Three Essays on 8964

不自由
毋宁死

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PREFACE

Collected here are three essays I wrote, over the course of five, six years, on the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the 1989 Democracy Movement in China. I am, personally, comfortable calling all of these essays in philosophy—but this, I acknowledge, is very much a consequence of my own idiosyncratic conception of what philosophy is, or can be. No doubt, for many, these essays will not be recognizable as such, as philosophy. Other labels (e.g. historical analysis, social theory, autofiction, autotheory, memoir) might well seem more appropriate—but I am ultimately not too concerned with the rectification of names—or rather, I am only so concerned insofar as I am concerned with the future of philosophy, to the extent that I am convinced that these debates reflect a sort of self-limitation, on the part of academic philosophy, of its own possibilities. Call these essays what you wish, then—they are, in any event, artifacts of my thinking about my life and my world, about the politics of memory and mythology, and the value and legitimacy of revolution, violence, and democracy.

In the pages to follow, I make no secret of my personal connection, interest, and stake in this event. 8964 is an event that forms a kind of horizon for my life, and that of my family’s, shaping, from the background, sometimes distally, sometimes directly, every detail of our every day. In fact, not only do I make no secret of this connection; I make it a core goal of mine in what follows to center these connections, interests, and stakes, so as to speak of them, not as an abstracted, impersonal, academic “one” but as a concrete, personal “I”. I do this, not only because I find it to be more honest, but also because I find it more fruitful for thought. There is, I believe, an internal relation binding philosophy (or thought more generally) to autobiography—and as Nietzsche astutely observed, this is a relation that has been and remains largely repressed within philosophical practice. The philosophical posture is one inclined to avoid the question of its own occasions and origins—though, this is, perhaps, only natural. Philosophy operates on the order of thoughts, of reason and its necessities—and the question of what *occasions*, what spurs philosophy, from its own perspective, will naturally appear as a contingent matter of history and autobiography.

This naturalness is why Nietzsche has been so important for me as a voice of conscience—jolting me awake, at just the moments at which I find myself slipping into slumber. As he writes:

> It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy up till now has consisted of—namely, the confession of its originator, and a species of involuntary and unconscious autobiography; and moreover that the moral (or immoral) purpose in every philosophy has constituted the true vital germ out of which the entire plant has always grown.

Nietzsche reminds me here that the necessity of sincerity with respect to the question of the occasion of thought follows in the interest of preserving the essential or rightful *ethical* animus of thought. For when and to the extent that it is *life* that calls upon me to think, thinking without acknowledging the occasions of life which called thought forth is to threaten to empty thought of its value for life and condemn it to idleness. The *motivations* for thought in life are not identical with the *reasons* for thought in life—if they were so identical, there would be no reason for thought—but when we lose sight of the sites of thought, and lose sight thus of the fact that what compelled us to thought were the problems which we encountered as we lived our lives as flesh and blood human beings in a concrete situation among other flesh and blood human beings, we risk degrading thought into a pointless exercise of the study; we risk forgetting, that is, that it had been *for* something or someone that we had been thinking; and in so doing, we risk not only being simply misled in our thinking; we risk making a phantom or fantasy of our work—to risk, as it were, ghosting our own writing and our own voice.[1]

To my mind, De Beauvoir, Cavell, Kierkegaard, Rousseau, and Nietzsche stand apart as exceptions to this rule of repression, as exemplars of what might become possible for philosophy, when its kinship with autobiography is acknowledged and affirmed. With these essays, then, I see myself, humbly, as carrying on this tradition of thinking, whereby this practice of reflecting upon some of our more fundamental ideas about ourselves and the world (call it philosophy) unfolds, as a sort of two-step, side-by-side, with first-personal recollections and reflections upon one's own lived experience in the world (call it autobiography).

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[1] I borrow this image of ghostwriting from Veena Das, who writes in Life and Words of the necessity of ethnography to stay in "touch with life"—and speaks of the words of ethnographers as often having a spectral quality of having, as it were, been authored by a transparent eyeball of retrospection. As a mere haunting of something it takes to be already past, such writing is unable to touch that about which speaks and is, Das implies, therefore unable to move it or change it either. (93) A ghost, we might say, has unfinished business but, being merely spectral, is also constitutively unable to finish its business.

I have decided to arrange these pieces in chronological order. "Remembering to Remember" is a piece I wrote on the eve of the thirtieth anniversary of the Massacre. "Of Hope and Bloodshed" is a piece I wrote a year later, as I began to dig deeper into the historical details surrounding the event. "On Death and Liberty" is then a piece I wrote four years later, on the eve of the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Massacre.

In dedication to liberation movements everywhere.

No one is free until everyone is free.

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REMEMBERING TO REMEMBER

1.

Thirty years ago, my father and my mother were twenty-five. They had recently graduated from university, gotten married, and were both working in policy research institutes in Beijing. My uncle, who was with them that night, had just graduated high school. Like almost everyone they knew, they had all been embattled in the protests at Tiananmen for well over two months. The early days of the protests, they tell me, brimmed with hope and excitement. There are stories from these days of my father dancing to disco on the roof of a truck, shouting highly creative obscenities at named and unnamed officials imagined to be inside the Great Hall of the People. My father denies these allegations, but I feel they are too in character to be false.

Over the weeks, the students and the politicians became increasingly entrenched in their respective positions, and the political situation became increasingly tense—martial law was declared on May 20th, and on May 24th an initial attempt at the military occupation of the city had been thwarted by tens of thousands of civilian protesters. Military intervention was thus already known to be inevitable—what was unknown was what military intervention would ultimately amount to—but the students, by then, were not going to back down. Millions of civilians and union workers across the nation had joined their forces. The protests roared on. The hunger strikes continued. The occupation persisted.

On June 3rd, the state-run news channel broadcast a message warning people to stay at home, implying imminent military action. The effect of the warning was, unsurprisingly, the exact opposite. The next day, tens of thousands of brave Beijingers—the young and the old alike, students, teachers, workers, mothers, fathers, grandparents—took to the streets as they did weeks ago to stand down the incoming army.

That night, my parents, along with my father's best friend and my uncle, marched down Chang'an Avenue towards steadily approaching tanks in the distance. When they came within fifty meters of the tanks, the frontlines of both sides ground slowly to a halt. A voice from within the ranks of the protestors shouted, "坐下！坐下！"—sit down! sit down!— and so, they sat. They sat there—high with courage, but no doubt also deep in fear—and they stared down the massively still and silent tanks. In my reconstructions of this scene, I can't help but imagine that they were trying, as it were, to stare *through* the tanks, to the men sitting inside those massive machines of war, attempting to communicate a message that was equal parts provocation and plea, something to the effect of: "Surely you, at least, will not murder your own."

Soon thereafter, any and all remaining convictions, if there were any, were violently dispelled by canisters of tear gas. Amidst the waves of fear and panic, my father grabbed my mothers hand and headed towards the high wall that lined the left side of the Avenue, pushed her over the wall, and using a bicycle seat as a step, flipped himself over. When he got up, his eyes were burning with tears. As he came to his senses, he was suddenly consumed by the realization that he did not know where his brother was. He and my mother decided thus to stay, to find my uncle before they would go home. Later, when the streets settled, uncannily, once more into silence, my parents walked out back onto Chang'an Avenue. Soon they found my uncle standing on the side of the street, broken and shivering. When he saw my father, all he could do was repeat, "哥，死人了，死人了。" —Brother, they are dead, they are dead. The tanks were still there, sitting dumbly in silence in the middle of the street—only now, they had been stained with the stench of blood and fuel. Around them were corpses of students—bloody and unrecognizable, but still marked with banners and bandanas—strewn across the pavement, like so many pieces of trash.

