

IMAGINING TIANANMEN IN 1989:  
AMERICAN MEDIA, THE TIANANMEN INCIDENT,  
AND THE TRANSFORMING SINO-U.S. RELATIONSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is about how human rights issues were mediated by the American media, and as a consequence, influenced U.S-China relations at the end of the Cold War.

Focusing my research on the news framing by some American news outlets of the 1989 Tiananmen enabled me to observe and understand their role. “Framing” suggests a strategy of news reporting. In some ways, it facilitates our recognizing the ideological lens through which Americans perceived China affairs. I conceptualize their ideological bent as an imagination of a “special relationship” between America and China.

My thesis consists of three sections. The first two sections concern the American media coverage of the protests at Tiananmen and the military crackdown on June 4<sup>th</sup>. The news coverage consistently characterized the Tiananmen protest as a democratic movement intelligible to the informed public in the U.S. As a consequence, this news framing raised the American public’s expectations for the protesters. When disillusioned, they turned hope into anger, which was then expressed in Congress in wake of the Tiananmen massacre. Thus, the final section addresses how the Congressional leaders’ arguments corresponded with news framing of the Tiananmen protest. My thesis concludes with a reflection over the moral dilemma of liberalism in U.S. China policy and analyzes its implications for both publics in both countries in the future.

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Without the support of many people, I would never have completed my first thesis written in English within half a year. And I am particularly thankful for these individuals whose help represents the general assistance and encouragement I have received in finishing this thesis.

My advisor, Dr. Richard Immerman opened me up to a wide range of issues of the Cold War history. At his class and through private conversations, I learnt what is required for a good Cold War historian. This proved decisive in conducting my own research. His advice to the foreword of my thesis helped clarify my ideas about the whole project. His critique of the body of my thesis played a decisive role in the process of its revision.

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Dr. Wang Li, my undergraduate tutor as well as a Chinese American scholar who specializes in Anglo-American diplomacy and the English School of international relations theory, inspired my interest in U.S. foreign relations. Had he not returned to my college in 2004 which was my second year, my career would have been entirely different.

Holgar Loewendorf, a Ph.D. candidate in our department, squeezed time to be the first reader of my whole draft. Indeed, working with him cured me of many bad habits in writing.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, who were active participants in the 1989 Tiananmen protest. They recounted the story for me when I was just a child. Their

divorce in the seventh year after 1989 epitomized a larger story of how China developed at the expense of family and other values we cherish. It aroused my aspiration to promote the well-being of all Chinese families in the future, which always motivates my study of the past.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

China's Tiananmen Incident on June 4, 1989 signaled the crumbling leadership of the Communist Party, a drama that drew worldwide attention. For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the student protests demonstrated the crisis of political legitimacy which had been plaguing its counterparts in Eastern Europe for years. Some of these Stalinist regimes at the end of the year saw an emergent political pluralism. While the Chinese students' claims for continued political reform failed to effect the radical changes that took place elsewhere, international developments during the years following the Tiananmen incident endowed it with a special meaning in the last chapter of the Cold War, particularly in the eyes of Americans.<sup>1</sup>

America's media played a decisive role in shaping the domestic public opinion that subsequently exerted considerable pressure on the George H.W. Bush administration's China policy. Theoretically, the media performs the function of re-narrating stories that happened beyond people's sight. The success of the interplay depends on the extent to which news resonates among the public. The reason lies in the cognitive process of news consumers. In political scientist Donald Ellis' words, "any act of meaning construction involves matching incoming semantic information with preexisting interpretive frameworks."<sup>2</sup> Media coverage is thus expected to gain resonance among audiences by associating stories with their life circumstances. It is

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<sup>1</sup> In the recent study of the legacy of 1989, the Tiananmen incident is incorporated into the story of the end of the Cold War. See Jeffrey A. Engel ed., *The Fall of the Berlin Wall: The Revolutionary Legacy of 1989* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Donald Ellis, *Transforming Conflict: Communication and Ethnopolitical Conflict* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), p. 119.

designed to bring particular frameworks of understanding into the social realm in ways that are of emotional concern to various audiences. This is especially true for the coverage of foreign affairs, most of which cannot win the audience's attention in its own right.<sup>3</sup>

Walter Lippmann once remarked that “the news is not a mirror of social conditions, but the report of an aspect that has obtruded itself.”<sup>4</sup> To some extent the way that a particular aspect of an event penetrates people's minds is related to ideology. It means that, more often than not, ideology is entangled with the process through which the media coverage of foreign affairs manages to capture the audience's imagination. In America's case, in particular, ideology implies “a relatively coherent, emotionally charged, and conceptually interlocking set of ideas” that reflect Americans' self-image. Confirming their national identity, these ideas provide an interpretive framework in which complex realities of foreign affairs tend to be reduced to understandable and manageable terms.<sup>5</sup>

News outlets are geared up to exploit this cognitive characteristic by appealing to Americans' liberal sensibilities. A dominant ideology as opposed to totalitarianism in American history, liberalism is considered as a moral framework with respect to the legitimate source of political authority.<sup>6</sup> In this light, Americans' liberal frame of

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<sup>3</sup> Yanmin Yu, “Projecting the China Image,” in *Image, Perception, and the Making of U.S.-China Relations* (Latham, New York: University Press of America, 1998), pp. 54-56.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991), p. 341.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp.14-16. For the recent discussion of the ideological issues in U.S. foreign policy, see Walter L. Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 5. Although Hixson does not agree with Hunt's way of treating ideology as a coherent whole that ensured the consistency of America's international behavior, he shares Hunt's definition of ideology and regards it helpful in breaking the foreign-domestic boundary and merging home and foreign affairs into a new category of cultural identity.

<sup>6</sup> In this thesis, I incorporate the American ideas of democracy and civil liberties into the ideology of liberalism. It is based on political scientist Tony Smith's view that liberalism is the cornerstone of democracy. Only by initiating, consolidating, and perpetuating a liberal order can various social groups spontaneously arise to debate political

reference flows from John Locke's injunction that any government acting beyond limits imposed by the consent of the governed is condemned to dissolution by mass resistance.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, it is recognized that the legitimacy of government derives from its ability to act as the guardian of the presumed basic and universal human rights. During the 1989 spring, this liberal principle was manifest in the news stories that put emphasis on the confrontation between the government and the protesters at Tiananmen. Thereby, the demonstrators were portrayed as an active group struggling for what is defined in the western political discourse as freedom and democracy. Also, it was considered able to influence the liberal *faction* within the government to promote that change. In the end, the protesters' heroism resonated in the public's reaction against the perceived atrocities committed by the Chinese government in the final crackdown on June 4. My key arguments revolve around the way the American (print) media depicted the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989 as a variant of western liberalism in their news coverage.

Multiple studies concerning the Tiananmen incident have emerged since 1989. Their analytical foci range from the origins and process of the student protests to the impact of the June Fourth tragedy upon subsequent developments in China and the world. However, few of them have addressed the role of the news media, despite the fact that a number of examinations of the post-Maoist China exploit the news coverage as the primary sources. Among those few studies, the Joan Shorenstein

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affairs with each other and compete for political power. In turn, democracy served as an institutional arrangement to guarantee the liberal social order. See Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the World Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 13-15.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Gordon Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen* (Philadelphia, P.A: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 15.



Barone Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School conducted a media research, *Turmoil at Tiananmen: A Study of U.S. Press Coverage of the Beijing Spring of 1989*. Published in 1992, it aims to "review a variety of media organizations whose coverage of the events in China had the most impact on large segments of the American population, and upon the elites involved in the U.S. political and policy decisions that stemmed from those events."<sup>8</sup>

*Turmoil at Tiananmen* is a comprehensive study of the print and television coverage over the events at Tiananmen from May 15<sup>th</sup> to late June, covering the mainstream media outlets from Britain, America, France, Hong Kong, and Singapore. I do not aim to compete with it in terms of the breadth of samples for analysis. My goal is to address the linkage between the U.S. press coverage and the liberal ideology persistent in Americans' perception of China affairs. This is an important aspect to which it pays scant attention. An assumption underlying *Turmoil* is that the American media did not only provide historic records of what happened at Tiananmen but also conditioned the American public's reactions to the ongoing events. I extend this to the American liberal and idealistic fashion of imagining the Tiananmen protest. Notably, it is historically bounded and constructed. Americans' mode of thinking of China affairs is grounded in their decades-long obsession with China's transformation into a liberal society as well as their attempts to promote it. Their efforts backfired with the Chinese Communists coming to power in 1949, yet the myth survived as to their

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<sup>8</sup> "Introduction," in The Joan Shornstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy in John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, *Turmoil at Tiananmen: A Study of U.S. Press Coverage of the Beijing Spring of 1989* (June, 1992), <http://www.tsquare.tv/themes/Tatintro.html#anchor417246> (accessed on August 12, 2009).

benevolent intent to help and China's willingness to embrace.<sup>9</sup>

Compared to other relationships of the U.S. with those perceived inferior, uncivilized nations, the peculiarity of the U.S.-China "special relationship" was rooted in an ambiguity of the means available to Washington to shape China's future.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to Russia, which was equally perceived as backward, conservative, and resistant to change, Washington proved able to use coercion to impose its reformist agenda on China, as its harsh response the Boxer Rebellion had illustrated.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, however, China did not turn out to be an appropriate arena for Americans to carry out its reformist programs in the fashion they did to the Philippines. To a considerable extent American media coverage of China belied this

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<sup>9</sup> For the study of America's approach to China, see John King Fairbank, *The United States and China* 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). In his book, Fairbank identified a pattern of fluctuation between energy and apathy in U.S. viewpoint of China. To him, Americans' energy derived from their idealized vision of China's potential to develop along Western, liberal lines. And their apathy, resulted from the Chinese reality, whenever it frustrated their efforts to reform Chinese society. Michael Hunt conceptualizes America's attitude toward China as a "special relationship," which was akin to one between patron and beneficiary, and traces its myth-making process. The myth of a "special relationship" was based on two assumptions. On the one hand, there was an abiding faith in Chinese desire to follow America's model; on the other hand, Americans tended to believe in their capability of changing China, sometimes by coercive means. Sharing Fairbank's view of U.S. misconception of the nature of Chinese society, Hunt argues that Americans were inclined to carry out the reformist programs in China and use coercion to punish China's indifference to their efforts. Particularly, Hunt locates this approach in Washington's Open Door policy toward China from 1898 to 1914. See Michael Hunt, *The Making of A Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> To be sure, this impulse to consider other nations as followers of the American model of historical development was not unique to China issues.<sup>10</sup> China only stands as a remarkable case to illustrate America's missionary vigor with which its foreign policy has been pursued. Ironically, America had invested enormous energy and hopes in China's change but had seen less positive effects. There have been fruitful scholarships concerning "America's response to China." A classical study is conducted by Warren I. Cohen, *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations* 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). With regard to America's decision-making dilemma, compounded by Washington's misperceptions of Chinese political situation, see Tsou Tang, *America's Failure in China, 1941-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963). It was the first comprehensive study of how Washington mismanaged its relationship with Nationalist China. Cold War historian Odd A. Westad puts America's failure to support Chiang Kai-shek's regime against the Chinese Communists led by Mao Ze-dong in a larger Cold War context, regarding this story as the first showcase of Washington's decision-making dilemma with regard to the Third World revolutions. See Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Intervention and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 112. During the Cold War, the U.S. failed attempts to shape the Third World countries in its own image can be seen in Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy's Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> For Americans' perception of Russia and the Soviet Union and their efforts to change it, see David Foglesong, *The American Mission and the "Evil Empire": the Crusade for a "Free Russia"* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For Washington's response to the Boxer Rebellion at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Hunt, *A Special Relationship*, pp. 187-202.

ambiguity. They undertook to inform the U.S. of a distant, progressive China in ways favorable to the audiences' taste. As a corollary, the making of the myth of a U.S.-China special relationship was largely due to the media's activities in China. Particularly, from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1950s, missionaries were positioned to set the liberal agenda for China's progress before the American audiences by means of then burgeoning print media.<sup>12</sup> In the increasingly globalized 1980s, their role was replaced by the more specialized media agents with renewed interests in a China embracing the new Open Door.

In parallel, a worldwide political change toward democracy began to sweep through the world since the late 1970s, characterized by Samuel Huntington as the third wave of democratization.<sup>13</sup> For the dynamics of U.S.-China relations, this global transformation added new momentum to the special relationship myth. Over this period China became a focus of America's sensitivity to democracy and liberalism as it was perceived to bring its totalitarian political system to an end. Although no effective political reform took place in China, American foreign policy elites were committed to see that China's democratization bring the Chinese Communists' monopoly over state power to an end. Their "long-standing interest in converting China to American values and remolding the Chinese economic and political systems along American lines" remained in force even after the Chinese

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<sup>12</sup> As to the American media coverage over China affairs, American media's experience with the Guomindang regime and CCP revolutionary forces before 1949, see Stephan McKinnon and Oris Frieson, *China Reporting: An Oral History of American Journalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1987); for the dynamics between the media and the U.S. government with regard to the recognition of CCP regime, see Nancy B. Tucker, *Patterns in the Dust: Chinese-American Relations and the Recognition Controversy, 1949-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), chapter 8.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

Communist regime had cut off most of its economic and cultural ties to the U.S. since 1949.<sup>14</sup>

The moment of Chinese democratization expected by Americans was present in the spring of 1989, when more than thousands of students took demands for political reform to Tiananmen Square. The American news outlets wasted no time testifying to what they identified as the starting point of China's democratization. In ideological and cultural terms, their coverage of the Tiananmen protest represents a remarkable case of how the "special relationship" myth influenced U.S.-China relationship in the contemporary context. Up to a certain point, when their coverage was hampered by partial evidence and limited access to the CCP's decision-making process at the top, the media turned to the wishful ideas derived from that historical myth. Here the democratization of China became the theme they constantly used to characterize the Tiananmen protest, while elevating its historical position.

To substantiate this assumption, my narrative compares the American news coverage with the stories that concerned the decision-making process at the top of the CCP along with the protest's development. For many years the inside stories of the crackdown have been completely unknown to the outsiders. Even with the publication of the *Tiananmen Papers* in 2001, they remain only partially known. Zhao Zi-yang's memoir published on the eve of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tiananmen incident provides further insight into the power struggle within the CCP Politburo concerning

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<sup>14</sup> Harry Harding, *A Fragile Relationship: The United States and China since 1972* (Washington D. C.: Brookings Institute, 1992), p. 10.

the military crackdown on June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989.<sup>15</sup> Those inside stories about Zhongnanhai (the place where the supreme state agency locates) allow me to establish a comparative view between what was *supposed* to happen and what was *actually* happening in Tiananmen of 1989 in an effort to assess the accuracy of the American news coverage.

In analyzing the news coverage, I draw heavily on the concept of “framing,” which suggests a strategy essential to media coverage. In political scientist Robert Entman’s words, it represents an effort “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal explanation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”<sup>16</sup> In doing so, media coverage tends to reduce the complexity of the real events, thereby selling them as intelligible and fascinating stories to the possible widest range of audiences. It is also in this way that news frames work on the preexisting assumptions shared among the news consumers. Thus, by analyzing outstanding cases in the history of news, historians can learn some persistent cognitive characteristics that have been instrumental for the public in absorbing the news stories. The news framing of the Tiananmen protests and the crackdown by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) deserves a detailed study precisely because, to a considerable extent, it sheds light on the ideological lens through which the American public perceived foreign affairs.

