become leader of the Party, but after that he exposed himself as a tyrant." [12] Party members returned the favor in kind, with the All-China Federation of Trade Unions publicly backing the students but ignoring the workers who participated and their fledgling organization. [13] Party elders, however, shifted away from supporting General Secretary Zhao's policy of concessions to the students as May developed. At a contentious May 17th meeting of the Standing Committee of the Politburo held at Deng Xiaoping's residence, Deng and Li Peng criticized Zhao's approach, claiming he was splitting the party. Deng pushed for the declaration of martial law, which was formally announced on May 20th. In the early morning of May 19th, Zhao went to the square to warn students to leave, saying they should not sacrifice themselves for a movement that was over. Then Zhao left the square, having lost his position within the party, and was soon put under house arrest for the rest of his life. The late May announcement of martial law sharpened the politics of participants, with the workers' federation announcing that "'the servants of the people' [the party] swallow all the surplus value produced by the people's blood and sweat," and that "there are only two classes: the rulers and the ruled." [14] The majority of students, conversely, still held out for support from Zhao's faction even after martial law was declared. A potential alliance between students and workers never materialized under the pressure of the rapidly changing political context.

Students initially told workers not to strike so the movement's focus would remain on themselves and their power within it could be retained. After martial law had been declared on May 20th, however, students finally saw the importance of worker participation, though again only in a supporting role, and they finally asked workers to undertake a general strike. By that point, however, participation in the protests had dropped dramatically, and it was too late for workers to fully mobilize their forces. Nonetheless, workers were still able to pull large numbers to resist the implementation of martial law. In fact, workers continued to put more people into the streets even as student numbers dwindled. But by this point, the party had marshaled up to 250,000 soldiers in the outskirts of the city. Workers and other urban residents were initially able to stop the entry of soldiers into the city from the night of June 2nd into the 3rd, blocking roads and surrounding troops in vehicles. This led to only a small amount of violence, with urbanites often feeding the tired soldiers caught up in the crowds for several hours before they gave up and pulled out of the city center. This only encouraged more resistance the following night.

From the night of June 3rd into the 4th, however, the army moved more resolutely towards the square to put an end to the protests. That night it was mainly workers and unemployed youth who attempted to slow the approach of the army in the streets leading up to the square, and many of them paid for it with their lives, with hundreds of civilian deaths (among whom very few were students). Along Chang'an jie—the main east-west avenue bisecting the city at Tiananmen—workers and other Beijing residents built blockades with buses, often setting them afire. Molotov cocktails and rocks were thrown as soldiers approached. The intersection around Muxidi on Chang'an jie to the west of the square was particularly hard hit, with pitched battles between workers and soldiers. Many deaths were concentrated there. As the first soldiers in armored personal carriers (APC) arrived on the square, some students and residents continued to resist, and an APC was set on fire. Several civilians were killed on the edges of the square. Once the main body of the army reached the square they stopped, and by the early morning they were negotiating with the remaining student occupiers, allowing them to leave the square and walk back to their campuses—though not without several being beaten by soldiers first. The protests in the capital were over, but the repression continued. Workers were hit the hardest in terms of prison sentences and executions in the days and weeks that followed, with student participants getting more lenient sentences.

The harsh crackdown on worker participants became a condition for the acceleration of market reforms in the 1990s, most notably the liberalization of the food market in the early 1990s, which the workers clearly would have otherwise continued to resist. As the Chinese economy became increasingly integrated into global capitalism after 1989, the economic interests of students and workers diverged further. The students of the 1980s became the middle and entrepreneurial strata of the 1990s, benefiting from the continuation of the market reforms that the crackdown on the protests enabled. [15] In the late 1990s, workers in many older state-owned enterprises were laid off, rural-to-urban migration increased rapidly, and a class of “new workers” came into being, making low wages and living a precarious existence within the global manufacturing system. As worker and peasant protests increased again from the mid-1990s, they were not joined by students or intellectuals, who had mostly moved to the right when they still had any politics at all, arguing for the protection of property rights and free speech or increasingly taking nationalist positions.

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P.S.

• chuang | Jun 3, 2019 | Blog :
<http://chuangcn.org/2019/06/tiananmen-square-the-march-into-the-institutions/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://chuangcn.org/journal/one/sorghum-and-steel/>

[2] <http://chuangcn.org/journal/two/>

[3] <http://chuangcn.org/journal/>

[4] <https://www.patreon.com/chuang>

[5] Julia Kwong, "The 1986 Student Demonstrations in China: A Democratic Movement?" *Asian Survey* 28(9), 1988, pp. 970-985.

[6] May Fourth was a 1919 movement led by intellectuals that involved a cultural critique of Chinese politics. The CCP emerged out of the movement.

[7] On the development of Chinese neo-authoritarianism, see Joseph Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen: The Politics of Transition*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 86-93.

[8] Unless otherwise noted, information for this section derives from conversations with movement participants.

[9] Much of the information in this section on workers' participation comes from Andrew G. Walder and Gong Xiaoxia, "Workers in the Tiananmen Protests: The Politics of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 29, January 1, 1993. The rest is from conversations with participants.

[10] Jackie Sheehan, *Chinese Workers: A New History*, Routledge, 1998.

[11] Walder and Gong, p. 18.

[12] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 8.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[14] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 8.

[15] One illustration is the popular film *American Dreams in China* (美国梦在中国), a dramatization of the founding of education company New Oriental. It begins with the founders as cheeky college students in the late 1980s, channeling the anti-authoritarianism of Red Guards, but now to challenge their teachers' received wisdom about the evils of American society ("What do you know? You've never been to America!"). This pro-Western attitude paradoxically develops in a nationalist direction throughout the 1990s, as the protagonists seek to arm other upwardly mobile young men with the English language ability and self-confidence to achieve wealth and power on the global market while reshaping their own nation.