Under the grey of the lightening morning, my parents and my uncle biked all the way home, an hour's trip of silence back to Haidian. That morning, my mother bought out all the white sheets from the local fabric store, and with red paint, she wrote poems across them that have since become too painful and hateful to remember. My parents then went back out into the streets, and one by one, they cast the poems out of windows in grief and powerless fury and lined an entire street with bloody billowing messages of mourning.

2.

The other night my father described this day as a day more important than his birthday. It was the day that brought an end to his youth, the day he died as a boy—the day when he, to the extent that he could again reclaim life, was reborn as a man. This was a day that altered the course of his life irrevocably. It led him and my mother to leave their country, which for them had then been transformed from their home, the natural setting of all their previous hopes and aspirations, into a land barren and hostile, unlivable and unrecognizable. Last night, as is now tradition, my father stayed up and wrote deep into the night. I have translated the piece below, and present it with misgivings:

那天，
30年前的那一天。
让我知道什么是真正的可怕；
一股被自己的勇敢吓哭了的害怕；一阵险些酿成大祸的后怕。
那天，
30年前的那一天。
让我毅然放弃了之前的追求与希望；
之后的努力与奋斗，是为了一个普通人的尊严和快乐地活着。
那天,
30年前的那一天。

从此我开始爱惜生命，年轻的，嫩绿的，
静静地微笑着躺着的走了的生命。

我下定决心，如果能延续生命，他们一定
是比爸爸更理性与思考的生命。

那天，

30年前的那一天。

让我从此断然远离政治与权力，甚至痛恨
任何意识形态与说教；

对待权力和名望，是从此的鄙视与捉弄，不
管它属于个人集体还是民族国家；

那天，

30年前的那一天。

不仅给生机勃勃的80年代划上了句号，

从此，务实成了国人的心照不宣，留恋之
余，似乎掺着一丝苦笑的欣慰。

那天，

30年前的那一天。

那是我人生至此，最重要的一天，一
辈子的纪念日；

因为它让我之前的生活与理想哑然而止，之
后是未知与从头再来。

一晃30年，

那天，那一天，你历历在目。

That day,

That day thirty years ago,

Taught me what true terror is;

A terror that made me fear my own courage; a terror that only by chance did not become total.

That day,

That day thirty years ago,

I resolved to abandon hope and aspiration;

My struggles from then on would merely be for the dignity and happiness that belongs to the life of an ordinary man.

That day,

That day thirty years ago.

From then on, I learned to value life, the youthful, verdant life of those who passed away, sleeping with quiet smiles.

I promised myself that if life is to continue, theirs would be a life more rational than that of their father’s.

That day,

That day thirty years ago,

Tore me abruptly away from power and politics; it instilled in me a deep hatred of ideology and didactics;

From then on, power and eminence became nothing more than contemptible games, regardless of whether it belongs to individuals, peoples or nations.

That day,

That day thirty years ago,

Did not just draw the exuberance of the eighties to a close, From then on, the hearts of our people became filled only with the day-to-day—though whatever remnant traces of nostalgia for the past seem also forever entangled with the comforts of an ironic smile.

That day,

That day thirty years ago,

Remains to this day the most important day of my life, a day that will be memorialized for the rest of my life;

It marks the mute end of the life and ideals of my past—everything after it, is an attempt to begin anew within the unknown.

Thirty years passed like a flash

But that day, that one day, you remain daily before my eyes.

3.

This morning, before I decided to write this, I was reading a Times article entitled “Thirty Years After Tiananmen: Someone Always Remembers”. I was struck immediately by the opening question of the article: “In China, the Tiananmen Square massacre is not taught in any textbook, aired on any television channel or marked by any monument. But 30 years on, it remains vivid in the subconscious of the People’s Republic. Why?”

I was stopped short because—is this true? Has this memory managed to survive after all these years? Is the massacre really still alive within the collective memories of the Chinese people? My experience, admittedly limited, is unable to answer any of these questions in the affirmative. The events of June Fourth, 1989 are not vivid in the "collective subconscious" of the Chinese people—whatever that is supposed to mean. It of course still profoundly affects the lives of the majority of Chinese people, insofar as the history of the PRC since 1989—everything from the feverish government-led focus on pragmatic economic development, the hosting of the Olympics, internet censorship, to the ongoing bouts of strange and paranoiac policing of Chinese society and culture—is everywhere shaped, whether implicitly or explicitly, by the events of that night. That this is so, however, is by no means obvious for public consciousness.

But my deeper disagreement with the article comes from its apparent suggestion that the official erasure of history and the political enforcement of ignorance and silence is the only factor responsible for this collective forgetting. Active policing is indeed one of the mechanisms of controlling historical memory and discourse about 6/4, but to think that it is the only or even the primary mechanism is to vastly underestimate the practiced intelligence and efficacy of the Chinese government's capacities for shaping public consciousness.

What is most remarkable—and troubling—about the general attitude of contemporary Chinese people towards its recent history, most notably with regards to the Mao era and 6/4, is apathy, not ignorance. There is, of course, a complicated relationship here between apathy and ignorance—if you can't know, how should you care?—but what I want to stress is that it was part of the CCP's official strategy after 1989 to create an environment in which remembering, and indeed, political concerns more generally, seemed increasingly beside the point. Indeed, this strategy was in fact explicitly and publicly laid out just five days after the massacre. In Deng's speech on June 9th, 1989, he laid down his vision for how he wanted China and the Party to move forward in the wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre—a vision that has been carried out with remarkable faithfulness over the past thirty years. In his speech, Deng repeatedly called for "openness", and of course, he meant here a very specific kind of openness. He was reaffirming, with his speech, his original reformist line of economic and technological liberalization without political liberalization. In his vision, the future of China was determined by the ability of the Party to deliver such bountiful economic success that the old moral and political arguments that motivated movements like 1989 would be transformed within the new environment into expressions of naive idealism—in short, the strategy was, as it were, to put Chinese people's money where their mouths were. And in time, this strategy, coupled with the active policing of history and discourse, proved to be incredibly successful: it not only erased knowledge, but it uprooted even the very motivation for acquiring knowledge for nearly everyone who was not directly personally involved in those historical events. My sense is that, in reality, at this point, the memory of 6/4 is kept alive only by isolated personal or familial rituals of mourning, and only by a fairly small number of individuals who are at best loosely linked to one another.

But what is the point of remembering 6/4 anyway?—To understand the government we live under, for indeed no understanding of the CCP is complete without this memory.—But so what if we do have such an understanding? What if anything can we do with it?—And this, indeed, is the truly hard and important question. What should we do with the understanding that the CCP was—and likely remains to be, if pressured—a government capable of slaughtering its own students for the sake of its own grip on power? What concrete lines of action and criticism ought this lead us to? What significance, if any, should the material successes of the government over the past three decades possess in the face of this understanding, and if so, in what ways and to what extent? What should we do with our knowledge, if we have learned to recall and reclaim it?

I do not know the answers to these questions. Carl Jung once remarked that today has significance only insofar as it stands between yesterday and tomorrow. Well, today—this day—then seems to be a moment that has been strangled of its significance: for it is a moment that stands between an uprooted past and a future that, from most perspectives, seems to bear ever less relevance to it. This does not mean, of course, that today is an insignificant day. It means simply that the significance of today is merely at present indeterminate—that within this patchy, ambiguous horizon of amnesia, erasure, and mourning, the futural meanings of our inheritance remain at present *open* for determination. In other words, there is, therefore, a *project* of determining the significance of today—and the first step in this direction lies in the simple but not so simple task of remembering to remember.

OF HOPE AND BLOODSHED: ON THE FAILURE OF THE 1989 DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN CHINA

1.

A puzzle I return to repeatedly when reflecting on the democracy movement that swept through China in the spring of 1989 is why, of all the revolutionary movements that erupted across the Soviet Bloc during those turbulent years, it alone was the one to fail. The 89' Democracy Movement (*bajiuminyun* 八九民运) was the fuse that ignited the chain of revolutionary democratic movements which, in just a few years time, ultimately exploded the Soviet Bloc and reorganized the geopolitical landscape of much of the world into more or less the form we find it today. The puzzle is why it—despite being arguably one of the most popular, powerful, and certainly one of the most creative, dynamic, and inspiring non-violent democratic movements of the last century—was the paradoxical exception.