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<sup>15</sup> Zhang Liang compile, Andrew Nathan and Perry Link ed., *The Tiananmen Papers* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002); Zhao Zi-yang, *Prisoner of the State: The Secret Journal of Zhao Ziyang*, translated and edited by Bao Pu, Renee Chiang, and Adi Ignatius, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Robert Entman, "Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, 4 (1993): 52.

In a nutshell, the Tiananmen Incident empowered media outlets to highlight the ideological dimensions persistent in 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S-China relations. Throughout the course of news framing from late April to the early June, liberal-minded journalists tapped into the political culture of protests that featured prominently in modern Chinese history.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, to differing degrees they did not find it hard to present the contemporary case as a footnote of the presumed history of Chinese people struggling against totalitarian regimes. Here, news framing was a linguistic instrument for the liberal ideology to operate in a historically constructed framework. Particularly it managed the expectations of the news consumers for the prospects of success of the Tiananmen protest. Highlighting such words as democracy, freedom, and liberty, the American media manipulated the news stories in ways that stimulated the readers' yearning for the victory of the protesters. Thus their frustration at the Tiananmen massacre was understandable. After the June 5<sup>th</sup> morning as the PLA's scheme to disperse the demonstrators by force turned out notorious, Deng's regime was cast in the most unfavorable light since the 1980s. It was denounced as a repressive machine turning back the wheel of history. Yet, on the other hand, it was the news coverage that overemphasized the influence of western liberal principles among the protesters. In this sense, I will argue that the framing strategy was to a certain extent responsible for the outrage of the American society for the *unexpected* crackdown on June 4<sup>th</sup>.

In my study the news contents receive more emphasis than the way they were

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<sup>17</sup> A leading research in the political culture of Chinese popular protest is Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry ed., *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China* (Boulder, San Francisco, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1992). By discussing the Tiananmen protest within the context of Chinese modern history, this work also points out Americans' misunderstanding of China's social and cultural developments in modern times.

produced. Ideas often take on a life of their own after being produced. By analyzing how the news of the Tiananmen protest was framed, I intend to reveal the logic of the liberal ideas that dominated Americans' thinking of China's political change. Thus my thesis is more a study of transnational ideas than transnational actors. I consider the news media outlets and domestic news commentators to have played the role of *carrying* and *spreading* those ideas rather than *producing* them.

The news outlets whose coverage is cited here for analytical purposes include the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Time* magazine. Each represents a dominant voice in American public opinion in terms of its influence on policy. Notably, my research puts a premium on the print media coverage as opposed to television news. For breaking news, no doubt the television coverage can exert a visually powerful impact on the audience. But the framing effect of print coverage tends to last longer and is thereby easier for us to grasp the far-reaching implications of the event. Policy elites and opinion leaders who are of consistent interest and importance to foreign affairs often act as the agents of the newspaper's framing effect. They may well have particular concerns to be accommodated by media when contemplating various policy initiatives. This is seldom the case for the vast majority of news consumers who, by contrast, concentrate on television images much more than the substance of the issue. As Steven Chaffe and Stacey Frank, two distinguished students of mass communication, put it, "television brings news highlights to the less assiduous citizens, while the newspaper covers political content in greater depth and is preferred by those more

involved in politics.”<sup>18</sup> In short, while the ideology of liberalism are widely shared, foreign policy elites tend to seek, learn, and reflect on the news framings of print media more actively than do average citizens.

In this light, a comparatively enduring damage to the U.S.-China relationship can be seen in U.S. Congress. Congress was an arena where the political repercussion of the military crackdown, mediated by the American media, was intensely felt and seized upon to challenge Bush’s China policy. The speeches in Congress invoked the discourse of the U.S.-China “special relationship.” Advocating the application of pressure to the Chinese government, the voices echoed the American news framings of the Tiananmen crackdown. In sharp contrast, Bush was committed to an expedient tradeoff between a moral responsibility to the victims of the crackdown and long-term benefits that America could receive from a stable relationship with China. Yet, he justified himself on the ground of the likelihood of future political change in China rather than in national-interest terms. After all, at least rhetorically he did not go beyond the special relationship paradigm as a moral framework.

My thesis concludes with a reflection on American media’s role in U.S.-China relationship in the last chapter of the Cold War. I argue that they highlighted the ideological variables as the most precarious dimension in U.S.-China relations, largely excluding Bush’s realist approach as an alternative. Since events could gain momentum of its own, the legacy of their news framing of the Tiananmen protests has profoundly shaped the U.S.-China relations in the post-Cold War era. With the

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<sup>18</sup> Steven Chaffé and Stacey Frank, “How Americans Get Political Information: Print versus Broadcast News,” *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 546, 1 (1996): 58.



changed international circumstance in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ideological divergence came to the fore in U.S.-China relations. Human rights issues received particular attention in view of its logical connection with the nature of the Chinese Communist rule. The emerging human rights issue was not confined to the Chinese whose careers and fates were affected by the Tiananmen Incident. Yet, it was the Incident that drove a wedge between China and America over the issue, which, in association with domestic politics of both countries, then came to feature prominently in the bilateral agenda.<sup>19</sup>

The American media outlets covering the Tiananmen protests, in the final analysis, functioned as a driving force for this transformation by conditioning the way that the U.S.-China relationship was perceived by the foreign policy elites in America. Consciously or unconsciously, the American media outlets again stirred the historically embedded special-relationship myth when America's response to the Incident was brought into Congress's political process and the lively discussion over China's future within American academic establishment concerned with China policy. The drama at Tiananmen, as well as the chain of events triggered by it, ultimately served as the most recent case of the dynamic influence of ideology upon the interactions between America and China at interstate and transnational levels.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew Nathan, Robert Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York, London: W.W. Norton Company, 1997), p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> This M.A thesis grew out of my concern with the international circumstances in favor of China's political reform. It serves this purpose by observing how the Tiananmen Incident, among other events around the world, influenced China-U.S. relations. The American ideology of political liberalism, mediated by contemporary news press corps, figured prominently in the course of events in 1989 and became a footnote of the unique U.S.-China special relationship in history. As a case study, it aims to add to our understanding of the condition and extent of America's expectation for the progress of Chinese democracy.

A liberal impulse to see China's political transformation toward a democratic system that facilitates the expression of public opinion dominates all but my choice of liberal arts as an academic pursuit. It seems to me that an

## CHAPTER 2

### FROM HU YAOBANG'S DEATH TO THE HUNGER STRIKE (APRIL 15<sup>th</sup>-MAY 14<sup>th</sup>)

On April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1989, a sudden heart attack took the life of Hu Yaobang—the former General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Hu was perceived as a leading figure in liberating China, ideologically and economically, from the stultifying Maoist political framework. In the late 1970s he was devoted to the campaign of redressing grievances of victims in the Cultural Revolution, revising the rigid Maoist orthodoxy. His concerted efforts to “emancipate the mind” (*jiefang sixiang*) promised Deng’s return to power, after which Hu gained further leverage to pursue the policy of the economic Open Door.

The intellectual freedom enjoyed by students and the intelligentsia in the 1980s, however, spurred their demands for continued reforms, which conservative elements within the CCP interpreted as an attempt to erode their dominance over China’s political life. Consequently, a public protest that erupted in 1987 became a lively pretext for the voices opposing reform. Hu himself took full responsibility for this mass movement and retired reluctantly, presumably considering the necessity of China’s political stability. Though sacrificing the political career for the sake of public good, contrary to Hu’s purpose, the public viewed his retirement with sympathy and

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understanding of the historical dynamics that shape the present is the first step toward the realization of our ideals of Chinese democracy. The intellectual exercise of dissecting the case of American coverage of the Tiananmen Incident can at least keep us sensitive to the opportunities the international forces present to China. It enables me to see the extent to which China could benefit from the supportive “world public opinion” mediated by the global media. In this light, an effective way to realize the China’s democracy may lie in the historical dynamics that I am committed to study. This has motivated my research into history and will continue to motivate my research into the Chinese political reform, whether in educational institutions or in contemporary Chinese society.

grievance against the CCP, thereby sowing the seed of the protest of 1989. The news of Hu's death was announced officially on the afternoon of April 15<sup>th</sup>. In a way, the government miscalculated the repercussions of Hu's death among the Chinese youth generation. His reluctant departure from the corridors of power within the CCP in 1987 had not provoked the same degree of reaction, yet the situation was different this time. By April 21, the day of Hu's official funeral, 100,000 students had already gathered at Tiananmen Square.<sup>21</sup>

The American media was impressed by the present student protest. It seemed that they had been waiting for the stirring of Chinese democracy since the normalization of Sino-American relationship during the previous decade. The 1980s witnessed a rapid increase of an American media presence in China as well as the media's shift of position toward the Chinese Communist regime. No doubt China's political change in favor of Chinese democracy that attended Deng Xiao-ping's Open Door policy was part of the developments that many journalists were looking forward to.<sup>22</sup> To this concern was added the American practice of journalism, which inclines American mainstream media to hold the government accountable for social problems.<sup>23</sup> Applying this professional standard to their coverage of the demonstrations in China, they were more motivated to highlight the students' cause.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Orville Schell, *Mandate of Heaven: A New Generation of Entrepreneurs, Dissidents, Bohemians, and Technocrats Lays Claim to China's Future* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 50-51.

<sup>22</sup> The *New York Times* correspondent Nicholas Kristof's remark after the Tiananmen crackdown gives us a hint as to the general expectations for the Tiananmen protest at the very beginning. As he puts it, "Like most optimists about China, after the Tiananmen crackdown we felt betrayed. And, like most, we lost much of our confidence in the future of the Middle Kingdom. But what had really happened was that we had misjudged China in the first place." See Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *China Wakes: The Struggle for the Soul of a Rising Power* (New York: Random House Inc., 1994), p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Entman, "The Nature and Sources of News," in Geneva Overholser and Kathleen H. Jamieson ed., *The Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 54.

<sup>24</sup> For a brief analysis of the American news coverage of China in the 1980s, see Stephen McKinnon, "The Role of the Chinese and U.S. Media," in Wasserstrom and Perry ed., *Popular Protest*, pp. 206-214.

In a brief narrative of the students' march on April 18<sup>th</sup>, the *Washington Post* brought several banners raised by students at Tiananmen Square to its readers' attention, such as "Forever cherish the memory of Comrade Yaobang, the Soul of China," and "Long Live Democracy."<sup>25</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* explicitly identified Hu as the symbol of China's progress toward democracy. "When he was general secretary there was more freedom, more democracy," according to a young teacher interviewed in the street of Beijing, "once they got rid of him they clamped down on all of us, intellectuals, students and teachers."<sup>26</sup> The emphasis on the slogan of democracy, at this time, implicitly conveyed a message of America's expectation to see a new political system in China restructured along liberal lines. *New York Times* correspondent Nicholas D. Kristof made it clear that "Chinese people march for democracy," as he titled his coverage of the ongoing activities. Historically, only former premier Zhou Enlai's death in 1976 provoked comparable social agitation. This time, however, the meaning of protest seemed to have changed subtly. On April 20<sup>th</sup>, the day of Hu's funeral, Kristof observed that the Chinese practice of honoring Hu's death carried a ring of democratic aspiration. One day later, he became determined to characterize this protest as a struggle for democracy. Also, he attempted an analysis of the unusual inactivity of the Chinese government in dealing with the students during these days. It was assumed that the Chinese Communist leadership had already learned the historical lessons as the memory was fresh that in 1976, "after

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<sup>25</sup> David Holley, "Students Protest in China: Marchers Honor Late Reformist Hu," *The Washington Post*, April 18, 1989, Final Ed., p. A18. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com> (accessed August 16, 2009-February 20, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Uli Schmetzer, "Death of China's Hu Becomes Rally Point," *The Chicago Tribune*, April 18, 1989, North Sports Final Ed., p. 4. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com> (accessed August 16, 2009-February 20, 2010).

police removed wreaths mourners had placed in Tiananmen Square to honor Zhou, rioting began.”<sup>27</sup>

Such a speculation, however, proved to be the beginning of the wishful thinking about China’s progress toward democracy among the American media corps. They were too ready to construe the Chinese government inactivity as its leaders’ concessions to popular discontent. As a matter of fact, however, the delay of the government response to the protest was largely due to the political struggle for the initiative in the decision making process in Zhongnanhai, where the supreme power in Chinese politics is located. There were two opposing factions respectively favoring harsh and moderate measures toward the students, and the struggle between them endured until the late May. Zhao Zi-yang, who had succeeded Hu Yao-bang in 1987 as the secretary-general of the CCP Central Committee, was at the time strongly in favor of postponing heavy-hand measures toward the students. Sympathetic with the students’ cause, Zhao, in the wake of Hu’s funeral, proposed attempts to persuade the students to go to class, conduct dialogue with students at multiple levels, and avoid bloodshed.<sup>28</sup> But his influence in policy making depended heavily on his personal relationship with Deng Xiao-ping, then the chairman of the Central Military Committee. Moreover, his departure for a prearranged visit to North Korea weakened his ability to shape the course of events. An editorial was soon issued in the April 26<sup>th</sup> People’s Daily, rejecting Zhao’s proposal. Clearly, the General Secretary’s instruction to the propaganda agency that “published news and opinion should be more positive”

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<sup>27</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof, “China’s Date with Destiny—A Day of Reckoning Nears for Protests,” *The New York Times*, April 21, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. A8. <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed April 17, 2009-February 20, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Zhao, *Prisoner of the Stat*, pp. 5-6.

was overruled. In turn, the student protest was denounced as “a planned conspiracy and a disturbance,” aiming “to sow dissension among the people, plunge the whole country in chaos and sabotage the political situation of stability and unity.”<sup>29</sup> Though the editorial mentioned the students’ good intentions to eliminate corruption and promote democracy as well, wordings such as “disturbance” and “conspiracy” sufficed to deny the legitimacy of the protest.

The editorial showed the government’s failure to appreciate the students’ intent and the ramifications of adopting a hard-line position at this moment. At this point Kristof had misread the state of affairs early on. Yet the journalists soon had another drama to substantiate China’s move toward democracy. Students responded to the April 26<sup>th</sup> editorial with a march on the following day, the success of which went beyond even the participants’ most optimistic expectations.<sup>30</sup> It heartened the American journalists as well. “The Chinese students win concession after a massive march in Beijing,” the *Wall Street Journal* asserted in a headline.<sup>31</sup> The *Washington Post* picked up the topic of concession, informing its readers of the restraint on the part of the Chinese government. Particularly it emphasized that the CCP had adopted talks, rather than the use of force, as the best policy.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, the declassified documents show no indication that high officials were committed to dialogue with the students. In General Secretary Zhao Zi-yang’s absence,

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<sup>29</sup> “It Is Necessary to Take a Clear-Cut Stand Against Disturbances,” in Michel Oksenberg, Lawrence R. Sullivan, and Marc Lambert trans. and ed., *Beijing Spring, 1989: Confrontation and Conflict, The Basic Documents* (New York: M. C. Sharpe, Inc, 1990), p. 207.

