

History and China's 1989

Comments by Jeffrey Wasserstrom prepared for the May 20 CECC Hearing

In May of 1990, less than a year after television audiences around the world had been stunned by images of the People's Liberation Army using brutal force to quell popular protests in China, Barbara Walters interviewed Communist Party leader Jiang Zemin for the "20/20" news program. When she asked him to comment on the chain of events of the previous year, including a massacre in the nation's capital that left at least several hundred workers, students and members of other social groups dead, Jiang made a stunning statement. He said that "much ado about nothing" was the best description for all that had happened. In this sweeping rhetorical gesture, he dismissed as unimportant the Beijing killings—killings that are known in Chinese as the "June 4th Massacre," since it was early on the morning of that day that the largest number of unarmed civilians were shot by soldiers.

Jiang's "much ado about nothing" statement also suggested that many other things that happened in 1989 were insignificant. The massive rallies calling for change, for example, that had been held in cities across China in April and May, and a second massacre that had occurred in Chengdu after the Beijing killings—one of many events germane to these hearings that is handled well in NPR correspondent Louisa Lim's powerful new book, *The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited*. His comment also implied that he thought it unimportant that, after the massacres, the government had arrested and sentenced, in some cases to very long prison terms, many activists accused of fomenting "turmoil"—a highly charged negative code word for the chaos that had beset the country during the Cultural Revolution decade of 1966 through 1976—and laying the groundwork for what an official propaganda campaign dubbed a "counter-revolutionary rebellion" that had endangered the nation. His words suggested as well that it was a small matter that, just before the massacres, the government had imposed on the nation's capital a state of martial law similar to that it had imposed on Tibet earlier in 1989 after protests there. And that it was a minor thing that Zhao Ziyang—who had been elevated to the status of Deng Xiaoping's presumed heir apparent when Hu Yaobang was removed from that position in 1987, due largely to his having taken a lenient line on an earlier wave of student protests that began late in 1986 and served as a dress rehearsal of sorts for the popular struggle of 1989—had been purged and placed under house arrest.

Jiang's phrasing was deeply objectionable on many levels. It belittled the bravery of all those who gathered at Tiananmen Square and urban plazas across China in 1989 to call for an end to corruption and increased personal and political freedoms. It also belittled their patriotism—a crucial point as key themes of the protests were that a beloved country deserved to be run by better people and that the Communist Party should do more to live up to its own professed ideals. And his statement belittled the suffering of the many protesters and bystanders slain in Beijing and Chengdu—and that of the family members of these victims.

As someone who writes and teaches about China's past for a living, I also see Jiang's comment on the events of the spring of 1989, which are known collectively in Chinese as the "June 4th Movement," as problematic in additional ways that have to do with history. Calling the demonstrations and massacres of 1989 "much ado about nothing" distorts their important place in the history of Chinese protest and repression and keeps us from appreciating the way that struggles of the past can affect new efforts to transform a society. Using this terminology also implies, in a seriously misleading way, that China's leaders were not concerned at the time by the

challenge that protesters posed to their legitimacy and have not been anxious since about the legacy of 1989.

China's rulers were, in fact, deeply worried twenty-five years ago by what was happening, particularly by the mass gatherings of first students and then others as well at Tiananmen Square, a symbolically significant site where official ceremonies are often held and buildings and monuments stand that the government relies on to tell stories about the past that make Communist Party rule seem justified. And there is ample evidence that they remain worried to this day by 1989's legacy. Despite all the ways that China has changed, after all, while the Party has given up its initial strategy of talking a lot about 1989 and trying to persuade the populace to accept its skewed version of events, it has for more than two decades now devoted considerable energy to imposing what Lim and others have aptly called a state of "amnesia" about the year on the populace at large. In addition, many other things that the government has done in recent years are best understood as shaped in part by a determination to avoid facing a situation like 1989 again.