Of course, from a certain perspective, there is no puzzle, only a problem of tracing the causal trajectories that led to the events on the night of June 4th. The answer to our “puzzle” is written in the blood that stains the streets of Beijing to this day, and it reads: power, terror, and monstrous violence. The 89’ Democracy Movement was crushed by the brute force that the Chinese Communist Party had brought down upon it, and our answer is just that the CCP was capable of being a government that slaughters its people for the sake of its grip on power—capable, both in the sense that, unlike some other Soviet nations at the time, it had the support of its military, and in the sense that, ultimately, the party and its leaders found it in their conscience to use militarized violence against those who they were, at least nominally, supposed to protect and serve.

A close examination of the historical details, however, reveals a more complicated, and indeed puzzling picture.

The picture that will emerge once we delve back into the historical details will turn out to contrast sharply with the gloss I offered just now, wherein responsibility for the violence of June 4th can be cleanly and completely attributed to the CCP. A closer look will, indeed, put us face-to-face before a somewhat disquieting suggestion: that one reason why the 89’ Democracy Movement ended in a bloodbath was, perhaps, that the student leaders of the 89’ Democracy Movement hoped it would end that way. As I will argue, over the course of the protests, the student leaders eventually came to believe that martyring the students would be in their strategic interests—as both a way of inciting further domestic upheaval and rallying international support—and as a result, certain student leaders were in fact ushering the government leaders into a position where violence would appear to them to be the only viable move. However, here as elsewhere, intention operates and can only be made effective in the context of a concrete social structure. And in this case, the radical student leaders were able to push the movement in this direction, in accordance to their intentions, only as a function of the hierarchical structure of the internal organization of the movement itself. And so, if this is right, then the 89' Democracy Movement will have to be seen as less non-violent, less innocent, and indeed, less democratic than often supposed. This will then throw us back before the opening question of my essay, to the question of speculative history. What would have been borne of the movement, had it succeeded in bringing about the CCP's downfall? In that case, would the Democratic Movement have succeeded? What kind of society might have been founded in the wake of that movement?

The answer I will suggest will be: maybe only nominally, because maybe the society it would have founded would have been no more democratic than the one we see in China today. Indeed, as I will suggest, maybe, given the elitist orientations of the Movement's self-conception, and its hierarchical internal constitution, the government it would have founded would ultimately likely not have been an especially democratic one. If this is right, then in some sense, the failure of the Movement was not merely the result of external forces. Its failure was rather, at least in part, immanent to the Movement itself.

2.

In his masterful study of the transformations that Chinese society experienced in response to the dramatic sociopolitical and economic reforms of the 1980s, *The Ordinary and the Extraordinary*, the anthropologist Frank N. Pieke remarks that, ultimately, what the 89 Democracy Movement did was bring out "into the open a long-term crisis of the discursive underpinnings of Chinese society, dating back at least to the Cultural Revolution." (57) Pieke's central insight here is that the 89' Democracy Movement must be understood as rooted not only in the endemic material crises engendered by the CCP's attempts to affect widespread economic reform, but also in a host of ethical or ideological crises that emerged in the wake of the collapse of the Maoist state socialist form of life.

At the turn of the 1980s, China was still reeling from the decade-long nightmare of the Cultural Revolution. Leaving historical details aside, what matters for the purposes of this essay is that this was a decade of *total* upheaval. Think violent political purges of the classical Soviet sort, but everywhere, all the time, in every social domain—not just in the Party, but in offices, schools, and even within families. The result was the mass disintegration of pre-existing social bonds and economic and political structures, which affected everyone in China from the peasantry to the highest echelons of the CCP. It is no exaggeration to say that, during the decade following Mao's speech in May 1966, the entire population of China lived in a constant state of madness, fear, and paranoia.

And then, in 1976, Mao died. The reaction of public mourning which flooded the streets with flowers and tears was immediate and spectacular, but it was essentially haunted by a shadow of ambivalence—for his death was in no small part also a relief. So long as Mao was still alive, his chosen path of total revolution could not be contradicted without great political and indeed existential cost. By the time of his death, however, no one, except perhaps a few fanatical hold outs, wanted the Cultural Revolution to go on any longer. Mao's death thus signaled the closure of this decade of madness, and the Cultural Revolution thus ended anticlimactically, quietly and unspectacularly, as though by default, alongside Mao's passing.

The damage done to Chinese society by the Cultural Revolution was grave; the decade of total upheaval had left the state of the Chinese economy, bureaucracy, education system—and even the Party itself—on the brink of collapse. The Party and the country was desperately in need of reconstruction, and the issue of how this was supposed to be done became the central point of political contention. The Party at the time was divided between the so-called conservatives, who wanted to rebuild the Party and Chinese society in its pre-Cultural Revolution image, and the so-called reformists, who believed that China—and perhaps more importantly, the CCP—could only be rebuilt by enacting deep sociopolitical and economic changes. These reformers believed that the broken and ossified bureaucracy had to be transformed and revitalized; that the economy—which not only suffered from a decade of unproductivity, but was also riddled with endemic ails, with a failing collectivized agriculture system and a mass of highly inefficient state enterprises—needed rebooting and rethinking; and above all, that the political structure of the Party needed to be redesigned—institutionalized, technocratized, decentralized—so as to prevent anything like the Cultural Revolution from ever happening again.

Eventually, the reformist faction, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, won out the power struggle. Under the leadership of Deng, in the 1980s, China and the Party embarked upon a rocky and difficult road of sociopolitical and economic transformation—a period which came to be known as "Reform and Opening Up" (改革开放).

Two main difficulties confronted the reformist Party leaders during this period. First was the powerful intraparty opposition from conservatives who not only had vested interests in planned-economies but who were also politically inclined to think that economic reform and opening up would ultimately endanger the party's political position. An effect of this opposition was that throughout the 80's one can identify repetitive cycles of reform and backlash—of *fang* (letting go) and *shou* (pulling back)—for whenever reform policies stumbled, a conservative backlash ensued, and reformers would again have to assert their policies, which, again, would naturally stumble. This resulted in frequently changing and chaotic government policy and the unsteady progress of reform, which downstream generated widespread public dissatisfaction. (Baum 5-9)

The second major difficulty the reformers confronted was the entrenched political and economic systems themselves. Consider the especially illustrative example of the *Danwei* system. One of the most remarkable achievements of the early PRC government was its ability to rapidly establish nearly total political control of the society by way of erecting a highly bureaucratized social structure through the *Danwei* or work unit system. In spite of its unassuming name, *Danweis* functioned as what might well be seen as the foundational social structuring mechanism in early PRC society. For *Danweis* in fact managed much more than an individual's work or employment. It was also the individual's only means of access to essential social services such as healthcare, housing, schooling—and indeed, with the rationing system, even food. What was distinctive about *Danweis*, however, and what enabled them to serve their foundational social structuring function, was the way they were essentially linked up with the larger political system. *Danweis* were not autonomous social institutions but were essentially an organ of the party and the government—and since every Chinese citizen was allocated into a *Danwei*, through a massive hierarchy of bureaucratic organization, each individual in the country was thus linked *directly* to the Party and the Central Government. *Danweis*, as such, functioned as a mechanism by which the Party was able to control and manage the everyday lives of all those who lived within Chinese society. As Pieke observes, "So total and so central to the party strategy to perpetuate its rule, [bureaucratization] has become more than just a rational way to coordinate the activities of different organizations… Bureaucratization has become a way of life." (60)

Marketization meant, however, that work would no longer be allocated by the state via the *Danwei* system. It is often observed that in this process of marketization, the PRC faced an ideological crisis of legitimacy, insofar as its state ideology of socialism had come under immense strain. As I have been suggesting, however, the way to interpret and substantiate this claim is by understanding it as gesturing at the way in which the transition effected by "Reform and Opening Up" was a total transition in the PRC's *form of life*.