<sup>30</sup> Craig Calhoun, *Neither God Nor Emperor: Students and the Struggle for Democracy in China* (Cal., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 52.

<sup>31</sup> Adi Ignatius, “Chinese Students Win Concession after a Massive March in Beijing,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 28, 1989, p. A11.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Southerland, “100,000 in Beijing Mount Defiant Peaceful March,” *The Washington Post*, April 28, 1989, Final Ed., p. A1.

they were now led by Premier Li Peng, the spokesman of the conservative faction within the CCP, which stuck to the old maxim of the CCP's monolithic rule. In the April 28<sup>th</sup> Politburo Standing Committee Enlarged Meeting chaired by Li, most attendants expressed hard-line views on the ongoing protest. Incapable of flexibility in dealing with the students, they assumed unanimously the existence of hostile influences behind the scenes, in which foreign media presumably took part.<sup>33</sup> This clearly showcased the government's serious misunderstanding of the situation. It was largely because of their unwillingness to explore the students' purposes of protesting. Notably, the Politburo members all but disregarded the symbolic importance protesters had attached to Tiananmen Square. Interestingly, it was the very destination of the march that the protesters had chosen. Without effective representative institutions to translate the popular vision of social progress into national policy, the protesters aimed to bring their negotiations with the government into an open arena.<sup>34</sup> For this approach Tiananmen Square was the ideal place in terms of its special political significance in modern Chinese history. A physical site in which the supreme power of China is located, Tiananmen (the Gate of Heavenly Peace) has been used as *the* best place for mass movement throughout the twentieth-century Chinese history. From the May Fourth movement of 1919 to the protest against the Gang of Four at the end of the Cultural Revolution, and finally to the 1986 student protest, a number of significant moments of popular protest contributed to its exalted position.<sup>35</sup> There

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<sup>33</sup> "Excerpt from Party Central Office Secretariat, 'Minutes of Politburo Standing Committee Enlarged Meeting, April 28'," in Zhang compile, Nathan and Link ed., *The Tiananmen Papers*, pp. 86-90.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph W. Esherick and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, "Acting Out Democracy: Political Theater in Modern China," in Wasserstrom and Perry ed., *Popular Protest*, p. 55.

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Spence, for instance, symbolizes Tiananmen Square as the essence of Chinese protest against ancient

crystallized the spirit of popular protests against the repressive regimes. In this light, it was the ideal place for the protesters in the spring 1989 to search for a livable past to justify their ongoing cause.<sup>36</sup>

In 1989 Tiananmen Square was also the best place where the American journalists sought the ideological tenets of the movement—democracy and freedom. The way they identified the hallmark of the movement, however, hindered further insights into other parts of China. Several years later the foreign journalists were criticized for overemphasizing activities in Beijing and overlooking the extraordinary calm in Chinese rural areas.<sup>37</sup> Yet, at the moment in 1989, Beijing deserved to be the focus of media coverage. And it was appropriate for outsiders to approach the situation in center-periphery terms. At least Chinese young people's minds had been fixed on Tiananmen Square. Remarkably, by late April thousands of students from other provinces gravitated to Tiananmen in pursuit of their aspirations for social and political changes in China.<sup>38</sup> For anyone who arrived in Beijing at this time, his or her immediate aim was probably to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *wu si* (the May Fourth Movement).

*Wu si*, among other popular protests associated with Tiananmen, persisted as a myth open to reinterpretations. While it had been recognized as “the first time Chinese intellectuals recognized the need for a complete transformation of traditional

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regimes, though his book does not confine events to the physical limit of Tiananmen Square. See Jonathan Spence, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution 1895-1980* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981).

<sup>36</sup> For the analysis of the way the Tiananmen protesters searched for a livable past from the May Fourth movement, see Vera Schwarz, “Memory and Commemoration: The Chinese Search for A Livable Past,” in Wasserstrom and Perry ed., *Popular Protest*, pp. 170-183.

<sup>37</sup> The Joan Shornstein Barone Center, *Turmoil at Tiananmen*, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> “Excerpts from Party Central Office Secretariat, ‘Minutes of Politburo Standing Committee Meeting,’ May 1, in Zhang compile, Nathan and Link edit, *The Tiananmen Papers*, p. 104.



Chinese civilization,”<sup>39</sup> the way to bring about that change has always been in debate.

Among other things, one influential theme was the introduction of Anglo-American liberalism to strengthen the Chinese nation.<sup>40</sup> To be sure, Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century had only a modest understanding of liberalism in the abstract. To them liberalism was amenable to political expressions only in concrete terms. Partly for this reason, they needed the discourse of national salvation as an issue of immediate moment to grasp liberalism and solve its philosophical ambiguities.<sup>41</sup>

Many Americans faced a similar problem. During the Cold War liberalism asserted itself in the public discourse by denouncing human rights abuses under communist regimes, in order to discredit communism and promote democracy’s moral appeals.<sup>42</sup> This mindset carried over into the final years of the Cold War. Thus it is worth noting that when the protesting students in 1989 compared themselves to the protesters of *wu si*, the American media were motivated to identify liberalism as the dominant ideology of the movement, hopeful that framing news around liberalism would strike a chord with the news consumers.

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<sup>39</sup> Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> Yen Fu, a nineteenth-century Chinese intellectual who played a leading role in introducing liberalism into China by translating numerous western works, including *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Spirit of Law*, for instance, tended to mingle liberalism with Social Darwinism. He believed that democratic institution is the most effective means to mobilize the strength of a society for common purposes, not least of which at that time was national defense. See Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

<sup>41</sup> Some Chinese historians have tended to see Chinese Westernization as part of the larger transnational dynamics between China and western powers. See William Kirby, *Germany and the Republic of China, 1927-1937* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1984), p. 3. In this light, the extent to which Chinese understanding of Anglo-American liberalism inspired the political movement in the modern era remains problematic. According to Chow Tse-tsung, the May Fourth derived its nationalist ideology from Japan, liberalism from France, and gradualism from America. In particular, French ideology was in fact more radical than Anglo-American liberalism as it inclined toward anarchism and romanticism, whereas the American thought placed more emphasis on intellectual approaches to social problems than the philosophical foundation of changing Chinese society. Neither of these categories fit perfectly into Anglo-American liberalism as foreign observers often tended to see. For these three intellectual currents, see Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*. pp. 25-40.

<sup>42</sup> As John L. Gaddis observes, Americans carried into the Cold War a moral duty to defend their democratic values as a way of life. See John L. Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War: Implications, Reconsiderations, and Provocations* (New York and Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 47, 48, 64.

Here the *New York Times* made a point. One Chinese journalist formerly working in the People's Daily, Liu Bin-yan, was invited to write on the parallels between *wu si* and the Tiananmen protest. Liu was a senior party member with liberal ideas, which made him popular among the liberals in both China and the West. For the first half year of 1989, he had been at Harvard, unable to provide any eyewitness account of the drama at Tiananmen. But his view would no doubt echo the liberal ideas since his credentials had already made him an embodiment of reformist element within the Chinese society. Therefore, his editorial helped justify the public calling for change in Communist China. Liu's writing did serve this purpose. At the very beginning of the article, Liu drew an analogy between the Tiananmen protest and *wu si* based on the premise that both were crusades against repressive regimes for national welfare. "Seventy years ago," it read, "students...marched from the campus to Tiananmen Square, demanding democracy and science." They ended up "overthrow[ing] the warlord government and Confucian ideology," thus creating a new outlook for Chinese development. In Liu's view, the 1989 movement struggled for democracy in a way comparable to the May Fourth Movement. He described the present situation to the effect that "within the last two weeks, students have set up their own nationwide organization, ...replac[ing] the state sponsored Student Association," for the student organizations had "begun publishing its own newspaper." To Liu, this marked "the first realization of the freedom of speech and the freedom of association stipulated 35 years ago in the first edition of the Constitution."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Liu Bin-yan, "Chinese Marchers, '19 and '89." *The New York Times*, May 4, 1989. Eastern Ed., p. A 27.

Liu's observation of the Tiananmen protest would have confirmed the western observers' belief in liberalism, since it was supposed to draw on the Chinese historical legacy of liberalism. At this point he argued that the movement stood to gain more success, which meant concessions were to be made by the CCP leaders. In a broader sense, Liu based his confidence in the students' triumph on the CCP regime's inability to address such issues as corruption and social discontent within the existing political system. To be sure, this assumption was not just a figment of Liu's imagination. By May 1989 it had been to some extent justified by the democratization of other communist regimes. Thereby Liu considered the international circumstances as relevant to Chinese democratization. In his own words, "[p]olitical changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have destroyed the rationale for Chinese Communist ruling groups refusing further democratization."<sup>44</sup>

This line of argument, to be sure, appeared to accommodate the American readers' desire to see the Chinese embrace western democracy. Accordingly, the unprecedented size of the May 4<sup>th</sup> march was emphasized in the news coverage by the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*.<sup>45</sup> Equally noticeable were the support and participation in the march of other social groups than students. Among them workers and journalists received particular emphasis from these mainstream media.<sup>46</sup> By doing so, the media coverage created the impression

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> See Daniel Southerland, "Thousands March, Protesting Beijing's 'False Statements'," *The Washington Post*, May 4, 1989, Final Ed., p. A25; Nicholas D. Kristof, "Urging Chinese Democracy, 100,000 Surge Past Police," *The New York Times*, May 4, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. A8; Adi Ignatius, "Continuing Defiance Altering Chinese Political Debate," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 4, 1989, p. A11.

<sup>46</sup> See Sheryl WuDunn, "Workers Joining Students in Beijing Demonstrations," *The New York Times*, May 5, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. A1 (two pages); Adi Ignatius, "Continuing Defiance Altering Chinese Political Debate," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 4, 1989, p. A11; Daniel Southerland, "Journalists Cheering Students Demonstrating in China,"

that Chinese people, led by the students, were pursuing democracy. Associating *wu si* with liberalism in the western discourse, however, they inevitably lost sight of the multifaceted nature of *wu si*. Liberalism had manifested itself in the twentieth-century Chinese intellectual history in different ways, however. Typical of the popular protest against government, *wu si* gave birth to mass enlightenment and national salvation simultaneously. In this way, nationalist sentiments were inextricably linked with individual liberty in the sense that only when the mass came to be aware of the peril of the nation and the political degeneration could the Chinese be salvaged and gain liberty.<sup>47</sup> By “liberty” the *wu si* intelligentsia often referred to national self-determination, on which they thought individual liberty depended. But how would a group of people promoting individual rights that had characterized western liberalism conceive of themselves as staging a collective effort to save the nation? This question helped reveal an insoluble dilemma for the American media outlets and striking students. It turned out that the failure to grapple with it drove both groups into frustration and despair.

To be sure, not all American journalists were unaware of the difficulty in fitting the protesters’ claim into the framework of liberalism. “The views of the students vary enormously, as do their sense of conviction and their ability to articulate democracy,” Sheryl WuDunn (Kristof’s wife) observed soon after the April 28<sup>th</sup> march, “What emerge[d] from the interviews with several dozen students over the last few days is the feeling that democracy is as much a moral issue as a political one.” She then

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*The Washington Post*, May 5, 1989, Final Ed., p. A22.

<sup>47</sup> Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 13.

pointed out that democracy implied the eliminating of the morally intolerable corruption which had been endemic in Chinese politics. Thus there existed a need to redefine the student protest at Tiananmen. Given the fact that “many students seemed to have thought much less about such grand questions as the ideal organization of government, or whether a multiparty system is feasible for China,” WuDunn believed that the protesters at Tiananmen sought adjustments in the existing political system to fulfill its moral promise rather than a systematic reform of Chinese politics.<sup>48</sup>

However, such a conception of the protest’s nature did not cut against the grain of American liberal thinking, which resonates with most Americans in emotional, rather than philosophical, terms. The words such as “liberty” and “freedom” that the American media frequently used to characterize the demands of the students at Tiananmen, as Eric Foner remarks, are “fundamental to Americans’ sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation.”<sup>49</sup> At this point, journalists tried to exploit the historical analogy between the 1919 *wu si* and the 1989 protest. Yet, with limited knowledge in Chinese history, they invariably showed an inability to grasp the tension between Chinese conception of liberty and their national sentiments. It was inherent in the *wu si* ideology and reemerged in the 1989 “New May Fourth Manifesto,” to which few American journalists paid special attention. “Fellow students, fellow countrymen,” the Manifesto read, “the future and fate of the Chinese nation are intimately linked to each of our hearts.” Therein lay “but one goal, that is, to facilitate the process of modernization.” To realize this goal it required “liberating people from

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<sup>48</sup> Sheryl WuDunn, “Democracy? In China, Write Morality,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. A6.

<sup>49</sup> Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), p. xiii.

the constraints of feudal ideology and promote freedom, human rights, and rule by law.”<sup>50</sup> In the Chinese public discourse at that time, “feudal ideology” referred generally to old, conservative thought, whereas “freedom,” “human rights,” and “rule by law” connoted a liberal idea pointing to individual emancipation from the intellectual and physical shackles imposed by political authorities. In this light, liberalism appeared to student protesters as the effective way to escape feudal ideology and to modernize the Chinese nation. Needless to say, modernization turned out to be the ultimate goal, while the students simply subordinated liberalism as a means to achieve it. This connoted an idea that for the sake of Chinese modernization with democracy as its defining characteristic, personal interests, including individual rights promised in the liberal ideology, could be jettisoned. The tension between nationalism and liberalism troubled the demonstrators at Tiananmen when they felt it necessary to act in concert to exert pressure on the government. It came to a head within a week after the May 4<sup>th</sup> march as the students’ patience was running out. Thereafter they became more determined to act unanimously to press for their demands.

At this point, given that the government failed to respond positively to their demands, the protesting students were torn between the commitments to individual rights and to national welfare. On the one hand, they regarded individual rights as essential to national well-being, for which they were struggling to elicit the government’s commitment to political reform. On the other hand, they felt reluctant to

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<sup>50</sup> “New May Fourth Manifesto,” in Han Min-zhu (pseudonym) ed., *Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 136.

surrender most of their individual rights to the small number of demonstration leaders for the purpose of struggling against the government. Not least of these rights was the freedom to express and practice the best means as an individual saw fit. But clearly that freedom was opposed to the necessity of uniform action which had received by far the highest priority for the participants to push forward the protest agenda. In the final analysis, sacrifice of the protesters' individual rights became a necessity in the ongoing common struggle for the ultimate realization of individual liberty, justified more by the necessity for national strengthening than the intrinsic value of liberalism.

Inevitably many students left the protest, especially when the collective action at Tiananmen turned into radical behaviors. Only one week after the May 4<sup>th</sup>, the idea of a hunger strike was floated, resulting in the most serious split among the students since the Tiananmen protest.<sup>51</sup> With the dynamics among the protesters unheeded, the American journalists failed to capture this split in their news coverage. In theory, to foreign audiences the story of students sacrificing themselves for the national liberal cause may appear more appealing than an analysis of their dilemma in the protesting movement. But initially the mainstream newspapers did not put the hunger strike at the center of their coverage. It was conceivable that some writers were unwilling to spread pessimism among their audiences; or, they were too busy preparing for Gorbachev's visit to work on the news of the hunger strike.