Historians like me are prone to stress with many phenomena that paying attention to the past can help place the present into a clearer perspective, but history is relevant to 1989 in particularly striking and complex ways. One reason is that protesters and their opponents both made important uses of historical analogies twenty-five years ago. Before the battle in which troops of the People's Liberation Army were deployed, there were crucial battles of words and symbols, in which both sides often invoked the past. The degree to which students did better than the government in using historical arguments and symbols in April and May of 1989 helps explain why the latter made such desperate, brutal moves that June. Much Western commentary at the time and since has referred to parallels and connections between Chinese events and things taking place in or associated with other parts of the world. Many international factors were important twenty-five years ago, when inspiring protests were unfolding in Eastern and Central Europe, when some Chinese protesters expressed admiration for Mikhail Gorbachev (whose summit trip to Beijing brought foreign camera crews to the country who would end up covering demonstrations more than meetings between officials), and when some demonstrators nodded to American symbols (such as the Statue of Liberty) and slogans (from "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" to "We Shall Overcome"). Ultimately, though, it is the centrality of debates, arguments and symbols rooted in China's own past that stand out as especially pertinent.

How exactly did students invoke history? They made two basic historical claims—and were joined on the streets by workers, intellectuals, journalists and others in part because these appeals to history resonated, as did the general criticism the students made of the economic fruits of reform seeming to benefit disproportionately officials and their kith and kin. The students insisted that they were following in the footsteps of the patriotic heroes of 1919's May 4th Movement, a student-led mass struggle as well known in China as the Boston Tea Party is in the U.S., and something that, similarly, is assumed by all sides to be worthy of celebrating, even as there are battles over who has the best right to claim its mantle. The students also presented Deng Xiaoping and his allies as behaving in ways that brought to mind the irrationality of the Cultural Revolution era, which so many Chinese looked on as a benighted time whose mistakes should never be repeated.

The Chinese authorities countered these two claims by insisting that they, not the students, were inheritors of the May 4th tradition and that the protests threatened to hurtle the country back into a state of Cultural Revolution-like "turmoil." They had made moves like that latter one during the protest wave of 1986-1987 that began in Hefei and peaked in Shanghai (I

was an eyewitness observer of those events, though I was not in China in 1989), and this sort of rhetoric had helped convince students to return to classes. In 1989, though, the government's invocations of history largely fell flat. It was far from insignificant to China's rulers that students were being seen in 1989 as coming closer than they did to embodying cherished national ideals. A pivotal symbolic moment came when the government's annual efforts to commemorate the May 4th Movement as part of "their" legacy were upstaged by student actions. On the seventieth anniversary of the 1919 struggle, the most notable gathering was one by students in Tiananmen Square. Standing near a marble frieze showing patriotic students of the May 4th generation calling on workers to join them in helping their country stand up to foreign bullying and domestic misrule, members of the Tiananmen generation read out a "New May 4th Manifesto," a rousing document demanding change.

China's leaders cared deeply that the protests were calling into questions core old and important new stories they liked to tell and needed to tell to legitimate their rule, from the notion that official corruption and authoritarianism were problems of the pre-1949 past as opposed to the present, to the idea that the Communist Party had begun to move in a dramatically new direction since Mao Zedong's death in 1976. Interestingly, as Wang Chaohua, a leader of the 1989 protests who went on to earn her doctorate in the United States and is now a Southern California-based public intellectual, pointed out at a recent UCLA forum, one thing that added force to the student charge that Deng Xiaoping and company were replaying Cultural Revolution patterns was a series of shifts in the top echelons of the Communist Party. A worrying hallmark of the last years of Mao's rule was that he periodically launched attacks on those closest to him, including two successive heirs apparent, Liu Shaoqi and then Lin Biao. Many Chinese viscerally experienced these attacks because criticism of Liu and Lin was combined in each case with mass campaigns to promote ideological purity. It seemed by the early 1980s that, to the relief of many, this combination of high party politics and public campaigns had ended, but that hope was undermined in 1987 when Hu Yaobang was stripped of his highest post, that of General Secretary of the Communist Party (even though allowed to retain a largely honorific position within the government), and an "Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization" drive was launched.