The PRC was thus in a deep and constant state of crisis throughout this period. The crises China faced during this period were often at once material and ideological. The material crisis most often cited as the source of the social dissatisfaction that bred the 1989 movement was the widespread inflation. In the two years before the movement, inflation had caused real income and purchasing power to plummet. Food prices in urban markets rose 10% in 1987, and in 1988 prices for non-staple foods increased 28%, while in the same year prices of fresh vegetables increased 48.7%. (Baum 224) The immediate causes of these crises were spikes in demand due to widespread panic purchasing in expectation of price hikes caused by the de-controlling of prices. (Baum 234) Inflation, however, was a chronic problem during the reform period. This was primarily because the Chinese economy, prior to the 80s, had existed largely as an economy of shortages, and these shortages were dealt with through a system of rationing. Under market conditions where the system of rationing was put out of play, these shortages thus became acute. As such, inflation and the myriad associated socioeconomic woes it generated was, not unreasonably, seen by the public as the fault of the reforms issued by the Party.

Massive layoffs and pay cuts as result of labor reforms in the planned sector of the economy added to the litany of ongoing material crises in this period. The transition from an ossified and inefficient centralized economy to an increasingly market-driven economy meant that the large state-owned enterprises, which constituted just about the entirety of China's non-agricultural economic output at the time, had to undergo major overhauls. In the Chinese state enterprises set up in the early PRC period, workers were almost universally given life-long ensured employment contracts (tenure, as it were). In the eyes of the reformist politicians and state economists, these unbreakable "iron rice bowl", as they came to be called, were isolated as the principal cause of the inefficiency of state enterprises. The official line, as a result, was that it was only by "breaking the iron rice bowl" that the Chinese economy could be revitalized.

Unsurprisingly, the breaking of iron rice bowls led to massive labor unrest. (Baum 228) We should note, however, that the crisis embodied by these labor unrests was not merely a material crisis; it was also an ideological or ethical one. This is because, for the ordinary Chinese worker, "socialism" never designated an abstract political order. For them, the meaning of socialism was always first and foremost indexed to the benefits they derived from the state, to this social order which staked its essential claim to power and legitimacy on the ground that it benefited the lives of the commonfolk. In this sense, it might be said that the meaning of socialism was, for these workers, nothing other than their "iron rice bowls" themselves—and that by breaking the iron rice bowl, the reformist government risked breaking the concept of socialism for them as such.

Widespread corruption among government officials and bureaucrats in this period generated yet another flashpoint where the material and ideological crises intersected. In the period of reform, those best positioned to reap the benefits of the emerging market economy were, naturally, those who were already in positions of power in the old system. Under such conditions, political corruption is almost always bad for the economy. The result in this case was the massive concentration of wealth in the hands of a small group of individuals, which was hardly correlated with any increase in aggregate economic output. Unlike the form of political corruption in China we find exhibited in the early 2000s, which provided some kind of economic stimulation by way of its translation into purchasing power, there was so little to purchase in those days that the purchase power accrued by corruption was negligible. But above all, government corruption epitomized all that people felt was *wrong* with the reform period—from a sense of growing inequality, moral decadence, to rampant self-interest—insofar as it seemed to the public as though no one, except a handful of individuals, were benefiting from the reformist policies enacted by the Party.

The crucial final current of ideological dissatisfaction fueling the eventual emergence of the 1989 Democracy movement was the flourishing political, intellectual, and artistic freedom of the 1980's. Though, as I previously noted, reform in every domain frequently underwent cycles of *fang* and *shou*, on the whole there was more freedom for political, artistic, and intellectual expression and discussion in the PRC during this period than ever before in its history (and, indeed, arguably ever since). In many ways, this period represented a post-Mao Renaissance in China. University students, academics, and citizens suddenly had access to foreign literature, philosophy, and art. (Here I am recalled to the stories my parents would tell of their university days, shimmering memories, of huddling in dormitories, discussing politics and existentialism, poetry and sexual liberation). At last unchained from its obligation to regurgitate and reinforce state ideology, academia flourished during this period—the humanities and the social sciences, especially—and under the pressure to technocratize and enact rational socioeconomic reform, there was generous state patronage during this period for think tanks and natural and social science research institutes.

Against this background of the material crises and deep social existential unrest and disorientation, university students and intellectuals, empowered more over by a revitalized aesthetic and intellectual culture, began to articulate their dissatisfactions with the existing order—and during this time, “democracy” became the catchword of Chinese public discourse once more, just as it had been in the early 20th century. The 89’ Democracy Movement did not emerge *ex nihilo*. Democratic student activism in this period began with the 1978 Democracy Wall movement, when thousands of students and intellectuals gathered on Beijing’s Xidan avenue to plaster “big character posters” (*dazibao* 大字报) that demanded everything from greater governmental responsibility, to political transparency, to democratic participation. Over the course of the following decade, the Chinese democracy movement evolved and grew. In the scantly remembered student protests of 1986, students across China from Hefei to Shanghai and Nanjing, under the influence of the dissident Chinese intellectuals Fang Lizhi and Wang Ruowang, protested the economic inequalities generated by the reformist politics and demanded greater political liberalization—and all the while, in response to the tumultuous economic reforms that the CCP were enacting, labor unrest was boiling over across China. Thus, come 1989, the stage was set for what would become the largest and most important democracy movement in Chinese history.

3.

We turn now to the question of how and why the Tiananmen Square protests ended in violence. The first thing to note here is the existence of moderate factions on both sides who worked actively to achieve peaceful reconciliation throughout the protests. The question, framed otherwise, thus becomes how the moderate factions came to be defeated. As I will argue in this section, the answer here lies in understanding the organizational structures of the protestors and the government respectively.

The historian Richard Baum has suggested that the key here is to recognize, on the student side, that their decision making apparatus was one based upon *consensus*. (Baum 261) For what this meant was that an influential minority could, as the radical faction led by Chai Ling eventually did, come to direct the entire movement. This, Baum argues, is why despite the fact in the final days of the movement, when it gradually became clear to all those involved that a bloodbath was all but imminent, the student leader Wu'er Kaixi's counsel for immediate withdrawal from the square, which had majority support among the students, failed to direct the movement—for his proposal was simply overridden by the radical faction of the student movement, led by Chai Ling. (Baum 267)

The claim that the student movement was structured as a form of consensus politics typically takes its bearings from Wuer Kaixi's infamous rejoinder to a question posed to him by then-Premier Li Peng. When Li Peng asked Wuer Kaixi what it would take for the students to leave the square, he reportedly shot back: "If one fasting classmate refuses to leave the square, the other thousands of fasting students on the square will not leave."

It is important to notice, however, that the basis of the unity given expression here is *not* strictly speaking a matter of consensus. Consensus is, after all, a democratic concept, insofar as it is understood as an ideal discursive destination of a process of public rationality that is arrived at from a prior stage of difference. Notice by contrast, however, that for Wuer Kaixi, unity is *non-negotiable*. As he puts it, the issue of unity is one of *obedience* (服从): "On the square, it is not a matter of the minority obeying the majority, but of 99.9 percent obeying 0.1 percent."[2] This is a critical point, to which I will return.