Yet, it did not prove difficult to use the Gorbachev's visit to frame the hunger strikers' goals. A *Washington Post* comment on May 14<sup>th</sup> registered the feeling that a

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<sup>51</sup> Calhoun, *Neither God Nor Emperor*, pp. 58-59.

reformist mindset had taken hold in Sino-Soviet domestic politics. “The Soviet and Chinese leaders have become symbols of an attempt to rethink a utopian ideology that has failed dramatically to deliver its own promises,” it observed, even though it was ironic that the meeting between the Sino-Soviet leaders “coincided with serious setbacks for the reform movements they both set in motion.”<sup>52</sup> Here “serious setbacks” referred to the political turmoil that had occurred to Poland and Hungary in their 1980s’ experiences of democratization. Comparatively, the Tiananmen protest appeared as simply a recent case. Concerned with the protest’s significance to China’s democratization, the *Washington Post* was among the first of the media to cover the hunger strike after it was declared at Peking University on May 13<sup>th</sup>. To a certain extent, relating the hunger strike to Mikhail Gorbachev’s visit was a framing strategy adopted by writers for the *Washington Post*, which foreshadowed the news framing between May 15<sup>th</sup> and May 19<sup>th</sup>. By contrast, the *New York Times*, misled by unconfirmed “inside information,” placed the beginning of the hunger strike under the title--“China Party Chief Appears to Gain in Power Struggle.” It asserted that “if the present trend continued,” that is, the hunger strike continued to exert pressure, “Mr. Zhao may be emboldened to press for further economic reform and political liberalization and greater democracy.” This prospect seemed to be guaranteed by Deng’s support for Zhao, according to the news.<sup>53</sup> We now know that these views were completely misleading. They only showcased the foreign news media’s

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<sup>52</sup> Michael Dobbs, “Gorbachev, Deng to Meet on Rough Roads to Reform—First Summit in 30 Years Starts Monday,” *The Washington Post*, May 14, 1989, Final Ed., p. A1.

<sup>53</sup> Nicholas Kristof, “China Party Chief Appears to Gain in Power Struggle,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. 1.



ignorance of the immediate political reality in Zhongnanhai. To reveal the actual situation contrary to such an observation, we would better consult Zhao's own record on the political developments within Zhongnanhai up to the hunger strike.

As Zhao recalled, after returning to Beijing on April 30<sup>th</sup> he found himself with little maneuvering room to send students back to class with the government's face saved. Chinese students, as he saw them, had become fearless because the anticipated crackdown did not happen.<sup>54</sup> To reduce tensions between the government and students, he decided to convey conciliatory messages to students at several speeches on May 4. At the same time, he finessed the comments on the Tiananmen protest in a way that tried to avoid provoking the Zhongnanhai hard-liners. Public documents have substantiated these tactics. At the official ceremony commemorating the May Fourth movement, he stressed that Deng "ha[d] shown great concern for and love[d] the young generation," and had "ardent expectations concerning the important role of the young people of the contemporary era in carrying out the reform and construction work."<sup>55</sup> At a meeting with some governors of the Asian Development Bank on the same day, Zhao acknowledged the protest as an effort to correct the errors in the work of the party and the government, rather than a sign of China's political instability, since "the students' demands for correcting errors.....coincide with those of the party and government."<sup>56</sup>

The *Wall Street Journal* soon captured Zhao's comment as a conciliatory move on

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<sup>54</sup> Zhao, *Prisoner of the State*, p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> Zhao Zi-yang, "Making Further Efforts to Carry Forward the May 4<sup>th</sup> Spirit in the New Age of Construction and Reform," in Oksenberg, Sullivan, and Lambert ed., *Beijing Spring, 1989*, p. 249.

<sup>56</sup> Zhao Zi-yang, "Students' Reasonable Demands to Be Met through Democratic, Legal Channels," in *Ibid.*, p. 251.

the government's part as well as the initial victory of the protesters. While it was still "too early to tell if the movement [would] strengthen the liberal leaders or conservatives," as Adi Ignatius of the *Wall Street Journal* conceded, at least "the government is experimenting with Soviet-style openness" in response to the protesters."<sup>57</sup> It meant that since the Chinese government had begun to listen to dissenting voices, a liberal society no longer seemed to be a distant hope for China. *Time* magazine was cautious as to the success of China's liberalism, yet it did not deny that liberalism was the goal of the protesting dissenters. "The government's placid tolerance of [the] heresies is largely a matter of timing" it assumed, "[w]ith 3,000 international delegates attending the annual meeting of the 47-member Asian Development Bank last week in the Great Hall of the People, within earshot of Tiananmen Square, officials wanted to avoid any unpleasantness." Thus, "given the gap between the students' demands and senior leader Deng Xiaoping's aversion to substantial political reform, the government's soft line on dissent is likely to be severely tested in the coming months."<sup>58</sup> Without casting doubt on the orthodoxy of liberal ideology in the midst of China's political change, *Time* left the readers concerned about the prospects for China's democratization. It did not give any definite answer as to the development of the protest or its potential impact on China's road to democracy. Still, rather than hinting at a crackdown, its argument pointed to the government restraint.

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<sup>57</sup> Adi Ignatius, "Continuing Defiance Altering Chinese Political Debate," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 4, 1989, p. A11.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Serrill, Sandra Burton, and Jaime Florcruz, "China Softening Up the Hard Line," *Time* March 15, 1989 <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,957661-2,00.html#ixzz0cV9Lb3b6> (accessed on February 10, 2010).

Furthermore, the *Time* article portrayed Zhao as a liberal reformer, even though his influence was likely to be “on the wane.” Indeed, political reform was on Zhao’s agenda in dealing with the protest. He did not only expect his speeches on May 4<sup>th</sup> to ease the discontent of students caused by the April 26<sup>th</sup> editorial, but he also wanted them to serve as an opportunity for the Chinese official to interact with larger social groups. His “general approach was thus to carry out reform in the areas of concern to the people,” so as to “reduce the level of dissatisfaction among the people and the students.” The specific measures of reform included those raised by the students, such as “corruption, government transparency, democracy, rule of law, and public scrutiny of government.” Tackling these specific issues, as Zhao understood it, “would enable the NPC (National People’s Congress, which, in Zhao’s view, enjoyed more legitimacy among the masses to supervise the government than the CCP) to play its rightful role as the highest authority in the nation while directing the students’ attention toward furthering political reform.”<sup>59</sup>

Clearly, Zhao was supportive of the student protest for some political purposes beyond the protest itself. The American media were correct in depicting him as a liberal reformer. Yet, they underestimated the obstacles against his efforts at political reform. According to Zhao, Deng did not take a clear position toward the students protest until May 19<sup>th</sup> (when martial law was declared), let alone throw his support behind Zhao, while the conservative leaders were “working furiously to resist and to delay any dialogue with the students.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Zhao, *Prisoner of the State*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Initially the American media were not fully aware of Zhao's difficulties, however. They were so anxious to see the democratization of China as the fruition of its new Open Door policy that the political reality in China did not weigh much in their thought of her direction of change. Even though some held only cautious optimism as to the prospect of Chinese political reform, there was little doubt in their minds that the protesters' goal of opening up an open civic society for China was robust, at least for the time being.

In retrospect, the hunger strike was indeed a turning point in the Tiananmen protest, inasmuch as it added urgency and tension to the situation. Now the government was forced to respond sooner rather than later. And it was more likely to adopt a hard-line position. The subsequent state of affairs proved that the CCP authority had been pushed too hard to seek a negotiated solution. To a considerable extent the crux of the problem lay in China's political system, which allows for no flexibility necessary for crisis management. Compared to the western democracies with representative institutions in service of the resolution of conflicts between policy makers and masses, China does not possess the institutional means to maintain a constant and consistent negotiation process during the crisis. Worse still, its authoritarian regime is apt to intensify the conflict by stressing the Party's ideological orthodox, thereby eroding the public's faith in the government's sincerity in a negotiation. In this light, Zhao's moderate approach to the protest and his aspiration for political reform could not ease the tension. At best he was able to put off a showdown between the protesters and the CCP conservatives at the risk of a

leadership crisis. Philip Cunningham, a foreign observer at Tiananmen captured the essence of this charged atmosphere. As he argued,

In democratic societies such as the U.S., the handling of the student unrest was tricky enough, as politicians deliberated, under the weight of the Constitution, whether to ignore, co-opt, or tackle unrest by force. How much less maneuver was there here, in authoritarian China, at a time when the unelected leadership spoke in two voices? The impasse at the top made possible a modicum of tactical freedom on the ground, but it was threatened to raise the risks to the level of the undeclared civil war.<sup>61</sup>

While it is an exaggeration to foresee a civil war in China as a result of a split in leadership, this observation points to the Chinese government's inability to negotiate a satisfactory settlement with the protesters. It was not until Gorbachev left China that the journalists came to realize this point. Cunningham had been staying with the protesters and seldom distracted by the tasks of a professional journalist, such as collecting and updating immediate news. His detachment from the efforts to frame news might have enabled him to envisage the outcome of the protest in a long-term perspective, whereas the journalists often tended to expect signs of the protest's progress, which could add value to their news.

Comparatively, the American journalists had good reason to be optimistic with regard to the immediate moment. Despite all the potential obstacles, Zhao's strategy at some point persuaded the students to return to school with satisfaction. After May 4<sup>th</sup> the number of protesters at Tiananmen began to diminish. This was a visible sign of the event developing toward a peaceful end, showcasing a popular strength to put government on a moderate, democratic line. With the protest settling into a lull between May 5 and May 13, the media coverage subsided (especially television).

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<sup>61</sup> Philip J. Cunningham, *Tiananmen Moon: Inside the Chinese Student Uprising of 1989*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publisher, 2009), p. 72.

Now these media used this peaceful week to prepare their packages for another key moment in the world news—the upcoming Sino-Soviet summit.<sup>62</sup> The pending Sino-Soviet rapprochement might have diverted their attention from the students' side, until the hunger strike intruded in their agenda. The hunger strike erupted too soon for the media to respond effectively. It was not until they developed a framing strategy to weave Gorbachev's visit and the students' hunger strike together into a story of democracy's victory over totalitarianism in the socialist camp that the conflict in news framing was reconciled. And the following section is to show how in the subsequent news framing process the Sino-Soviet rapprochement as a geopolitical issue integrated into the American liberal thinking.

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<sup>62</sup> The Joan Shornstein Barone Center, *Turmoil at Tiananmen*, p. 18.

## CHAPTER 3

### GORBACHEV'S VISIT: GEOPOLITICS VS. LIBERALISM IN THE NEWS FRAMING (MAY 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>)

Gorbachev's trip to China in mid-May provides an opening for us to assess the competing relationship in the news framing of the Tiananmen protest between geopolitical realism and Grotiusian liberalism. The two theories locate human nature in international relations in different ways. For geopolitical realism, inherent evil and aggressive human nature dictates geopolitical conflicts to be an enduring theme in interstate relations. Grotiusian liberalism, though not denying the negative aspects of human being, argues for the existence of some universal values that are in favor of peace among various peoples. The American media obviously favored Grotiusian liberalism for their perceived similarity between Gorbachev's reformist mind and the students' request for democracy and a liberal society. As a consequence, in the print media's coverage over the Tiananmen protest, Grotiusian liberalism soon prevailed over geopolitical realism in American media's news framing, with its emphasis on the Sino-Soviet shared commitment to the political reform on liberal lines as opposed to their divergent interests in geopolitics. Though some discussions of the geopolitical ramification of the Sino-Soviet summit remained, it was the topic of political reform in China and the Soviet Union that set the agenda for the news coverage. This framing strategy was made possible by two basic facts—the hunger strike movement at Tiananmen and Gorbachev's public image as a reformer. The news framing with respect to Gorbachev in Beijing revolved around a variety of ways in which American

journalists pulled these two facts together.

To a considerable extent, it was Gorbachev who brought the media attention to Tiananmen. Many journalists were poised for Gorbachev's visit only to find the hunger strike as a media sensation. Since they scarcely noticed the inner dynamics among students that led to the hunger strike, the scene at Tiananmen took them by surprise.<sup>63</sup> In the journalists' viewpoint, the protest scene was more appealing than the geopolitical issues associated with the Sino-Soviet summit in Beijing. According to their news stories, they also appeared committed to the liberal ideology that had characterized their news coverage since the protest began. In the news coverage geopolitical analyses were juxtaposed with liberal comments about the popular calling for democracy in China, to be sure. Yet, western liberalism, symbolically attached to Gorbachev's visit, all but dominated the way the news was framed. It transcended the geopolitical context of the Sino-Soviet rapprochement to reach out to the two countries' masses, which were presumably in the pursuit of democracy and freedom.

In a *New York Times* article on May 15<sup>th</sup>, the title "Gorbachev Visits Beijing for Start of Summit Talks" was followed by a short description of the situation at Tiananmen to the effect that "[the] arrival ceremony [wa]s moved to the airport from a Square occupied by protests." By doing so, the article reframed focus of the news. Although there were references to Sino-Soviet disputes in Indochina in the article, they paled in comparison to the perceived dynamics of Gorbachev's engagement with the protesters at Tiananmen. Undoubtedly this occupied most of the news content. The

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<sup>63</sup> Calhoun, *Neither God Nor Emperor*, p. 67.



article also assumed that the protesters had much to gain from the Soviet reformist leader's presence. For "many of the students see in Mr. Gorbachev a vigorous symbol of political liberalization and regard his visit as an implicit rebuke to the aging leadership of China."<sup>64</sup> Here the Soviet leader's popularity among the students seemed to have eclipsed Deng as an architect of China's Open Door.

The theme of Gorbachev's popularity in China could be found in the *Washington Post* as well. Quoting an anonymous diplomat's words, one article argued that "Deng's economic reforms have already produced impressive results, and by endorsing Gorbachev's reforms, the Chinese will give the Soviet leader greater credibility and respectability both internationally and at home."<sup>65</sup> There was no clear-cut definition of the "Gorbachev's reforms" pursued in China, however. Here the *Washington Post* used an ambiguous term. It remained unclear in the media discourse in which aspects Deng's Open Door policy paralleled Gorbachev's New Thinking. More important, the American journalists never provided evidence as to the CCP leaders' admission of their reform as one comparable to Gorbachev's. Now when the students demanded for the "Gorbachev's reforms," a paradox emerged: how could a CCP regime pursuing democratic reforms comparable to the Gorbachev-led process in Moscow disregard their own citizens' calling for the continuation of that reform?

This kind of contradiction was more dramatic in the *New York Times* editorials.

On May 17<sup>th</sup> one of the chief editors of the *New York Time*, Bill Keller, made two

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<sup>64</sup> Bill Keller, "Gorbachev Visits Beijing for Start of Summit Talks," *The New York Times*, May 15, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. A1 (two pages).