This pattern was then repeated during 1989, when Hu's successor Zhao Ziyang, who had been targeted in some early student posters as one of the many top officials whose family members were benefitting unfairly from the economic reforms, ended up becoming the second heir of Deng in a row to fall for taking too "soft" a line toward a protest wave. Once again, though in a way far more devastating than the drive against "bourgeois liberalization" of 1987, this shift in heirs was linked to a broad campaign, in this case to rid the country of "counter-revolutionary" elements, such as 2010 Nobel Peace Prize recipient Liu Xiaobo and other alleged "black hands" behind the protests.

Turning from historical argument during 1989 to China's more recent political history, two things are particularly important to note. One is that, while the June 4th Movement was crushed, the Communist Party, in seeking to avoid future large scale protests of a similar sort, has, in a sense, given in to some student demands of the time while refusing to budge on others. Among the many wishes of 1989's youths was to see the Party back off from micromanaging their private lives, allowing them more freedom to do things such as listen to music they liked, socialize on campuses as they wanted, and read more widely in international literature. With some important exceptions (such as tight censorship of foreign publications dealing with hot button issues, from Tibet and the Dalai Lama to the events of 1989 themselves), later generations of Chinese students have been able to have private lives of the sort their predecessors dreamed

of. It is easy to check off areas where the government has not budged, of course, including not only regarding calls for political liberalization and more democracy, but also the demand that the authorities admit that 1989's protesters were patriots acting to improve the country, not hooligans trying to destroy it. Still, partial victories in amid defeat should be acknowledged.

The second way in which the government's desire to avoid facing another challenge like that of 1989 matters is it helps us make sense of officials responses to protests in the 1990s and in the opening years of the 21st century. International currents certainly matter here. China's rulers have spent a lot of time trying to figure out how best to prevent local variants of Poland's Solidarity or Arab Spring uprisings from taking place. There are also special factors involved in the harsh ways that the Communist Party has dealt with unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang. Still, a concern with trying to avoid what top officials see as mistakes they made in 1989—the main error in their minds, I think, not the use of force but allowing the struggle to grow as large as it did before that point—has influenced government responses to many outbursts. And in a sense, even the fear of Solidarity, Arab Spring, Color Revolutions and the like, as well as policies toward Tibet and Xinjiang, are inflected a degree by concern with what happened in April-June 1989.

I've written extensively about this topic elsewhere, as have others, but in a nutshell, the government's approach to protest since 1989 has been to take particularly strong lines against outbursts that show a) any degree of organization, b) draw together people of different social groups, and c) link people in different parts of the country. These were all key features of the June 4th Movement. When protests take place that do not have any of these characteristics, the government is sometimes willing to deal with them gently, perhaps give in to some specific demands made by those who take to the streets, and see them as a way that people can let off steam. Some leaders may be punished, some concessions given are then taken back, and so on, but a flexible and measured approach is common. On the other hand, when one, two or especially all three of the factors just listed come into play, even something that is totally unlike the 1989 protests in terms of specifics will be dealt with severely. The classic example here is the harsh crackdown on Falun Gong after the organization staged a large-scale sit-in in central Beijing in April 1999. But, more recently, it also seems fair to say that one of the reasons for the brutal means used against activists in Tibet and Xinjiang is the government's concern that protests there quickly connect people of different social groups and disparate locals within the large regions that have significant Tibetan or Uighur populations.

Much more could be said not just about the issues raised above, but also about the kinds of grievances that agitate people in China now and bring them to the streets in tens of thousands of protests a year, and about how the concerns expressed in current outbursts at times echo and at times diverge from those that exercised 1989's demonstrators. And I would certainly be happy to answer questions about current protests as well as about 1989 and its legacy during the May 20 CECC Hearing. What I hope at least to have demonstrated in this short statement is that the events of April-June 1989 were very far from being "much ado about nothing" and that placing them into historical perspective is not just of some use but crucial to understanding China's recent past and China's complicated present.