Despite the fact that any dissenting minority could in theory co-opt the movement using this "consensus" decision-making apparatus, it is obvious that the dissenting minority capable of directing the movement in fact would have to have considerable influence and good standing within the movement as a whole. This certainly was true of the radical faction led by Chai Ling. One of the reasons for the radical factions' immense influence was that they were one of the first groups to initiate the hunger strikes, and it was largely through the moral aura of the hunger strikes that they derived their authority. As Pieke points out, the hunger strikes constituted a major turning point of the movement, where the relation between the students and the government transformed from one of *petitioning* to one of *confrontation*. As Pieke observes, what distinguishes the hunger strike as a protest tactic is that it is a "matter of all or nothing". (Pieke 205) The students' demands now became demands upon which the students were staking their lives. In this way, Pieke argues that the hunger strikes radicalized the movement and decreased the possibility of a compromise between the students and government moderates like Zhao Ziyang—and that this is why, eventually, the attempts at dialogue between moderate students and government moderates, exemplified by the negotiations made by the Dialogue Delegation, ultimately collapsed. (Pieke 201)

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[2] Zhaoqing, Geijing, and Siyuan. 1989. 【血染的风采】, "Xueran de fengcai" [Blood-stained Glory]. Hong Kong: Haiyan.

There is good evidence to suggest that the push towards radicalization, spearheaded by student leaders such as Chai Ling, was intended precisely to destroy the possibility of a peaceful resolution and to increase the likelihood of an ultimately violent confrontation. In effect, the goal here seemed to be one of altering the essence of the movement from one of reformist petitioning into one of r*evolutionary martyrdom*. Thus the infamous moment in Hinton and

Gordon's (1995) documentary *The Gates of Heavenly Peace,* when Chai Ling is recorded uttering her harrowing remark:

> What we actually are hoping for is bloodshed, the moment when the government is ready to brazenly butcher the people. Only when the Square is awash with blood will the people of China open their eyes. Only then will they really be united. But how can I explain any of this to my fellow students?

For the moment, I shall leave these words here with just a brief remark, for this is a point to which I will return more than once. But what I wish to note here is the sense of dissonance that for me precipitates out of her speech—the sense of rupture, between my senses of myth, memory, and reality—between how the 89' Democracy Movement is cast and understood in my mind or my imagination, as an exemplary instance of a non-violent movement, and the heartless political pawning of human lives that is gestured at by Chai Ling here. Howard Zinn once pointed out that it is one thing to martyr oneself, but something wholly other to martyr another; he writes, "If there *are* necessary sacrifices to be made for human progress, is it not essential to hold to the principle that those to be sacrificed must make the decision themselves? We can all decide to give up something of ours, but do we have the right to throw into the pyre the children of others, or even our own children, for a progress which is not nearly as clear or present as sickness or health, life or death?" (17)—Now of course, the violence of June 4th was not perpetrated by the radical student leaders themselves. But there is more than one way to get blood on one's hands. Pulling a trigger is one way; giving an order is a second; and knowingly leading one's comrades into a death trap—sacrificing them—for the sake of certain political goals, perhaps, is a third.

But for now, let's turn to consider the decision-making apparatus of the government.

On the eve of the protests, the moderately inclined Zhao Ziyang, who repeatedly sought to establish a non-violent resolution with the students, was officially occupying the highest post in the party power structure, as the General Secretary of the Chinese Community Party. As is well-known, however, the nominally-retired Deng Xiaoping remained then the de facto leader of the party—an arrangement which can be traced back to the establishment of a secret protocol in the 1987 Thirteenth Party Congress, which granted Deng ultimate authority and veto power in all political decisions within the Party, despite his official retirement. (Baum 218) Relevant here too was the military officials refusal to recognize Zhao as the chairman of the Military Affairs Commission (MAC) at the same congress. This denial of authority meant that Deng not only retained his position as the de facto leader of the party, but also his position as the highest civilian authority presiding over the military. (Baum 215)

After the initial attempt to recapture Beijing on May 20th failed due to the soldiers' unwillingness to open fire upon civilians, Deng's position on the MAC proved pivotal in directing the course of events towards its culminating moment of violence. On May 21st, seven senior PLA officers reportedly drafted a letter, in protest of the use of force against civilians, arguing that the PLA "belongs to the people… it should never spill the blood of the people"—with over one hundred senior PLA officers, in turn, endorsing this letter. (Baum 267) In response, however, Deng personally sought and obtained the declarations of support from the commanders of all seven greater military regions—to ensure that he could use militarized force against the protestors in the future, if he came to deem it necessary. This consolidation of loyalty was, for Deng, crucial—and it needed crucially also to be *public*—published as it was across various Party organs, the intent here was to assert his claim to and grip upon power before the public.

Deng was indeed *always* fully prepared to use force to quell the student movement. Deng had ordered 20,000 troops to be stationed near the capital as early as April 21st. For unlike Zhao, Deng felt rather little moral apprehension towards the idea of violently suppressing opposition in order to re-establish order, even when the opposition consisted of unarmed civilians—a fact that was already clearly evident in a speech Deng gave on 1986 December 30th titled "On the Problem of Present Student Disturbance" with regards to the nationwide student protests of 1986 and the prominent dissident intellectual Fang Lizhi, where he said:

> If they want to create a bloody incident, what can we do about it? We do all we can to avoid bloodshed. If not even one person dies, that is best… but the most important thing is to grasp the object of the struggle… don't worry that foreigners will say we have ruined our reputation… we must show foreigners that the political situation in China is stable.
>
> (Quoted from Baum 204-205)

These are words that make one shudder. The bottom line for Deng was clear: the “object of the struggle” was political stability and the maintenance of power. From the very beginning, Deng saw that the sheer size and diversity of the 1989 movement’s social base made it a genuine existential threat for the regime. By late May, Zhao’s repeated failures to court the moderate faction of the students—which was in part a result of the co-opting of the student movement by its radical faction—was, by Deng’s lights, justification enough for him to act. For in fact, he had long been personally convinced that militarized violence had become the only correct course of action—he had never vested much confidence in Zhao’s conciliatory response to the situation; he merely gave Zhao the benefit of the doubt. But thanks to the secret 1987 protocol and his position as the Chairman of the MAC, the decision to resort to militarized violence was fully and completely within Deng’s power. And ultimately, his will became the Party’s command.

4.

As Esherick and Wasserstrom point out in their essay, “Acting out Democracy: Political Theatre in Modern China,” it is not clear that the concept of *minzhu* (民主) informing the Movement, typically translated as “democracy,” maps cleanly onto the concepts of democracy encountered in liberal and post-liberal political philosophies of the modern European tradition.[3] An important point of divergence concerns the relation of these concepts to that of pluralism. For the classical concept, the relation of democracy to pluralism is an internal one. Since at least Mill, the idea that unity in politics must be founded, at least, upon the acceptance and acknowledgment of difference has lain at the very heart of the idea of a democratic society. The professed aim, at least, is *e pluribus unum*. Difference is here the prior and fundamental term, and unity is achieved by working with and through difference.

By contrast, Esherick and Wasserstrom argue (though they don't quite put the matter like this) that minzhu aims at unity in a way that sees no need to accommodate for difference. Thus they draw our attention to articles such as this one, published in the Chinese dissident magazine *Enlightenment* in 1979, which paints the following vision of a more *minzhu* China, post-revolution:

> The fire [of *minzhu*] will enable people completely to shake off brutality and hatred, and there will be no quarrel among them. They will share the same views and principles and have identical ideals. In lofty and harmonious unity they will produce, live, think, pioneer, and explore together. With these dynamic forces they will enrich their social life and cultivate their big earth.
>
> (Cited in Nathan 1985:6)[4]

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[3] Wasserstrom, Jeffrey N., Elizabeth J. Perry, and Joseph W. Esherick. "Acting Out Democracy: Political Theatre in Modern China." *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China: Learning from 1989*. Boulder: Westview, 1992. N. pag. Print.

[4] Nathan, Andrew J. 1985. Chinese Democracy. New

The vision articulated here is not *e pluribus unum* but simply: *unum*. The vision of a more *minzhu* China is of a more harmonious and unified China, where the people "share the same views and principles and have identical ideals."