<sup>65</sup> Daniel Southerland, "Sino-Soviet Summit May be Deng's Last Hurrah," *The Washington Post*, May 15, 1989, Final Ed., p. A1.

internally contradictory comments on the same day. In particular, he reversed his argument about Gorbachev's unwillingness to side with the protest that had just been made on the same day. Gorbachev's cautiousness toward the protesters was first captured by WuDunn in her coverage of the meeting between party leaders. There she asserted that "Gorbachev sharply distanced himself from the unrest that had disrupted his meeting with Chinese leaders" in efforts to "back away from the protest 'hotheads.'"<sup>66</sup> Previously Bill Keller shared this position as he argued on 17<sup>th</sup> that Gorbachev tried to "avoid injecting itself into the sensitive internal politics of China."<sup>67</sup>

Soon afterwards, however, Keller's tone took a radical turn. In another editorial on 17<sup>th</sup>, he depicted Gorbachev as freed from the restraints of commenting on Chinese home affairs and trying to urge China's political reform. Overnight Keller turned the Soviet leader into an internationalist promoting democracy, who had "used the three days in Beijing to encourage political liberalization.....[by] commend[ing] the Chinese leadership for opening a political dialogue with the students." Moreover, the Chinese leaders were reported to have embraced Gorbachev's reformist ideas. As Keller asserted, "Chinese leaders emerged from their meetings with their Soviet guest voicing calls for democracy and human rights that bore the unshakable trademark of Mr. Gorbachev's political creed."<sup>68</sup> For all these overstatements of the Sino-Soviet shared political values, Keller failed to locate the Sino-Soviet summit in the

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<sup>66</sup> Sheryl WuDunn, "Gorbachev Backs away from the Protest 'Hotheads'," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. A8.

<sup>67</sup> See Bill Keller, "Gorbachev Visits Beijing for Start of Summit Talks."

<sup>68</sup> Bill Keller, "Gorbachev Praises the Students and Declares Reform Is Necessary," *The New York Times*, May 18, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. A1.

Tiananmen protest. Specifically, he offered no clues as to whether and how the hunger strike would come to a peaceful end, provided that this pro-democracy gesture on the Chinese government's part was to be taken seriously.

Perhaps Keller represented an extreme case of exaggerating the perceived Sino-Soviet convergence in western liberalism. Yet his ideas were no exception to the American media's frame of reference, under which the Soviet leader's role in the Tiananmen protest was constantly manipulated in favor of liberal and democratic principles at the expense of the specific context in which the demonstrations took place. The American media appeared hopeful that Gorbachev's image as a reformer would convey some messages opposing Communist political orthodoxy, even when he showed no intent to complicate Chinese politics. Presumably for this reason, they actively sought clues in his personal position toward the protesters at Tiananmen on several occasions. For all their failures to get clear-cut evidence about Gorbachev's urge for Chinese democracy in Beijing, Gorbachev was portrayed as an embodiment of the reformist minds within socialist countries, connecting them to the western democracy. Consequently, his image as a western-style reformer marginalized the geopolitical dimension of his conciliatory move toward Beijing.

Moreover, as Gorbachev's visit was viewed as the moment in which Sino-Soviet efforts at political transformation converged, another question followed: did the geopolitical rapprochement have anything to do with the supposed Sino-Soviet congruence in the domestic political democratization? The American media's answers reflected a Wilsonian logic of "democratic peace," which suggests that democracies

are far less likely to go to war with each other than non-democracies.<sup>69</sup> Keller in his May 18<sup>th</sup> editorial had already hinted at “democratic peace” in arguing that “a liberalized China would probably be a more congenial partner in the Mr. Gorbachev’s plan for demilitarizing Asia and opening the Communist world to greater economic cooperation with non-Communist countries like Japan and North Korea.”<sup>70</sup> It was the *Chicago Tribune* which carried the logic of democratic peace so far as to suggest that Washington was to welcome the trend of reconciliation between Moscow and Beijing, since it reduced the geopolitical tension that had made America’s role in triangular diplomacy possible.

“There was a time when Americans would have shuddered at the reconciliation of the two Communist superpowers after their decades of hostility. But times do change. The U.S., increasingly comfortable in its relationship with China and nourishing some optimism that Gorbachev means what he says about Soviet reforms, should welcome the detente as an important step toward international stability.”<sup>71</sup>

Thus America’s role in Northeast Asia stood to change. It would no longer play one superpower against another, but rather to help develop a big-power cooperative framework that worked to its advantage.

In a fierce reaction to this optimism, the conservative columnist (and a former speechwriter of Richard Nixon) William Safire on the May 18<sup>th</sup> *New York Times* forcefully argued that the “Red Re-union” was “not good news” for America. In his view, first, China was unlikely to become “a source of electronic intelligence about the Soviet Union, as useful to our C.I.A. as Cuba with its Big Ear as to the K.G.B.”

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<sup>69</sup> As to the general idea of “democratic peace” and its place in international relations theory, see James E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr, *Contending Theories of International Relations: A Comprehensive Survey* Fifth Ed., (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 2001), pp. 313-321.

<sup>70</sup> Keller, “Gorbachev Praises the Students and Declares Reform Is Necessary.”

<sup>71</sup> “Unwittingly, China Scores Points,” *The Chicago Tribune*, May 18, 1989. Ed.: North Sports Final Ed., p. 22.

Second, the Korean Peninsula could bear the brunt of the geostrategic change because of the Sino-Soviet rapprochement. “The pre-Gorbachev Chinese liked having Americans around in South Korea” as a counterweight to the Soviets, but now they might come around to view the American presence in Northeast Asia as unnecessary. Predictably, the pressure on American forces to withdraw from the Northeast would mount. Thus, according to Safire, Gorbachev’s initiative to end the 30-year confrontation between Beijing and Moscow could be seen as the beginning of the end of the strategic position of South Korea, or even Japan, as America’s sphere of influence in East Asia.

In short, Safire observed in the geopolitical rapprochement in East Asia a Soviet intention to pursue its traditional expansionist policy. This was assumed to have motivated Gorbachev to “castigate the Chinese ‘hotheads’” (a term used by WuDunn in her May 17<sup>th</sup> editorial). For, in Safire’s own words, “if repression were triggered that spills blood without gaining control, the Great Chinese Counterrevolution might soon be under way. In that case, reverberations would be felt in Warsaw, Budapest, Tbilisi, Kiev, and Moscow.” He thereby implied that in order to counter such a wave of democratization, Gorbachev had acquiesced in the Chinese government’s way of handling the Tiananmen protest. The editorial was concluded in an old anti-communist ideological rhetoric,

“By all standards of rationality, the Sino-Soviet summit meeting is a historic advance for Communist leaders in both countries and a setback for freedom, unless it leads to Communism’s crack-up. Only in that unlikely case would it be ‘not detrimental to our interests’.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> William Safire, “The Long Demarche,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 1989. Eastern Ed., p. A31.

As it turned out, it was that “most unlikely case” which became reality. Needless to say, history proved Safire’s geopolitical analysis wrong, inasmuch as it dismissed the potential of change within the Soviet regime. But for the time being, Safire’s comment represented no more than a marginal voice opposing Grotiusian liberalism. By contrast, most editorials tended to explore the universal values beyond the geopolitical pragmatism that had characterized Gorbachev’s rapprochement with Beijing. Those values were attached to, rather than consciously conveyed by, Gorbachev. In the American media’s perspective such a nuance weighed little, for a belief had motivated them that liberal ideas could get the life of its own. And their framing strategy was to highlight the Sino-Soviet congruence in democracy as a corollary to their geopolitical reconciliation, which expressed more a blessing of American democracy and western liberalism than a potential threat to American strategic interests. In this way, Grotiusian liberalism prevailed over the geopolitical analysis in its own right.

Additionally, it is also important to note the impact of the coming of Gorbachev on the coverage of the Tiananmen protest. While the realist perspective of the geopolitical situation was marginalized in the news coverage, Grotiusian liberalism, as the American media imagined it, endowed the hunger striker with an international identity that transcended Sino-Soviet differences over geopolitical interests. At least in the eyes of American journalists, they were legitimate expression of the current wave of democracy that swept the Communist world. Gorbachev did inspire the American media early on to compare the Chinese protesters to those in the Soviet

Union. On May 16<sup>th</sup> the *Wall Street Journal* article once paid compliment to the demonstrators at Tiananmen, claiming in the title that “Beijing’s protesters’ organizational skills would astound radicals in the Soviet Union.” It carried the story of a failed attempt of Beijing policemen to clear the students from Tiananmen Square, concluding that “[t]he students’ ability to outmaneuver the authorities seems to derive from their tight organization.” The organizational skill was amazing, indeed. As it described in detail,

“[T]he hunger strikers sit in small groups on the ground, surrounded by several circles of fellow students with linked arms. It was virtually impossible for someone unknown to penetrate the rings. . . . . Inside the circles, there is relative calm and extraordinary discipline. Despite the mass of people, the atmosphere is relaxed and orderly.”<sup>73</sup>

This scene dwarfed the loosely organized Soviet protesters, according to the author. But the course of democratization of the Soviet politics forcefully demonstrated that the organizational skills of grassroots movements did not work in the way the American journalists imagined in 1989. After the years of struggle since the 1980s, the social request for democracy brought the Soviet Communist monopoly over the political power to an end, whereas the protest in Beijing was soon suppressed in June 1989. The disparity in their leaderships’ characters and the ideologies they held mattered more than the organizational skills of political dissenters in each country to the outcomes of political changes. Compared to Gorbachev’s preference for western values over Marxist-Leninist revolutionary orthodox, the Chinese leaders at large were committed to the revolutionary myths exalting the Communist rule.

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<sup>73</sup> Peter Gumbel, “Beijing Protesters’ Organizational Skills Would Astound Radicals in [the] Soviet Union,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 1989, p. A11.

The Chinese communist ideological commitment was reflected in the tough positions toward the protesters adopted by most CCP top leaders during the meetings in mid-May. This was the period when the decision of the military crackdown was made. On May 16<sup>th</sup>, when the American media had just begun to guess how the Soviet leader would express his blessing to Chinese democracy, the CCP Politburo Committee held an emergency meeting to resolve the impasses at Tiananmen. The meeting, filled with intense arguments between Zhao Zi-yang and the conservative leaders over the nature of the ongoing protest, produced an impasse within the Politburo. To the old revolutionaries, in Li Peng's words, the students appeared much as a vehicle of "a tiny minority" who was "trying to use the turmoil to reach its political goal, which is the repudiation of Communist Party leadership and the socialist system," and the signs were their "slogans about reversing the campaign against the bourgeois liberalism."<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, Bo Yi-bo, a party-elder whose prestige in buttressing Deng's political position legitimated his presence in the decision making, took Gorbachev's visit as another display of the protesters' malicious intent. "When the students chose Gorbachev's visit as the time for their hunger strike," he charged, "they seriously disrupted the conduct of foreign affairs and sullied our national image."<sup>75</sup> Clearly, the conservative elements within the CCP refused to bow to the protest. They were determined to hold the exclusive claim to the supreme moral conscience on behalf of the Chinese nation against the students' vision of justice.

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<sup>74</sup> "Excerpts from Party Central Office Secretariat, 'Minutes of the May 16 Politburo Standing Committee Meeting'," in Zhang Liang, compile, Nathan and Link Ed., *The Tiananmen Papers*, pp. 177-178.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.



As I wrote earlier, the turning point of the Tiananmen protest occurred during Gorbachev's visit with the hardliners gained an upper hand within the Politburo. Ironically, it was also during this period that the American media increasingly lost sight of the truth behind the facts they gathered. Committed to reporting the individuals embracing liberal values against government power, they were distracted from what was going on in Zhongnanhai, where the CCP leaders finally decided to use brutal force to seal the protesters' fate. At the same time, despite the enthusiasm with which American media expected Gorbachev to inspire the Chinese protesters, the contest between geopolitical and liberal arguments around Gorbachev's visit ceased to continue after the Soviet reformer's departure from Beijing on May 18<sup>th</sup>. The focus of media attention shifted back to the protesters, especially the hunger strikers. The declaration of martial law on May 19<sup>th</sup> added new momentum to the event at Tiananmen and even changed its direction. The American media was not slow to respond to the martial law, which did arouse their concern for military crackdown. Yet they ingenuously overestimated the protesters' physical strength and underestimated the brutality of Chinese military's coercive means until the June 4<sup>th</sup>. For this reason, the heroism of the hunger strikers and the prospects of their triumph over the government remained to be the main storyline.

*The Continued Hunger Strike, Martial Law, and the Precarious Moment (May 18<sup>th</sup>-June 4<sup>th</sup>)*

After Gorbachev's visit the American media soon turned the focus onto the

hunger strikers. Before the CCP leaders' determination to use force became obvious, the hunger strikers remained at the center of the media spotlight. As the foreign media linked the hunger strikers to China's democratization, sympathy toward the students compromised professional objectivity in their news coverage. Soon it became a general practice of the television media to seize on the heroism of the hunger strikers without reporting some individuals were having meals privately.<sup>76</sup> Comparatively, the print media did not cover the hunger strikers in individual terms as early as did the television media. They carried few personal tales of the participants in the hunger strike until it reached the climax during Gorbachev's visit. Even then, the personal stories they carried were not as detailed as those on television because of the limit of printed pages assigned to the Tiananmen protest. Nevertheless the print media came to view the protest as diverse social forces converging at Tiananmen in dynamic ways. On May 18<sup>th</sup> WuDunn began to single out individuals to personify the hunger strike. Those young men and women, as she viewed them, were "the heart of [the] China protest." To support this point, she recounted a young college student who joined the hunger strike while his family was completely in the dark. In the end, according to WuDunn, the young man gave up the fast after losing consciousness and was rushed to the hospital. After coming around, he did not regret what he had done or change his mind to take the government's position. Rather, he continued to advocate democracy as the common cause of the students. Accordingly, the story ended with a quotation of the young student's hope for democracy: "We cannot rely on rule by one leader. We

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<sup>76</sup> The Joan Shornstein Barone Center, *Turmoil at Tiananmen*, pp. 22-24.

must search for a beautiful perfect system.”<sup>77</sup> This storyline, with an emphasis on that student’s commitment to “democracy” as the perceived objective of the protest, empowered the hunger strikers before the American readers. Apparently, the protesters’ physical weaknesses, when confronted with hunger, did not seem to undermine their struggle but rather to boost their morale.

Moreover, the print media did not mimic the television media’s persistent concern with the hunger strikers. It paid closer attention to the social forces revolving around the hunger strikers as well. Because more groups had begun to join the protest since mid-May, the newspaper media could seize the initiative to present the dynamism within the movement. Ignatius of the *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, referred to “hundreds of thousands of office workers” and “two truck loads of peasants” as important forces in “China’s burgeoning democracy movement.”<sup>78</sup> Such an emphasis invited the conclusion that the protesting groups, with their diversified social identities, had gained wide currency among Chinese society. The inner logic, linking the diversity of social forces among the protesters to liberalism in China, did not extend only to the news coverage of the dynamics within the protest. To provide another example of framing the protest in personal terms, the May 19<sup>th</sup> *New York Times* referred to a senior party member committed to free speech in the 1980s and resisted news censorship in 1989. Qin Ben-li, the head of the World Economic Herald, refused to succumb to the government pressure to “cut the offending material”—that

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<sup>77</sup> Sheryl WuDunn, “Hunger Strikers, Heart of China Protest,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 1989, Eastern Ed., pp. A1, A10.

