

Review: Tiananmen Reconsidered

Reviewed Work(s): Behind the Tiananmen Massacre: Social and Economic Ferment in China. by Chu-yuan Cheng: The Iron House: A Memoire of the Chinese Democracy Movement and the Tiananmen Massacre. by Michael S. Duke: China Rising: The Meaning of Tiananmen. by Lee Feigon: Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement. by Minshu Han: The Broken Mirror: China After Tiananmen. by George Hicks: Beijing Spring, 1989: Confrontation and Conflict: The Basic Documents. by Michael Oksenberg: Tiananmen Diary: Thirteen Days in June. by Harrison E. Salisbury: Tiananmen Square: An Eyewitness Account of the Chinese People's Passionate Quest for Democracy. by Scott Simmie and Bob Nixon: Crisis at Tiananmen: Reform and Reality in Modern China. by Mu Yi and Mark V. Thompson

Review by: Lowell Dittmer

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Tiananmen Reconsidered

Review Article*

As the continuing debate over sanctions demonstrates, the “Tiananmen Incident” has been seared into the consciousness not only of the Chinese people but the world, partly because it occurred in full view of the mass communications media which had come to China to record the Sino-Soviet summit, partly because the massacre seems to have marked a shift from transformational reform to a self-perpetuating reform regime (the so-called reform treadmill, as it is known in Eastern Europe). This verdict may be premature, but at least the crackdown seems to have marked the limits of political change for the existing generation of CCP leadership. The nine books surveyed below are among the first and, so far, the best to cover these unforgettable events. In terms of methodological approach, they fall into roughly three categories: first-person diary-type accounts, more academic descriptive narratives *cum* analysis of causal background and future implications, and collections of primary documents. Of course there is a certain overlap. After reviewing the books in each of these categories I shall try to sum up the current state of knowledge in this new field of research.

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- * BEHIND THE TIANANMEN MASSACRE: Social and Economic Ferment in China. *By Chuyuan Cheng. Boulder (Colorado): Westview Press. 1990. xii, 256 pp. ISBN 0-8133-1047-4*
- THE IRON HOUSE: A Memoire of the Chinese Democracy Movement and the Tiananmen Massacre. *By Michael S. Duke. Layton (Utah): Peregrine Smith Books. 1990. xxiii, 180 pp. (Maps, photographs.) ISBN 0-87905-371-2.*
- CHINA RISING: The Meaning of Tiananmen. *By Lee Feigon. Chicago (Illinois) Ivan R. Dee. 1990. xvi, 269 pp. (Map.) US\$19.95, cloth, ISBN 0-929587-30-8*
- CRISIS FOR DEMOCRACY: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement. *Edited by Minzhu Han. Princeton (New Jersey): Princeton University Press. 1990. xxiv, 401 pp. (Figures, maps.) US\$45.00, cloth, ISBN 0-691-031460; US\$12.95, paper, ISBN 0-691-00857-4.*
- THE BROKEN MIRROR: China After Tiananmen. *Edited by George Hicks. London (England): Longman Group. 1990. xxv, 526 pp. ISBN 1-55862-069-9.*
- BEIJING SPRING, 1989: Confrontation and Conflict: The Basic Documents. *Edited by Michel Ok-senberg, Lawrence R. Sullivan and Marc Lambert. Armonk (New York): M. E. Sharpe. 1990. xiii, 403 pp. US\$45.00, cloth, ISBN 0-87332-683-0, US\$15.95, paper, ISBN 0-87332-684-9.*
- TIANANMEN DIARY: Thirteen Days in June. *By Harrison E. Salisbury. New York and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company. 1989. xiv, 176 pp. US\$10.95 / C\$12.95, paper. ISBN 0-316-80905-5.*
- TIANANMEN SQUARE: An Eyewitness Account of the Chinese People's Passionate Quest for Democracy. *By Scott Simmie and Bob Nixon. Vancouver (British Columbia): Douglas & McIntyre. 1989. xi, 212 pp. (Maps, plates.) C\$14.95, paper.*
- CRISIS AT TIANANMEN: Reform and Reality in Modern China. *By Mu Yi and Mark V. Thompson. San Francisco (California): China Books and Periodicals. 1989. x, 283 pp. (Plates.) US\$14.95, paper, ISBN 0-8351-2290-5.*