Recall that in §3, I argued that the decision-making apparatus for the student protestors during the 89' Democracy Movement is not truly based upon consensus. Repurposing Wu'er Kaixi's words, we might say that consensus is not a matter of the 99% obeying the 1%, but, as it were, a matter of the 99% *agreeing* with the 1%. To construe the students as operating on the basis of consensus is thus to construe it as a democratically structured movement. Therefore, if this construal is false—if the decisions of the movement were not produced by a system of rational discourse among equals, but rather a hierarchical system of power—then 89' Democracy Movement would be revealed to be less structurally democratic than is often supposed.

We may furthermore observe that the priority of unity for the Movement is, ultimately, internally related to its elitism. From the outset, the 89' Democracy Movement was always first and foremost a movement led and driven by the Chinese *intelligentsia*. In and of itself, this fact does not of course make the Movement elitist. But as Esherick and Wasserstrom observe, what one finds when one reads many of the posters published during that time in support of the Movement is that what is being called for, when *minzhu* is being called for, is not that the *people's* voices should be heard in government, but more specifically that the

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York: Knopf.

intelligentsia should receive a "greater voice in national affairs." (838)

Now, the general interest of the Chinese *intelligentsia* in this case was, of course, democratic in the sense that their interest was to defend the interests of the people. Nevertheless, their elitism is manifest in their belief that they are in a position of greater *authority* with regards to the questions of what the interests of the people truly are. This specific kind of elitism, I suspect, is one that emerges out of a confluence of Marxist ideas of communist leadership and the dictatorship of the proletariat and earlier Chinese beliefs about the political roles of the *intelligentsia* in the state—as the mongrel child of two visions of elite bureaucratic rule. Either way, I believe that the practical political costs of this elitism ultimately proved to be fatal.

The scale and significance of the events of 1989 can often lead us to forget the way they were rooted in the broader background social, economic, and ideological distresses caused by the large-scale reforms that were being carried out in China in the 1980's. As pointed out earlier, however, the growing pains of this period were immense.[5] And what this means is that the real base of popular support for the 89 Democratic Movement was massive, and the dissatisfaction to which it gave voice was, in fact, shared among broad sections of the Chinese populace. And yet, throughout its life, the Movement remained primarily a *student* movement. The support of the workers, through the trade unions, was not enlisted until more than one month into the protests—and even when they joined, they were not given any leadership roles in the political organization.[6] In short, the Movement arguably failed to recognize and incorporate the multitude of voices in society that would have further strengthened it.

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[5] For a classic recounting of post-Mao Chinese politics in the 1980s, see Baum, Richard. *Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994. Print.

The failures of the Movement as a movement of democratic politics may thus be attributable to its failure to adopt what Rancière called the "presupposition of equality."[7] On Todd May's reading, the presupposition of equality is a presupposition of equal intelligence in the domain of politics; he writes, "We are, unless we are deeply damaged in some way, capable of creating meaningful lives with one another, talking with one another, understanding one another, and reasoning about ourselves and our situations. Our social and political contexts, while sometimes difficult and complex, do not involve essential mysteries that we are in principle incapable of comprehending without the assistance of a savant of some sort."[8] (7)

On May's account, a truly egalitarian, Rancièrean democratic politics should exhibit egalitarianism in at least two ways:

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[6] See Zhao, Dingxin (April 15, 2001). *The Power of Tiananmen: State-Society Relations and the 1989 Beijing Student Movement*

[7] Jacques Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy, (tr.) J. Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 17.

[8] May, Todd (2009). Democracy is Where We Make It: The Relevance of Jacques Rancière. *Symposium* 13 (1):3-21.

> “a democratic politics is one that emerges from below rather than being granted from above”; and
>
> “a democratic politics is egalitarian in what might be called a horizontal sense. That is to say that those participating in it consider one another to be equal.” (May 12)

Note that on my reconstruction, the Movement fails to some extent to meet both these criteria. Firstly, though the Movement began as a grassroots movement, it quickly generated an internal hierarchical structure and became quickly dominated by an elite group of student and academic leaders who authorized the political actions that the others obeyed and carried out. Moreover, the Movement failed to exhibit horizontal egalitarianism insofar as its intelligentsia segment assumed the authority to *speak for* everyone else in the Movement, and to the extent that the Movement failed to incorporate the working class into its ranks and its leadership.

Furthermore, as May observes, a commitment to non-violence should follow naturally from a genuine commitment to an authentically egalitarian democratic politics. (17) The basic thought here, I take it, is that if one truly recognizes the other as an equal—as a rational, dignified agent who is on the same moral and intellectual footing as oneself—then one cannot coherently see the other as deserving of violence. As I tried to show in §3, however, there is evidence to suggest that certain student leaders of the 89’ Democracy Movement eventually came to see their comrades, if not quite as “deserving violence,” at least as expendable political pawns who had to be violently sacrificed for the sake of politics—as means to ends, as it were, rather than as ends-in-themselves. As such, the Movement's status as a non-violent revolution is, therefore, to this extent a questionable one. And my suggestion is that this judgment was only possible from a perspective which did not adopt what Rancière calls here the "presupposition of equality". Therefore, the Movement's failures as a non-violent movement were internally related to its failures as democratic movement.[9]

What would a truly democratic and truly non-violent 89' Democracy Movement have looked like? First, to say the least, a truly democratic 89' Democracy Movement would not be able to see the lives of its members as expendable.[10] Second, its goal must be radically more egalitarian than that of increasing the voice of the *intelligentsia* in government—even if this voice were able to truly and faithfully represent the people (which I doubt), insofar as doing so would deprive the people of their right to be active participants in politics, the society thus established would still fail to be truly democratic. Third, the structure and constitution of both the Movement's leadership and membership would have had to be broadened and democratized. The Movement, in short, would have had to understand itself authentically as a people's movement, rather than a student movement, from the outset.

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[9] Here I will simply reproduce the remainder of the aforementioned Chai Ling interview without further comment:

> Interviewer: Are you going to stay in the Square yourself?
>
> Chai Ling: No.
>
> Interviewer: Why?
>
> Chai Ling: Because my situation is different. My name is on the government's blacklist. I'm not going to be destroyed by this government. I want to live. Anyway, that's how I feel about it. I don't know if people will say I'm selfish. I believe that people have to continue the work I have started. A democracy movement can't succeed with only one person.

[10] I am recalled to Hegel's discussions in the Phenomenology of the Terror which followed the French Revolution, of the totalizing interpretation of the essential moment of universality in the concept of freedom as something that, as it were, is meant to swallow the singular individual, as a whole in which differences are simply absorbed and annihilated.

Would the Movement have been successful, if it were so reconstituted? I'm not sure there is any point speculating about this question. For all we know, the Movement thus reconstituted would still have been brutally crushed. Still, I do think that the Movement thus reconstituted would have been a more *powerful* and, most importantly, a more promising one, for a more authentically egalitarian Movement would at least have been less likely to *fail itself*. Here, I am returned to the old Anarchist doctrine of *prefiguration*: the idea that the internal organizational structure of the successful political revolutions tends to prefigure the structure of the society that it will eventually bring out. This is so, because what a revolution ultimately aims to bring about is a radically new way of inhabiting the world—with new norms and habits and institutions—and old habits, as we know, die hard. Thus, a revolutionary movement that is fighting, say, for the establishment of a radically egalitarian society but that is not itself democratically constituted (one that, for example, assumes that the implementation of a radically egalitarian society requires a transitional stage during which a certain social group will have to assume a dictatorial position) will tend to fail in spite of its own best intentions. For by failing to remold itself in its own vision of the future in the present, it carries the habitual and institutional vestiges of the old world into the new—and in so doing, the movement risks becoming the monster it once revolted against.

This, then, is what I mean to suggest when I say that I suspect that the 89' Democracy Movement would have eventually failed itself, despite itself—and that its failure was not merely a function of external circumstances but was, at least in part, internal and constitutional.

5.

For those committed, still, to democratic politics in China, the 89' Democracy Movement in China occupies a special place in our hearts and our minds. Consequently, I have no doubt that a good number of the claims that I have put forth in this essay will strike my readers as outrageous, even repugnant, to possibly even leave scars and fissures between myself and those of you whom I would have liked to call friends.