<sup>78</sup> Adi Ignatius, “Beijing Seems Out of Control As Workers Join the Protests, Upstaging Historic Summit,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 18, 1989, p. A13.

is, the newspaper's pro-students coverage of the Tiananmen protest. Mr. Qin's act gained such wide support that, as the article described, "[t]acked to his newsroom wall are supportive letters, telegrams, and petitions signed by journalists at most of the other Chinese major newspapers, including those of the local Communist Party." A guardian of press freedom, as a corollary, Qin was sympathetic to the students' cause. "He supports what the students stand for," the article stated in the end, "and believes that their protest signals something healthy ahead for China." The students' cause, in the news content, was defined as democracy and in particular involved the retirement of Deng, elimination of corruption, and transparency of government policy making in particular.<sup>79</sup> Presented as a diverse body, images of those democratic crusaders did not disappear from the news pages either. For this reason, next to the article was displayed a photo of jubilant students and workers riding buses, trucks and motorbikes to Tiananmen.

Indeed, focusing on the participants' stories helped the media substantiate the receptivity of Chinese society to the protest. This framing strategy also implied the American media's optimism as to the ultimate triumph of the demonstrators over Deng's regime. There involved a liberal view that the protesters were often powerful enough to direct the nation's political agenda. Such an idea also resonated with the Americans' romanticized view of the Chinese Communists during WWII as a grassroots force struggling for a new China, an effort worthy of America's blessing.<sup>80</sup>

It was rooted in the larger vision that the Chinese nation is destined to evolve toward

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<sup>79</sup> Bill Keller, "Shanghai Editor Now a Rallying Cry," *The New York Times*, May 19, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. A10.

<sup>80</sup> McKinnon and Friesen, *China Reporting*, p. 154. Michael Schaller, *The American Crusade in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), pp. 183-184.

an American-style democracy, provided that the people were unfettered by repressive forces.<sup>81</sup> The reality in 1989, on the contrary, was that the antagonism between a totalitarian regime and political dissenters diverted the efforts to establish a democracy. In effect, the hunger strike set in motion a vicious spiral that led to the escalation of the confrontation between the government and protesters. The more the hunger strikers pushed forward their vision for a liberal society, the more they viewed themselves as the conscience of the nation. As a result, the CCP authority felt a desperate need to end the protest by force. The foreign media coverage that favored the hunger strikers could only exacerbate this spiraling tension. Since the CCP leaders perceived themselves as holding the exclusive claim to moral superiority, the protesters' calling for political reform, boosted by complimentary remarks from the foreign media, appeared only as a threat to the regime that inherited its legitimacy from Mao's era.

With the government refusing to make any face-losing concessions to the protesters, the hunger strike was unable to accomplish its purpose. The situation deteriorated consequently, when the protesters were unwilling to leave Tiananmen and the government more determined to stand tough. The prolonged confrontation between the protesters and government turned out to weaken Zhao Zi-yang's position as a mediator vis-à-vis the protesters and the conservative elements within the CCP.

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<sup>81</sup> Sinologist Richard Madsen argues that American scholars tend to characterize China as a "troubled modernizer." Underlying this observation is the assumption that China is destined to follow America's model. See Richard Madsen, *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of Berkeley Press, 1995), p. 28. In this line of reasoning, the obstacles to China's efforts at modernization is naturally found in particular corrupt and inefficient regimes. Thus John King Fairbank tends to argue in favor of Chinese communist, which he portrayed as an agent for Chinese modernization. See John King Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution, 1800-1985* (New York: Harps and Row, 1986).

His vulnerability to the hard-liners' criticisms came to a head on May 17<sup>th</sup>. On that day, when Deng called a meeting to declare martial law, Zhao was confronted with a fate similar to his predecessor Hu Yao-bang: the exclusion from the halls of power. He was more unfortunate than Hu in that he ended up as a loser in the CCP's byzantine power struggle, unable to take any credit in what he had done as a top leader of China's economic reform in the 1980s.

But Zhao remained free to do whatever he saw fit. He thus made a final bid to persuade the students to end the protest so that martial law would not be justified. His measure was as desperate as it was inconceivable for other CCP leaders: at 4 a.m. on May 19<sup>th</sup> he came to Tiananmen Square to talk directly with the hunger strikers! Certainly there was no approval of Zhao's meeting with the students by the Politburo in advance, and he was ultimately put under house arrest until he died in 2005. However, the students were not aware of his position, nor were they informed of the fact that "[even] if the hunger strike continued or if some people died; they [the elders] would not be moved."<sup>82</sup> It was the impasse within the CCP leadership at the time that caused this plot twist in the events at Tiananmen. With little knowledge of the procedure within the Politburo, to be sure, few observers were able to grasp Zhao's conciliatory tone in asking them to go home.

In turn, neither did the American journalists seize Zhao's implicit meaning (in quotations) from his message as well. Kristof, for instance, conflated Li with Zhao in his report that "Li as well as party leader [Zhao] go to Square to ask students to end

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<sup>82</sup> Zhao also recalled that Li Peng followed him to Tiananmen after failing to block him. See Zhao, *Prisoner of the State*, p. 31.

strike.”<sup>83</sup> Li’s dialogue with the student leaders on May 18<sup>th</sup> was another sign of the disingenuousness of the CCP’s approach to the students. This time the government showed its commitment to negotiate with the students while preparing to impose martial law. Kristof was misled again as he covered the dialogue between Li and student representatives. Though he judged that “Li had hinted at a crackdown,” its implementation method was beyond his imagination. Ignatius held an even more moderate view as he reported that “Zhao and Li visited student hunger strikers in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in what was viewed as a peace-making gesture.” “Mr. Zhao was not likely to be a Deng’s enemy, he rose to power as Deng’s protégé,” he argued. Thus Li, as Deng’s follower, was not likely to stand against Zhao. According to Ignatius, Li merely “charted an ambiguous path between Zhao and Deng.”<sup>84</sup> As a corollary, the military crackdown would not be a viable option for Chinese Communists.

Yet, in fact, the situation was much worse than what these journalists conceived of. The dialogue was no more than a rhetorical showdown between the protesters and the CCP leaders. Li Peng, on the government’s behalf, did not show good faith in a sincere talk with the student representatives. Martial law, backed by Deng and other elder leaders, had already been on his agenda by May 17<sup>th</sup>. Now that Zhao was denied any access to politics, there was little chance in reality that the CCP leaders would come around and call off the military operation. With Zhao no longer an obstacle to

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<sup>83</sup> Nicholas Kristof, “Chinese Premier Issues A Warning to the Protesters, But Huge Rally Go on, Li as Well as Party Leader Go to Square to Ask Students to End Hunger Strike,” *The New York Times*, May 19, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. A1.

<sup>84</sup> Adi Ignatius, “Chinese Communism Faces a Crossroads As the Masses Speak,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 19, 1989, p. A1.

the Zhongnanhai hard-liners, Li gained Deng's endorsement, and finally, the conservative leaders reached the decision to declare martial law in Beijing.<sup>85</sup> The declaration of martial law on May 19<sup>th</sup> set the tone for the news coverage until the June 4<sup>th</sup> massacre. There was a subtle change in the news framing strategy during the last days of May. With the martial law looming against the high-spirited students, the news' emphasis shifted from sympathy toward the protesters to speculation about Deng's resolution and ability to insist on martial law to the end. Indeed, because martial law was declared but not enforced, the situation hung in the balance and was more open to speculation than ever before.

Against this background, rumors spread across national borders soon after the troops made their first attempt to enter Beijing city on May 20<sup>th</sup>. The American media at this time related every step in the military operation to the presumed power struggle within the Politburo, which in reality had ended with Zhao Zi-yang's appearance at Tiananmen on 19<sup>th</sup>. Before May 24<sup>th</sup>, for instance, when the army, blocked by the residents in the outskirts of Beijing, made little headway, the mainstream American media looked favorably on Zhao. The *Wall Street Journal*, relying on Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qi-chen's perfunctory remark that "Zhao remains in his party post," reported that Zhao was "maintaining a backstage struggle against Premier Li Peng."<sup>86</sup> In the following days as the troops became increasingly present on Beijing streets, however, more pessimistic predictions of a military crackdown emerged in American news. In particular, Li's public appearance on May 25<sup>th</sup> was the beginning of the end

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<sup>85</sup> "The Elders Decide on Martial Law," in Zhang compiles, Nathan and Link edit, *The Tiananmen Papers*, p. 204.

<sup>86</sup> "Chinese Troops Pulled Back from Capital as Leadership Power Struggle Continues," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 1989, p. A11.



of the rumors that his political influence had waned vis-à-vis Zhao. On that day, Kristof cited an anonymous party official's comment that there was no hope that Zhao would come back to power.<sup>87</sup> As a corollary, the military crackdown was inevitable. In the words of *Wall Street Journal* staff reporter Julia Leung, "the stage has been set for an ugly—even violent—showdown."<sup>88</sup>

This emphasis on the imminence of a military crackdown by the American news media meant that they no longer remained optimistic with regard to the CCP leaders. What they began to present now was an uncertain state of affairs rather than the government's mercy. Though the soldiers' determination to execute the order was frequently questioned, there was no evidence that they would act against the government. At the same time, the media cast Deng, regarded as the supreme leader of the Chinese military, as the last Chinese communist revolutionary whose claim to power had lost legitimacy. As *Wall Street Journal* correspondent James Sterba's described,

"Deng, an economic reformist but no friend of free speech or Western-style democracy, has marshaled old-guard revolutionaries and some commanders of the People's Liberation Army in support of an effort to retain power in the name of preserving Communist Party rule."<sup>89</sup>

Such a characterization of Deng served as a foil to the just cause of the Chinese people protesting against the repressive communist regime. Implicit was the liberal ideology that informed the news coverage. To be sure, it was perhaps the protesters' temporary success in thwarting the troops' advance that motivated the journalists and

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<sup>87</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof, "Li Proclaims Control—Zhao Is Isolated, Officials Indicate," *The New York Times*, May 26, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. A1.

<sup>88</sup> Julia Leung, "Military Cast as Kingmaker in China Leadership Struggle As Li Seeks to Incriminate Party Boss, Purge Followers," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 15, 1989, p. A15.

<sup>89</sup> James Sterba, "Deng Marshals Forces to Retain Power," *The New York Times*, May 26, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. A8.

columnists to hail the victory of the cause of Chinese democracy over totalitarianism. Nevertheless, the liberal ideology held by most Americans could always outlast the protesters' transitory confrontation with government forces. The media, adhering to their dogma, tended to turn the protesters' cause into lasting moral courage. A *New York Times* editorial on May 27 represented this way of framing news when claiming that the students had "ignited a moral bonfire that still blaze[d] across the Middle Kingdom and indeed, in Chinese communities all over the world." Here it registered no feeling that the military crackdown could be distressing for China and the world. On the contrary, anything that took place immediately was presumed to facilitate China's democratization in the long run. As the editorial argued,

"Chinese rulers can no longer plead ignorance about what their people want. They are comparable to that of Communists in Poland after the spontaneous uprising for Solidarity in 1981. Though Mr. Li reigns, he can rule successfully only by following Warsaw's example in giving rights and voices to the opposition."<sup>90</sup>

It was also remarkable that the *New York Times* brought a transformed Eastern Europe into focus. In practical terms the Eastern European path to democracy was supposed to set an example for China's political transformation. Charles Krauthammer shared this view as he wrote for the *Washington Post*. In particular he argued that Poland's political transformation in the 1980s had illustrated that martial law was "an admission of the collapse of revolutionary legitimacy." In doing so, the party had to split itself into "Hungarian-style factions," which "violates the central tenet of Leninist power, the principle of democratic centralism under which there must be no intraparty factions because a faction means opposition and opposition

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<sup>90</sup> "A Tarnished Triumph in China," *The New York Times*, May 27, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. A22.

means contention and contention is the seed of democracy.” Thus, beyond the courage of the protesters at Tiananmen, greater satisfaction could be taken “in a large truth emerging from Tiananmen Square: in a technological age, political consciousness and totalitarian rule are an inherently unstable combination.” The age of totalitarianism had passed in that “revolutionary legitimacy without the original revolutionary leader is a political trick that history is not prepared to tolerate long.”<sup>91</sup>

In short, the vast majority of the news writers considered martial law to deal a devastating blow to the legitimacy on which the Chinese Communist rule depended. The aspiration for democracy, it followed, could fill the vacuum of people’s minds and inspire more social movements in the future. The ongoing protest seemed to have offered some clue. “What this present episode tells us,” Haynes Johnson quoted a young Chinese student as saying, “is that ultimate force cannot repress ideas.” The anti-government demonstrations at Tiananmen in this sense had showcased the strength of liberal ideas. Both the Chinese and foreign observers thus had good reason to “smile at the future” of Chinese democracy.<sup>92</sup>

The media’s confidence in the triumph of liberalism in China found a more forceful expression on May 24<sup>th</sup> in a *Chicago Tribune* remark. “[A]t the heart of the movement that is shaking China with its fervent demands for *democracy*-including *free speech* and a *free press*-and for an end to corruption in the Communist Party and the government,” it read, “are college youths indoctrinated since childhood by the state, many, perhaps most, are party members.” Indeed, such a sentimental comment

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<sup>91</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “Losing the Mandate of Heaven,” *The Washington Post*, May 26, 1989, Final Ed., p. A23.

<sup>92</sup> Haynes Johnson, “Smiling at China’s Future,” *The Washington Post*, May 19, 1989, Final Ed., p. A2.

might strike a chord with an American audience with fervently believing in the triumph of liberalism. Though “it [wa]s too soon to know where their courage w[ould] lead,” the commentator thought their brave endeavors sufficient to inspire global public opinion to morally sanction the Chinese government. In practical terms, he expected martial law to boost the prestige of the protesters and demoralize the Chinese military. For a possibility remained that “the leaders of the People’s Army had seen enough to dampen their enthusiasm for using force to impose martial law and put down the student protests.”<sup>93</sup> The liberal ideas therefore were likely to take root in the Chinese military, the ultimate power on which Deng’s regime depended for its rule.

Moreover, international public opinion was reported as assisting the protesters. The Chinese communities abroad featured prominently in the news stories. On May 28<sup>th</sup>, the *New York Times* reported an interesting event of Chinese students in California launching a trans-Pacific effort to send 1, 800 garbage bags to Tiananmen.<sup>94</sup> There was no mention of why the Chinese students abroad sent garbage bags to Tiananmen, where the protesters were in no mood to clean up the square. Yet, this episode, coupled in the news with the Chinese students’ debates on the campuses of several American schools about the outcome of this protest and prospects of China’s democracy, served to showcase the global support for the Tiananmen protest.

The demonstration appeared to have a spillover effect that transcended the

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<sup>93</sup> “A Sense of Wonder Grows in Beijing,” *The Chicago Tribune*, May 24, 1989, North Sports Final Ed., p. 12.

<sup>94</sup> Katherine Bishop, “China Exchange: From Gossip to Trash Bags,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. A17.