These are our ancestors, of whom we speak—and it is only understandable if we wish to save them from such harsh and unremitting light. We are, in our own time, lonely as we are, and their shining memory is among the few things we have today from which to draw inspiration and hope. There is, thus, a real interest in maintaining the 89’ Democracy Movement’s innocence as a political movement—not just in China but abroad, although this interest likely expresses somewhat different motives in the two contexts. Regardless, I wish simply to say that I understand the reluctance to bring these shining memories back down to Earth. I understand, because, as the child of two proud Beijingers who participated in the Movement, and who survived the bloodbath of June 4th, I recognize those desires in myself. The stories and images of hope and freedom that the Movement have left behind continues to captivate the imaginations of generations of Chinese radicals. When I hold the Movement before my mind, if I can bring myself out of the shadows of the Massacre, it often shines with an almost unassailable aura. When I think of the Movement, I think of the emaciated students lying in their tents, dreaming of liberty; I think of Lady Liberty, made of papier mâché, staring down the portrait of Mao in the Square; and of the mothers and fathers who brought food and water to support and nourish the student protestors occupying the square; I think, too, of May 24th, when the first attempt at the military occupation was thwarted by tens of thousands of Beijingers who stood in the streets, in front of the tanks, daring them to come closer, and pleading them to turn around.

It is indeed against my own inclinations to preserve this mythologized memory of the Movement that I have argued that the 89’ Democratic Movement fails to live up to the aspirations of its name.—So why then take the scalpel to this myth? Why criticize this mythologized memory if it is able to serve as such a powerful source of inspiration for radical democratic politics in China?

Because my interest here is not, first and foremost, to condemn the past. To quote Zinn once more, condemnations of the past, if performed for their own sake, make no moral sense; they do nothing more than "deplete our moral energy." And so, if historical criticism is to be politically and morally valuable, it must be performed in a way that is essentially forward-looking, as a means of learning lessons for the present and its future. Thus, I have sought to unweave the 89' Democracy Movement of its mythologies because, if we are to move forward, the Chinese democratic movement cannot afford to be deceived about its heritage. In truth, our ancestors are imperfect (though what else, indeed, could they have been?). And so, if we allow our desire to avoid reality to here possess us, we will condemn ourselves to the unconscious inheritance of their imperfections, and thus fate ourselves to repetition. The great irony here is that, by worshiping our ancestors, we will have in fact made ourselves unfilial as their descendants. Our most urgent task, if we still wish to carry forth their visions, their dreams, and their lives, is to mourn them well—to remember them well, which is to remember both truthfully and in a good light, to find a place for them, where they can shine in the way that would do justice to our lives and theirs. There are buried lessons here, lessons which we must recover for the future of radical democratic politics—lessons regarding the importance of prefiguration and the practical value of egalitarian self-organization—and these lessons, ultimately, can only be recovered if we come to recognize and acknowledge the Movement for what it really was.

不自由毋宁死

1.

In the muted light of this Monday's morning, tucked still, beneath my sheets and the lingering narcotic fog of the night before, I reach for my phone, open Instagram, and scroll. Seconds later, betwixt a short video essay on the cultural history of the raccoon, and a pair of kissing parrots, I am reminded what day it is, and what day tomorrow will be.

不自由毋宁死

White banner, black text—beneath it, in English, blood-red and capitalized, "LIBERTY or DEATH"—signed, the graduate students of the school of architecture, Tsinghua University.

Beneath the banner is a crowd. Among them, I know, somewhere perhaps not too far beyond the frame, stands my parents, their friends, and my uncle. A flash of fantasy invites me to look for them—but they are of course not quite here. The crowd is dense, abuzz, and busy. But there are three faces gazing into the lens—looking at me. The scroll halts, and I am arrested. Their faces, every one, appears as a face marred with an uncanny ambivalence. It is as though I know but cannot see that behind this face lies hope—lies a burning yearning for the good and for freedom—but, tasked as this hope is, with bearing the weight of not just their own fear, but also their loved ones' worries, it appears only to emit in flesh a faint, flickering light. As I gaze into their faces, I find myself slipping into their possession—their faces, every one, I think, look like mine—and I come to be skewered between two desires, each contradicting the other. Their hope leaps inside me, first, like a spark, to reignite some flame, and again I am consumed by anger, frustration, indignation for everything that has happened and everything that will.—But then, it occurs to me, that I know something they do not know. They do not know that tonight they shall be greeted with death. *Run*, I want to scream, *run! Do you know what you mean when you say:*

不自由毋宁死

2.

These words resurfaced two years ago, first in banners in Beijing and Shanghai, then with more frequency graffitied in alleyways and on bathroom walls, then, everywhere online. The phrase is, of course, owed to America, a translation of "Give me liberty or give me death"—one of the many precious symbolic fragments derived from America's revolutionary, democratic inheritance, along with papier mâché lady liberty, which made its way across the ocean in 1989.

This time, however, the call-back was not, in the first place, to 1775 but to 1989 itself. This much, these words, it seems, we have remembered.

The protests that erupted in late 2022 were remarkable not only for their size—and sizeable they were—but for their occasion. For the trigger for this wave of protests was, remarkably, the deaths of ten ethnic Uyghurs in the city of Urumqi, in Northwest China, who had burned to death in their homes when their apartment building caught fire, in the midst of a lockdown.

A number of smaller scale protests had already erupted across China, prior to this incident in November—most notably perhaps, the Sitong bridge protest on October 13th. By the late Spring of 2022, faced with the altered properties of the Omicron variant, the lockdown and testing measures driving the CCP's Zero-COVID policy, which had in the early phase of the pandemic been so astonishingly successful at keeping China running in a moment when the entire world had shut down, were quickly proving futile. China's early success with the pandemic, it turned out, had the tragic consequence of inducing a false sense of satisfaction among the ruling elite, producing a stubborn and idiotic posture of pride, which functioned effectively as a systematic blockage of social learning that led to the total derailment of vaccination progress. Following the virus' mutation, the Chinese populace was left defenseless, and infection rates and death rates skyrocketed.

Beijing's decision in response, then, was however not to admit to their strategic error, and mobilize towards vaccination, but to double-down on their existing, erroneous strategy of utilizing frequent testing and strict lockdowns to curb the spread of the virus. The consequences for the stupidity of the government, again, fell upon the Chinese people. Not only were masses of Chinese citizens prevented from earning their daily bread and accessing vital medical resources, they were furthermore forced to participate, day-in, day-out, in the humiliating and alienating farce which the Zero-COVID policy had become. Entire cities, tens of millions, were collectively trapped within their own homes, sometimes behind literal steel bars, welded onto one's doors, permitted only to go outside for their daily testing (which, everyone knew, was the only possible way at this point anybody was getting sick). Breakdowns in the supply chain coupled with a make-shift ration delivery system lead to shortages in basic supplies and food. This was a maddening, grueling period of violent, bureaucratic oppression. In Shanghai, the lockdowns were enforced for some three months before they were loosened—and despite its repeated failure, with constant relapses of COVID surges, the policy remained in full force, in Shanghai and elsewhere across China, in major metropolitan areas from Beijing, Guangzhou, to Chongqing for another six months.

Following in the footsteps of other major cities in China, the Urumqi city government enforced strict lockdown measures upon its residents following a surge of cases in August. By November, the conditions in Urumqi were beginning to resemble those in Shanghai in July—hunger, as a result of government rationing and supply-chain breakdowns, together with loneliness, and the daily experiences of bureaucratic alienation and humiliation had already raised the percolating social discontent close to a boiling point. At this moment, a fire breaks to take the lives of ten human beings, burned alive inside their homes, unable to escape, as a result of the lockdowns. Among the dead were Qemernisa Abdurahman, 48, and her four youngest children.