Chinese context. That is to say, the Tiananmen protest involved peoples under other sovereignties. Then in the American news coverage, Hong Kong became a strong case in the global opposition to Beijing's martial law. Since the People's Republic of China would take over Hong Kong's sovereignty from Britain in 1997, the way Chinese communism handled the crisis at Tiananmen aroused widespread concern among Hong Kong residents. According to an article in the May 30<sup>th</sup> *Wall Street Journal*, "about 1.5 million Hong Kong people, perhaps a fifth of Hong Kong's population, poured into streets to demand democracy for themselves." In particular, they demanded election rights from Beijing, that is, their autonomy of choosing the administrative leaders.<sup>95</sup>

The demonstration in Hong Kong reflected not only the local concern for Chinese democracy but also for the intrinsic value of democracy as a way of life. In this way it highlighted democratization as a global concern. Indeed, the American media's coverage of these foreign activities fit in with liberalism's aspiration for a transnational civil society. This had motivated many news outlets to emphasize the modern communication techniques that arguably exposed China to liberal values and conclude that China's exposure to the western world would result in "the emergence of a new civil society against party and state."<sup>96</sup> The seeds of democracy were thus sowed in Chinese people's minds. Eventually, it was social activist Colman McCarthy who summed up the sympathetic mood of the American media and the public toward the protesters at Tiananmen.

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<sup>95</sup> "Hong Kong's Referendum," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 1989, p. A22.

<sup>96</sup> Fox Butterfield, "Long March," *The New York Times*, May 28, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. E1.

“A massacre of innocents—the ‘crackdown’ that pessimists say is inevitable—is still possible in China. What isn't possible is that the bravery and wisdom of the past two weeks of massive nonviolence can be canceled. The story still to be written is how this group of Chinese students came to understand so well and so boldly that the strength of truth and justice is superior to the weakness of guns and tanks.”<sup>97</sup>

Implicit in his idea was that, with the powerful voice of world opinion, even if the tragedy occurred a promising future for China still lay ahead. Over and again the American media hailed the ideal of liberalism as universally shared and applicable to every nation. Many commentaries, arguing for liberalism's triumph in China over communism, assumed the rise of a backlash of the Chinese public which could be too powerful to resist for Deng's regime. The democratization movements, which had taken place elsewhere in the world, apparently fueled their faith in the necessity of China to experience the same process. Because democratization was considered to be a universal phenomena, for China there appeared no choice but democracy.

There was doubt, to be sure, about the correlation between democratization and popular protest in China. Alexander Cockburn, a prominent political journalist, paid attention to the complaints of the protesters and viewed their protest as an inevitable product of China's road to free market and free capitalism. Thereby he contended that the protesters were not so desperate for a liberal society in China than material betterment in their lives.<sup>98</sup> Arguing in this way, Cockburn only complicated the discussion of China's democratization. After all he did not dismiss it as Americans' misunderstanding of the events at Tiananmen. By contrast, Sun Yu-mei, a

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<sup>97</sup> Colman McCarthy, “Non-Violence and the Process of Chang in China,” *The Washington Post*, May 28, 1989, Final Ed., p. F4.

<sup>98</sup> Alexander Cockburn, “Millions in Tiananmen Square, But Not of One Mind,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 25, 1989, p. A19.

distinguished Chinese-American scholar, challenged the epistemological basis of that discussion. Here she alerted the readers to East-West cultural differences, arguing that China presented the need for westerners to redefine democracy. Meanwhile, she suggested the U.S. not impose their liberal thinking on Chinese reality. Americans' conception of liberalism was largely a product of the Cold War, she thought, whereas Chinese tradition did not fit well into that "freedom vs. totalitarianism" framework.

"By generally and vaguely attaching the word democracy, the West fails to see the reality in China. It seems that other than the daring act of calling for 'democracy' and 'freedom' in a traditionally totalitarian country, the Chinese students, workers and ordinary citizens have little else to show to the world. At best, they are imitating the West. If not for the speculation that communism is facing a new challenge or the seemingly inevitable conclusion that communist systems have failed, the mass demonstrations in China probably would not have made front-page news."<sup>99</sup>

In short, Sun believed that the American news coverage had created a false impression among its audience. In this regard, she touched on the essence of Americans' misconception of China, that is, a wishful thinking about the nature of change and progress of the Chinese nation. But her voice was overwhelmed by the media comments on the coming collapse of Chinese communism in the wake of the bloody crackdown of the remaining protesters at Tiananmen, which began on the midnight of June 3<sup>th</sup>. The brutality exceeded anyone's imagination. In turn the "massacre" stirred up a frenzy of media attention after June 4<sup>th</sup>. The details, such as the casualty numbers, the way the military's brutalities were committed, and the heroic "Tank Man" standing up to a line of tanks, were certainly of primary concern to both print and television media. Yet, equally noticeable was the media reasserting

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<sup>99</sup> Sun Yu-mei, "The Hope of the Chinese Go beyond Democracy," *The Washington Post*, May 29, 1989, Final Ed., p. A24.

its faith in the coming collapse of Chinese communism when voicing the outrage of the American public. In the June 5<sup>th</sup> *New York Times*, Kristof argued that the massacre weakened the Communist rule in a way similar to the Kwangju massacre of Korea in 1980. For the military's expanded power would deprive the government of legitimacy, while widespread protest would force it to make concessions to the democratic demands of the public. To Kristof Chinese history had proven this. As he observed, the Chinese Communists came to power in 1949 when the Chinese people became increasingly averse to Chiang Kai-shek's overreliance on military power for his rule.<sup>100</sup>

Kristof's view received support from academic establishment. Two weeks later, Christopher Kruegler, the associate director of the Program of Nonviolent Sanctions at Harvard, envisioned nationwide protests and riots concomitant to the Tiananmen crackdown. Here he drew a parallel between China's situations with that of the Philippines after the assassination of Benigno Aquino. In his view, China was to follow the Philippines' example and establish democracy in a new widespread current of public discontent with the government.<sup>101</sup> Kruegler made his argument against the backdrop of speculations about a civil war in China. But in addition to the disorder on Beijing's streets, there existed no convincing evidence to substantiate the civil war scenario. It was merely true that the Chinese military appeared out of control overnight. For this reason, they bore the brunt of the American media's denouncement of Chinese communism's inhumanity.

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<sup>100</sup> Nicholas Kristof, "Ungoverning China," *The New York Times*, June 5, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. A10.

<sup>101</sup> Christopher Kruegler, "What Will the People of China Do Next," *The New York Times*, June 26, 1989, Eastern Ed., p. E26.



Subsequently in the news coverage of events in Beijing on June 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, the media repeatedly dramatized the contrast between the desperate resistance of the remaining protesters, now joined by Beijing residents, and the cold-blooded government forces. The journalists did not shift their critique away from the top leaders of the CCP until June 24<sup>th</sup>, a day when the Politburo held a Standing Committee meeting to display the new leadership. It became clear that Zhao and the personnel committed to his course of policy had been ousted from the halls of power. Though the American mainstream media regarded this event as a sign of the reemergence of the CCP conservatives,<sup>102</sup> the triumph of liberalism remained a powerful myth in their audiences' minds, especially those concerned with American foreign policy. At the turn of the twentieth century, American foreign policy, with its coercive means as a necessity, had served to educate China about the civilized standards of international community.<sup>103</sup> As more than eight decades had passed, Congress resumed this task in the aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown, which will be the last part of my story.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Robert L. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen: The Politics of U.S.-China Relations 1989-2000* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), p. 72.

<sup>103</sup> A prominent example of America's efforts to coerce the Chinese government to observe international rules and practices was President McKinley's sending of troops to Beijing in 1900. See Hunt, *A Special Relationship*, pp. 189-202.

<sup>104</sup> Here is the end of my analysis of the American media coverage of Tiananmen protest. The primary reason is that my thesis is primarily concerned with the liberal ideology in the American perception of China during the Tiananmen protest. Press media served as a window to observe the ideological framework involved as long as the media outlets constantly touched on political and moral judgments in their remarks. They identified the root cause of the Tiananmen protest as a crisis of communism, hailed China's popular movements in history and in 1989, blamed the government paternalistic, imperious manners in dealing with the protesters, and finally, characterized the protest as a herald of liberalism's inevitable victory over communism in China when it was drawing close to an end. Notably, these undertakings went beyond information supply as a basic media function, which, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had been increasingly undertaken by television media in more engaging ways. Able to present lively images, television media put the press media at disadvantage. Thus, it was after June 4<sup>th</sup> when the advantage of the television media was brought into play and the press media's role was eclipsed in the field of information supply. Indeed, the television images are shocking and attractive to mass audiences, yet for the informed public, for whom the news stories are of ideological concern. The Congress representatives fall into the latter category. Their ideas proved to be a continuation of the media's frame of reference. They voiced the liberal views more vigorously and, in more direct ways, shaped America's response to the Tiananmen incident.



## CHAPTER 4

### IN THE SHADOW OF “JUNE FOURTH”: CONGRESS AND AMERICAN RESPONSE TO THE TIANANMEN INCIDENT

“Almost overnight, one of America’s most striking Cold War strategic successes was shaken to its core,” Secretary of State James Baker recalled.<sup>105</sup> From a geopolitical standpoint, that strategic success was largely due to the triangular diplomacy between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing, which had put the United States at a advantage vis-à-vis the other two.<sup>106</sup> Bush was well aware of this point and committed to the legacy of triangular diplomacy left by the Nixon administration.<sup>107</sup> Yet the Tiananmen crackdown rendered his political position untenable. Representing Americans’ moral concerns for the Tiananmen massacre, Congress became a source of pressure to end Bush’s approach to China oriented by geopolitics.<sup>108</sup>

There is no direct evidence to demonstrate that the media coverage determined what was in the minds of Congressional leaders’ when the bloodshed occurred at Tiananmen. Still, no evidence exists to show that Congressional leaders disregarded the role of media as a transmitter of the events at Tiananmen. Theoretically, mainstream print media constitutes an indispensable source of information on foreign

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<sup>105</sup> James A. Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), p. 104.

<sup>106</sup> Henry Kissinger gives one of the most systematic interpretations of triangular diplomacy in his memoir. See Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979), pp. 763-765. Bush relished his experience of working with Kissinger, especially the time he assumed certain responsibility of conducting triangular diplomacy in Beijing. See George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), p. 90.

<sup>107</sup> Cohen, *America’s Response to China*, p. 211.

<sup>108</sup> James Baker’s recollection of their task of managing the U.S.-China relationship in the wake of the Tiananmen massacre suggested the enormous pressure that Congress had exerted on the administration. As he argued, “it was imperative for us to lead world reaction rather than leave the perception that we were being dragged along by Congress.” Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, p. 105.

countries for the foreign policy elites—a group that necessarily includes Congressional leaders.<sup>109</sup> In the case of Tiananmen incident, to be sure, Congressional leaders did not necessarily rely on newspaper information to make political decisions. Yet, to varying degrees they *could* be moved by the way media presented the Tiananmen protest and the massacre that followed. With the students invariably depicted as the Chinese guardians of western liberalism in the slogans for democracy, political transparency, and press freedom, Congressional leaders were inclined to sympathize with them as did other politically informed and ideologically committed citizens. And the brutality of the CCP's military crackdown on June 4<sup>th</sup> was equally provocative and shocking to them as to those without clear-cut political persuasion.

It is observed that more often than not the American media follow the official story lines in reporting foreign events.<sup>110</sup> This was not the case in 1989, however. The media made it clear that China's notorious disregard for its citizens' lives and their rights to demonstrate against government was intolerable. Ideologically, their position gained support in Congress. Soon after the Tiananmen massacre the view took hold in Congress that America's democratic, liberal ideals were confronted with an unprecedented challenge. The gravity of this challenge stemmed not from Chinese communism per se, but rather from Americans' profound bewilderment at China's path toward democracy. Sinologist Richard Madsen once observed that some other

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<sup>109</sup> Yanmin Yu, "Projecting the China Image," in Hongshan Li, Zhaohui Hong ed., *Image, Perception, and the Making of U.S. China Relations*, p. 67.

<sup>110</sup> Mei-ling Wang, "Creating a Virtual Enemy: U.S.-China Relations in Print," in Li and Hong ed., *Image, Perception, and the Making of U.S. China Relations*, p. 75.

events, which carried potentially greater or more direct implications for America's self-interest than the China tragedy, occurred in the week of the Tiananmen massacre.<sup>111</sup> Yet it was the Tiananmen incident that drew most attention and stirred the most emotional response in American society. The blame, according to him, was to be put on the tradition of dramatizing political events in China in terms of good vs. evil in American news reporting. In the 1980s Deng had always been seen as a reformist revolutionary that adhered to the western version of modernization, to which open society and democracy are vital. Now his regime proved so repressive that Americans felt deeply upset by the contradictions between what they expected for China and what had taken place. Associating the news stories with their liberal persuasions, they could hardly "reconcile the outcome [of the Tiananmen protest] with the common understanding around which American institutions are oriented."<sup>112</sup>

By stressing Americans' perplexity over China's failure to meet their moral criteria, Madsen exposes two sides of the myth of a U.S.-China "special relationship," respectively presented by the media and Congress. In the media coverage of the Tiananmen protest the theme of "democratization" connoted *the reformist agenda* that Americans thought Chinese were bound to follow, whereas the way the Capitol Hill responded to the events in China demonstrated the other side of the "special relationship"—a *paternalistic* attitude toward China. These two sides did not stand in tension with each other. Instead, America's paternalistic approach to China was always ready to make up for the inadequacies of its self-imposed reformist mission. In

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<sup>111</sup> These events included Ayatollah Khomeini's death and Poland's first free election. See Madsen, *China and the American Dream*, p. 5.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

the case of 1989, the Congressional leaders brought up economic sanctions when they found the Chinese government unwilling to embrace the media's vision for democratization.

It was remarkable that the process through which the paternalistic attitude emerged in American Congress corresponded with the development of events at Tiananmen. First, the Congressional leaders came to identify the nature of the Tiananmen protests as a Chinese people's quest for democracy, press freedom, and other basic human rights since late May, a period when the media began to voice their faith in the strength of Chinese democracy in its struggle against a communist dictatorship. On May 16<sup>th</sup>, Congresswomen Barbara Kennelley, in introducing her resolution supporting the Tiananmen protesters, identified the Chinese quest for democracy with America's past. "Do we in the United States not remember our own struggles for greater democracy, our own movements for civil and equal rights?" she asked. Then she interpreted the necessity of supporting the Chinese liberals,

"These students hold signs bearing the quotes or near quotes of great Americans—'Give me democracy or give me death' and 'I have a dream.' These students are the future leaders of China—the leaders with whom our children will engage in diplomatic relations."<sup>113</sup>

Whereas the army shattered the presumed Chinese democratic dream, Congress then reiterated its unyielding backing of the protesters. Punishing China's military and protecting potential victims to Deng's regime became its immediate priority, for this could show America's commitment to Chinese democracy. They were included in the resolutions passed in Congress in late June and early July 1989. The proposal to

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<sup>113</sup> *Congressional Record* (CR) 135 (May 24, 1989): H10089. <http://heinonline.org.libproxy.temple.edu> (accessed March 1<sup>st</sup>- 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010).

protect the Chinese students in the U.S. at the time and the suspension of transfers of military technologies to China simply carried a symbolic meaning. Notably, however, Congress focused on the very subjects of the news coverage in its effort to push the Executive to address these issues. With the students portrayed as heroes under the news' spotlight and the military led by Deng and other Zhongnanhai hardliners the culprits for the final tragedy, the media helped Congress identify who was to be supported and who to be sanctioned.

At the same time, the American media helped cultivate emotional ties between the Chinese and American people. On June 6<sup>th</sup> Congressman Bill Green, a liberal Democrat of New York State, made it explicit that “the hours of television, the many interviews, [and] the reports in newspaper made Americans identify with the people in Beijing and elsewhere in China.”<sup>114</sup> Green's remark was not necessarily designed to strike a rhetorical chord. It demonstrated a tendency of the Congressional leaders to identify with the media perspective on America's approach to China in the post-Tiananmen era. Since late May they came to share the media's conception of the Tiananmen protest as part of the democratization movement sweeping communist and totalitarian regimes. Plenty of speeches in Congress alluded to certain democratic movements that were happening or had happened around the globe. Even though bloody suppression had taken place at Tiananmen, Congressional leaders showed no inclination to admit that China was diverging from that world trend. Whereas the media emphasized the democratic ideal as an enduring legacy left by the Tiananmen

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<sup>114</sup> CR 135 (June 6, 1989): H11055.

protesters, they claimed that China's change in favor of democracy lay in the future. Their arguments came down to Chinese people's commitment to democracy, which the media regarded as essential to the protesters' moral integrity. It was frequently suggested that the strength of the students' democratic ideal would outlast the physical power of the government and army. Typically, Senator James Sasser proclaimed that

“Mao Zedong has taught that power comes out of the barrel of a gun, and China's hardline leaders are trying to follow in that tradition. But the fact is that the student demonstrators across China are teaching their elders a far more profound lesson: that power comes from the strength of an idea—and that power comes from the courage of people who are willing to stand up for freedoms they believe in.”<sup>115</sup>

Borrowing the word “Mandate of Heaven,” which had been used by the *Washington Post* in an analysis of the liberalism's inevitable triumph in China,<sup>116</sup>

Senator Jesse Helms argued for the economic sanctions legislation he introduced on June 8<sup>th</sup>. In his words,

“The Communist regime, the present regime in China, has lost its mandate of the people, or as Confucius says, the mandate of heaven. . . . . [A] legitimate government is one that people follow freely because it meets the criteria set by the Heaven, as exemplified by Confucius. . . . . [But] the ruthless brutality which the world has witnessed during the past several days demonstrates clearly that the Communist regime in China has lost its mandate, and we must be prepared to support those elements in China which are working to restore traditional morals and traditional freedom.”<sup>117</sup>

It was the very assumption that the Chinese needed America's help to overthrow the illegitimate government that justified Helms's legislation. Thereby he advocated economic sanctions as the primary means to encourage those positive elements to change China. His legislation would have reduced U.S.-China trade to the 1970s

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<sup>115</sup> CR 135 (June 8, 1989): S11376-77.

<sup>116</sup> See Charles Krauthammer, “Losing the Mandate of Heaven,” *The Washington Post*, May 26, 1989, Final Ed., p. A23.

<sup>117</sup> CR 135 (June 8, 1989): S11357.



levels.<sup>118</sup> It meant that China would lack the basic technology and foreign finance to develop its nascent market economy. This legislation was partly based on Senator Paul Simon's previous assumption that the Chinese needed "Western assistance, trade, and expertise in order to climb out of the poverty and hopelessness they ha[d] experienced for so long." In his view, the moderate elements in China were strong enough to pressure conservative CCP leaders to succumb to America's economic sanctions. Thus, "putting the United States-China relationship on hold, and encouraging our friends to do the likewise, will strengthen the moderates' hand over the long haul." Senator Simon did not specify the influence of Chinese moderates and the way they would put China on the path of democratization. But his particular fondness for Chinese democracy seemed to have intensified along with the belief that Chinese efforts at modernization were linked with American aid. His commitment to China's democracy, as he himself stated, came from the missionary background of his family.<sup>119</sup> His invocation of economic sanctions in response to the Tiananmen incident echoed America's belief over the period of the Boxer Rebellion that Chinese respected only force.<sup>120</sup> The essence of Americans' paternalistic approach to China remained unchanged nine decades later. With direct intervention in Chinese affairs inconceivable now, they perceived economic sanctions as equally able to force China to change its domestic agenda.

Up to this point, Congress had laid out the ideological justifications for its hard-line approach to the Tiananmen massacre. Rhetorically at least, Bush shared one

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<sup>118</sup> Eric Hyer, "The United States' Response to Tiananmen Massacre," *Conflict* 11, 3 (1991), p. 174.

<sup>119</sup> *CR* 135 (June 6, 1989): S10876.

<sup>120</sup> For America's response to the Boxer Rebellion, see Hunt, *A Special Relationship*, p. 197.

underlying assumption that China was destined to follow America's democratic model.

His maneuvers behind the scenes to restore the bilateral relationship, which drew on the old style of secret diplomacy, were political rather than ideological in nature.

Ideologically he was concerned about the damage of economic sanctions to China's progress toward democracy. As he put it,

“[T]he commercial contacts between our countries (China and America) had helped lead to the quest for more freedom. If people have commercial incentives, whether it is in China or in other totalitarian systems, the move to democracy becomes inexorable.”<sup>121</sup>

Apparently, economic sanctions were not on Bush's agenda since he hoped to see China move toward democracy in the long run. In this regard, he shared Congress's faith in China's change toward democracy in the end. Yet, tactically, he was equally concerned that Congressional overreaction would provoke Chinese leaders. Thus, in a June 6<sup>th</sup> press conference he took the initiative to lay out several measures to punish China, which included “the suspension of military contacts, technology transfers, and a sympathetic review of requests by Chinese students studying in the United States to extend their stays to avoid going back to China.”<sup>122</sup> By doing so, Bush aimed to appease the American public and cultivate favorable views in Congress on his foreign policy. For this reason, he arranged a secret Beijing trip of National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft to inform Deng of his benevolent intent behind the apparently tough posture. As Scowcroft told Deng, the president was determined to secure the Chinese leaders' cooperation in managing the domestic opinions concerning his China policy,

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<sup>121</sup> Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 89.

<sup>122</sup> Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, p. 67.

in which maintaining the trade relationship was a key component.<sup>123</sup>

“The terrible tragedy of Tiananmen,” as Bush’s Secretary of State Baker perceived it, “was a classic demonstration of a powerful new phenomenon: the ability of the global communications revolution to drive policy.”<sup>124</sup> In this light, all Bush did was to prevent the administration being driven by global media. Specifically, he spared no efforts to minimize the deleterious effects of the sensational images of the Tiananmen massacre on the U.S.-China relationship. The print media’s activities were less visible than the television media during the Tiananmen protest, yet the implications of their news coverage were more profound. Among other things, it helped reveal the deep-rooted ideological tension between China and the U.S. Because it constantly emphasized the students’ protest as a democratic cause comparable to the democratization that the world had witnessed in the 1980s, the American public’s expectation was raised so high that the tragic outcome on June 4<sup>th</sup>, presented by the television media, was extremely unacceptable. And it rendered the image of the Chinese Communist regime repugnant to them.

For this reason, the Tiananmen massacre rendered the liberal ideology prevalent in U.S. domestic politics a potentially destabilizing factor in U.S.-China relations in the years to come. With the images of the Tiananmen massacre a clear memory in Americans’ minds, any social group can claim to defend American moral values by attacking China’s human rights records. This is particularly the case after the Cold War, when Moscow no longer poses a geopolitical threat to U.S. interests in the way it

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<sup>123</sup> This the message Scowcroft conveyed to Deng himself. See Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 108.

<sup>124</sup> Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, p. 103.

formerly did. For any pragmatic politicians, the promotion of democratic ideas and morals in China can be an effective method for gaining political support.<sup>125</sup> This kind of political pragmatism can deepen mutual misperceptions between Washington and Beijing. In the post-Tiananmen era, China's inactivity in improving its human rights record presents a moral challenge to the U.S. codes of conduct in the international community, whereas the Chinese are apt to view America's critique on the China's human rights as an attempt to resume imperialist policies from which China suffered in the past.<sup>126</sup> Policy makers can only finesse the ideological divergence rather than solve it in managing U.S.-China relations. There involves the moral dilemma that American foreign policy has suffered in history. Media did not create, but rather stirred it up once again.

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<sup>125</sup> David Lampton, *Same Bed, Different Dreams: Managing U.S.-China Relations 1989-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 259.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

## CHAPTER 5

### EPILOGUE: THE MORAL DILEMMA OF LIBERALISM IN U.S. CHINA POLICY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Time and again the U.S. was troubled by the dilemma: Could Washington consider Beijing as a geostrategic partner or as a test of American wisdom and morality? The crux of the problem is that geopolitical self-interests cannot be used to justify their moral integrity which, in turn, is a requisite for their morale in the conduct of foreign policy. In the historical light, the moral dilemma of America's China policy lies in the tension between means and ends. One significant objective of American foreign policy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—the spread of democracy—was the product of its continuous process of nation-building. In a way, the American nation constituted itself as a universal example and a driving force for an open-ended process to achieve its “manifest destiny” in the world.<sup>127</sup> This ideology directly ran counter to the limits of the *state* as a political entity. The state enforces order; ideology spreads the vision for order. When that vision cannot be brought into reality in the way a blueprint is transformed into a project, domestic discontent will tend to undermine the state's legitimacy. This happens when ideology spreads beyond the state's power. A state may become overstretched in this scenario, inasmuch as domestic dissenters will undermine its power basis.

In this way, China has frequently showcased the limits of America's national power. Even though the American army landed on China's soil in 1900, its

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<sup>127</sup> Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), p. 3.

government failed to shape the political course of China. Even when Chungking was all but completely dependent on Washington for its survival during WWII, Washington felt unable to manage the political process of Nationalist China. These uneasy experiences between America and China traumatized publics in both countries' domestic. Psychologically, the U.S. was hurt even more in that its liberal ideology was repeatedly challenged by the state power's failure to realize the national vision.

The international media globalizes the influence of America's liberal ideology. But its power has not been that omnipresent. George F. Kennan, one of the most prominent American thinkers and policy makers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sought to educate the public about the reality of power politics in international relations before the advent of global media.<sup>128</sup> To the American public, however, a pessimistic evaluation of international relations goes against the grain of U.S. national identity, which dictates the pursuit of a universal democratic peace as a desirable end for both America and the world. An alternative method for Americans to grasp power politics, therefore, is to develop a new category to encompass its democratic ideal as a form of national power. In this regard, Joseph Nye's idea of "soft power," which refers to an ability to fulfill American interests by persuasion rather than coercion, by projecting good images of America rather than by the use or threat of military force or economic sanction, is an intellectual innovation.<sup>129</sup> It relates America's domestic aspiration of shaping the world in its own image to a means in pursuit of power. Conceivably, when

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<sup>128</sup> George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy* Expanded Ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>129</sup> Joseph Nye first raises the concept of soft power his earlier work, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990). The recent elaboration is *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

power becomes soft, it will operate in more ambiguous and justifiable ways to serve Americans' self-interests. Reconciling America's self-interests to its self-image as a guardian of the welfare of international community, the idea of soft power avoids provoking Americans to critically think about the myth of their national identity. It is prudent for America to live with a world with different and divergent understandings of democracy and its relationship to peace. It is equally desirable to conduct foreign policy in ways that enhance Americans' national identity.

So far as the U.S.-China relationship is concerned, encouraging Chinese liberal reformist elements can help reduce unnecessary hostility caused by the Chinese anxiety for self-assertion in recent decades. However, the U.S. public and decision makers should resist the temptation to view these efforts as the mission for which U.S. foreign policy is destined to fulfill. Their sensitivity to the proportion between the rate of change in China and American interests is a requisite for the long-term stability of U.S.-China relations. To this end, they need to keep a close eye on China's social and economic developments, while judging their implications for democracy in the Chinese cultural context.<sup>130</sup>

China also needs to make effort to accommodate America's liberal thinking. After all, Americans will not reverse their liberal mindset to embrace China's totalitarianism. Recently, Chinese scholars have come to grips with the liberal ideology in American foreign policy. Increasingly they tend to regard liberalism as an intellectual strand in

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<sup>130</sup> Sinologist Paul Cohen once cautioned Americans not to impose such western definitions as "progress" and "modernity" on China, since the social scientists' interpretations of them cannot avoid being influenced by particular ideologies. See Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 153-154.

its own rights, rather than a pretext for what they saw in the past as American imperialists' exploitive purposes.<sup>131</sup> Yet there are more to be done. Among other things, China's political reform can benefit the bilateral relationship with the U.S. If Chinese liberals can use the prevalence of liberalism in America to the advantage of China's political reform, Americans will be spared from the ordeal of the moral dilemma of liberalism.

The American media can play a positive role in setting agenda for U.S. leaders and Chinese liberal reformers simultaneously. Free from the wishful thinking of what China *ought* to be, American media will be able to focus on what China *actually* is, thereby more capable of helping American leaders understand to which extent China is different from the U.S. In parallel, Chinese liberals and political reformers can learn Washington's considerations by analyzing the news frames in American media coverage of China. Indeed, this will be vital to their efforts to elicit Washington's support for their democratic cause. And this is equally the way American media act as an agent of the soft power to change other countries in ways favorable to American interests.

Thus, for both U.S. leaders and Chinese liberals, the American media's performance in the Tiananmen incident is a subject that is worth further inquiry. My project is designed to analyze their role as a transmitter of liberal ideology. Specifically, it critiques the way it transmitted the liberal messages from China to

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<sup>131</sup> The important Chinese studies on the liberal ideology in U.S. foreign policy include Ren Xiao, *Ziyoushuyi yu meiguo duiwai zhengce* (Liberalism and U.S. Foreign Policy) (Shanghai: Sanlian Publisher, 2005) and Wang Li-xin, *Yishixingtai yu meiguo duiwai zhengce: yi ershi shiji zhongmeiguanxi weili* (Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy: U.S.-China Relations in the Twentieth-Century as A Case Study) (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007).



America, that is, the news framing tactics. The media agents should not be blamed for the final tragedy, even though their unanimous sympathetic had given pretext to the CCP hard-liners to justify their harsh treatment of the protesters. They were simply overburdened with the task of creating history. During the protest, they shuttled back and forth through the protesting crowds and shared their feelings, while grappling with large amount of information to weave them into coherent news stories. Their full exposure to the protesters, to be sure, deprived them of the detachment from the Tiananmen stories themselves. They might have been too occupied with the plot to reflect over their writings. It was in this course that their intrinsic liberal ideology came into play. Reinforced by the commentators in America, that ideology was conveyed to the informed audience who kept a close eye on foreign affairs. It turned out that these men and women who constituted the source of public opinion with respect to the making of U.S. foreign policy were caught in a larger historical current, which is defined as the pattern of interaction revolving around the myth of “special relationship.” To dispel that myth without damaging the bilateral relations, Americans need to learn to think in Chinese terms while Chinese are working to democratize their country and make it more familiar to what Americans tend to think. Only by mutual endeavors can we bridge the gap between the reality and imaginations.

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