News of their death spread like wildfire across the Chinese internet, despite the government's best attempts at censorship. Two days later, some four thousand kilometers away, vigils and protests were held in Nanjing, Lanzhou, Shanghai, Chengdu, Xi'an, and by November 27th, they had spread to Beijing, Wuhan, and Hong Kong—and subsequently, across the globe, in major cities, from Toronto, to New York, and D.C. At these protests, citizens—most of whom had never, to this moment, experienced the *meaning* of being a citizen—gathered together in the streets, in their collective calls for government accountability and the end of the Zero-COVID policy. Words which just days before would have been unthinkable to utter in public—words to the effect of "step-down Xi Jinping," and "Xi is a big dumb cunt"—were everywhere being unleashed into the world, on- and offline, shouted in megaphones and billowing across banners.

As this all happened, I sat halfway across the world with my eyes glued to my screen, watching—cautious, riddled with anxiety, but harboring deep down, a small but fiery spark of hope. What amazed me about these protests was their breadth, and their apparent humanism. The Han Chinese, for the unaware, have traditionally been a terribly proud and indeed racist people. Those who do not count among the Han are traditionally labeled barbarians of one flavor or another—a way of carving the world, which can be traced back to the Zhou Dynasty's "Sino-barbarian dichotomy" (*huayizhibian* 华夷之辨). In contemporary China, this inheritance can be seen manifest in various currents of ethno-nationalism and reactionary (and perhaps legitimate) anti-Western sentiments—and more specifically, in a virulent form of state-sanctioned Islamophobia that has the Uyghur people as its object.

Suddenly, however, it looked as though the CCP had unwittingly engineered the objective social conditions such that the Sino-barbarian dichotomy lost all its salience. What the protestors in Shanghai saw was that, under the hands of this government, they were no different than the men, women, and children who had burned to death in their own homes in Urumqi, and that it was nothing more than luck that had saved them from flames. Set against the monstrosity and stupidity of the CCP, they recognized one another as equals. Regardless of whether this meant equals in humanity, or equals in slavery, the deaths of these others became the death of their kin—deaths, therefore, demanding of justice, and deaths deserving of mourning. The moment, and its words, it seemed, had returned. With the charred corpses of the innocent staked out before us, it became clear that the meaning of slavery is to exist, and to cease to exist, beneath the whim of another—and suddenly, again, we found that we could no longer justify this condition of slavery to ourselves. The choice between liberty and death, in this moment, is paradoxically purged of its appearance of drama. If to live life as a slave is, in any event, to exist as among the living dead, then so indeed:

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Given Georgetown's establishment technocratic bent, it was disappointing, but no surprise that no protests or vigils were held on campus, but a few days in, I saw a flier advertising a vigil held by the

Chinese student association at George Washington University. It was a late November evening, and cold. A scattered crowd of thirty, maybe forty, stood around candlelight at the foot of George Washington’s statue, in the main square before the chapel. The organizers looked to me like they were no older than eighteen, nineteen years-old. Many, if not most, of the Chinese nationals in attendance wore a mask, as a precautionary measure against the Chinese surveillance apparatus. The vigil began with a moment and silence, followed by an attempt to rally the crowd into a chant. When they first spoke their slogans— “不做奴隶，做公民”， “I refuse to be a slave, I shall be a citizen”—the organizer’s voice wavered and broke, scattering like ocean spray against the dark November wind. The crowd returned some fragmentary echoes, and the organizers sunk into a quiet murmur. Then a snicker broke, and a big boy from the back shouted, thrice, in quick succession, “傻逼！习近平！”— “Dumb cunt! Xi Jinping!”—and the crowd erupted, first into laughter, but then into effervescent song: “傻逼, 习近平! 傻逼, 习近平！傻逼, 习近平！”

For most of the Chinese students in the audience, myself included, this was an entirely new and, indeed, liberatory experience. Never could I have even dreamed of hearing, let alone chanting these words in public, among other Chinese citizens. Despite the fact that we were, it is true, in America, some ten thousand miles away from the jurisdiction of the Chinese execution block, this was an electrifyingly powerful experience of collective action and expression. I was, I learned, not alone: in our opinion of Xi Jinping as a big dumb cunt, We were an I that was a We and a We that was an I.

But the days rolled by, and this We proved to be momentary, and it dissolved, and with it, too, eroded my sense of hope for a free China. Part of the reason why this happened is that the CCP, responding to the mass protests, eventually decided to pull a total 180, lifting in one fell swoop all COVID restrictions. They did so amidst a massive surge by early December, with disastrous public health consequences. Indeed, it has often seemed to me that the abruptness of the reversal signaled that it was some perverse, oblique attempt to punish the protestors—as though it were the actions of some kind of infantile but tyrannical parent, saying to their child, after their protests: Be careful what you wish for.

The other reason this We dissolved was because it was simply no match for the Chinese state, which, with its terror tactics and its state-of-the-art surveillance technology, moved swiftly and effectively to ensure that the scattered protests did not grow and develop itself into a sustained and structured *movement*. My friends who participated in the demonstrations in Shanghai, without exception, received a phone call the next morning from the state police, politely inquiring where they were the day before. Then, the words 不自由毋宁死 sunk back down to the pit of one's stomach. Not one of my friends participated in the protests beyond that day—and almost all of them who could leave China, then did. For my own part, I did not have to suffer this shameful slink back into self-preservation—but I know, I am no hero, and would have done the same.

Suddenly, then, the Hobbesian gambit—that faced with the choice between life and liberty most men will, without hesitation, choose life—began once more to resemble the truth, and I slid back into despair. There can be no free China, so long as its people are entrapped within the CCP's allseeing machine of death. The philosopher Elizabeth Anderson has argued that social movements are among the most reliable and powerful means available to us to effect social change. As we have seen, demonstrations can provide a powerful occasion for learning for the disempowered: insofar as they have been denied political participation, a protest, or indeed any other large-scale collective action, can provide an occasion for the disempowered to learn, sometimes for the first time, how to secure their own standing for political claim-making and contestation. Furthermore, through the use of demonstrations and campaigning, social movements are capable of forging channels of practically motivating information and facilitating its circulation. And by deploying strategies such as sit-ins and boycotts, social movements are, moreover, potentially capable of occasioning genuine opportunities of breakdown and encounter that could compel those in power to re-evaluate and revise their commitments.

However, as the sociologists Charles Tilly and Sidney Tallow point out, a social movement must be “a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities”—and it seems clear to me that presently, given the sheer power of the Chinese state, no such movement could possibly grow within the borders of the People’s Republic of China. There can be no movement, no *sustained* campaign of claim making, so long as we can be observed and threatened in our every move. In this respect, I cling onto more hope for Gaza, than for China—as hopeless as Gaza is. For as hostile as American soil is to the Palestinian liberation movement, the basic insurance of liberties in America and elsewhere in the liberal West, however incomplete and imperfect, still holds out the possibility of effective social movements. Crush as they may the campus protests—but the movement can still find space to reclaim its momentum, online, and elsewhere in the streets.

So where, then, does this leave China—and those of us who dream, still, of a free China? Are we simply to sit idle, waiting for his death, or otherwise for conditions in China to deteriorate into true uninhabitability, whatever that might be, twiddling our thumbs among the living dead, hoping that Junior will be kinder to us than his father has been? Is this, indeed, the only thing we *can* do?—I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.

Today, in powerless fury, I know not what else to do except to perform a small ritual of mourning. Thus I light this candle, to remember, to resent, to mourn the unforgotten dead, to keep my hope alive.

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These are words upon which I wish but am too cowardly to stake my life—but still, in the meantime, I will chant them and I will chant them, so that perhaps when one day I need to enact them, someday, I can.

"Today, in powerless fury, I know not what else to do except to perform a small ritual of mourning. Thus I light this candle, to remember, to resent, to mourn the unforgotten dead, to keep my hope alive."

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