First-person memoirs have the advantage of immediacy and subjective verisimilitude, offering the writer greater latitude for editorial commentary and personal impressions and tending to engross the reader more easily. I categorize the Duke, Feigon and Salisbury books in this category, although only the last is a pure type, as both Duke and Feigon amplified their accounts with empirical investigation via interviews and published sources. Harrison Salisbury, one of the most prolific and accomplished foreign correspondents in contemporary journalism, with some twenty-six books to his credit (including a reprise of the *Long March*, a bestseller in Chinese), happened to be on assignment with a Japanese film crew making a documentary about the fortieth anniversary of the PRC when that story was superseded by more urgent events. From a window in the Beijing Hotel overlooking the square, he witnessed (or endeavored to witness, sometimes crouching beneath the window to avoid stray bullets) the climactic confrontation, and rushed into print with the first book-length account of the tragedy. His book appears to consist of diary entries dating from his arrival on June 1 to his hectic departure on June 13. Sacrificing scholarly pretense for topicality, the text omits footnotes or indeed any indication that the author relied on testimony other than his own. Unfortunately, that is hardly enough. Bewildered by the noise and commotion upon being roused from slumber at 4:30 on June 4, his first impulse was to tune into to BBC or the VOA — and much of his subsequent impressions merely elaborate upon western media commentary. These impressions are necessarily rumor-rife and fragmentary, but not without value: we learn, for example, that the shells fired at the American embassy compound were steel-jacketed bullets capable of penetrating bricks and masonry (p. 109). The reason for this, Salisbury speculates, was to signal CCP displeasure that Fang Lizhi had been given asylum there. The author argues that the hard-line leadership had been preparing for a lethal confrontation since democracy protests surfaced in the fall of 1986, noting that the PLA had since that time been cut off from VOA or BBC broadcasts on pain of court-martial (pp. 151, 154, 158-61); yet paradoxically, the operation was executed “in the most slovenly manner imaginable” (pp. 83-84) — compared, say, to Beria’s efficient clampdown on Moscow following the death of Stalin. The bloodshed, Salisbury suggests, was not only gratuitous but wanton, designed to terrorize the population.

Both Duke and Feigon are *engage* China scholars fluent in Mandarin who happened to be engaged in field research when they were caught up in events; thus without sacrificing the immediacy of a first-hand memoir, they have sketched in an ample empirical background that will give their accounts more durable shelf life. Duke arrived in the capital to study contemporary Chinese literature on the eve of the declaration of martial law (May 19) and stayed on till June 8. His impressions, based on speeches by movement leaders on the square, conversations with Chinese informants, and translations

of big-character posters, vividly convey both the naive idealism of the movement's heyday and the stark terror of its bullet-ridden end; his book is lavishly illustrated with personal photos, and capped off by an insightful concluding chapter and "call to action."

Lee Feigon, a history professor at Colby College hitherto best known for his biography of Chen Duxiu, brings a valuable historical perspective to his account by comparing the democracy movement to previous student movements, notably the Cultural Revolution, which he reflects upon somewhat wistfully. From such comparisons he infers that Chinese student movements are characterized by an ambivalence toward authority that derives from their juxtaposition of anarchist rebellion with elite patronage, and typically results in the construction of a new authority "just as inimical to student ideas as the one they helped to destroy" (p. 23).¹ In the 1989 case, elite patronage is evinced not only in Zhao Ziyang's signals of support for a nonviolent accommodation with the protesters but in the very origins of the movement: in contrast to those who identify the movement's leadership with those who played the most visible role on the square, Feigon traces the movement to several small preexisting groups of student dissidents or "democracy salons" — small groups led by Wang Dan and Shen Tong at Peking University, a Party History Department group at People's University, etc. These were not "colorful TV Personalities" or "Western democrats" (whom Feigon tends to regard as confused and vainglorious) but young people with ties high up in the party who "felt deeply about the Chinese Communist party and were upset by the corruption and bureaucracy they saw undermining it" (pp. 129-30). Yet while Feigon plays with the possibility of a direct link between high-level reform cadres and their local protégés,² he ultimately dismisses it — as, based on the scanty evidence he presents, we must as well. In any case, his picture of student leadership is one of such flux it is difficult to see how it could have been manipulated, as leadership passed from the early salon leaders to the hunger strikers in mid-May, and from local leaders to outsiders by the end of the month — resulting in an escalation of demands. Feigon captures the movement's subcultural

¹ This involves (in chapter 2) a revisionist interpretation of the Cultural Revolution that is both valuable and overdrawn, focusing disproportionately on the first fifty days to argue that the radicals stimulated major policy innovations ranging from the opening to the west that resulted in China's admission to the UN and other international forums to the "green revolution" that later bore fruit in the increased crop yields of the 1980s. It is to be sure true (and useful to point out) that much of the rhetoric (against bureaucracy and corruption) and even some of the tactics (*viz.*, mass demonstrations, big-character posters, "link-ups" between disparate groups) derived from the Cultural Revolution, and that Deng Xiaoping (along with many of his cohorts) was in opposition to both movements. But the ideological goals of the two movements, as well as many of the tactics (*e.g.*, the democracy movement was conscientiously nonviolent), were quite different.

² For example, see p. 130: "It is therefore tempting to believe that the protests of 1989 also were instigated by government officials, eager to send a message to their political opponents."

ambience very well, not without occasional flashes of wit:³ he notes a floating consensus around constantly shifting goals and fears, a self-dramatizing, sometimes suicidal idealism with an anarchic subcurrent, a fascination with borderline fashions (western sunglasses, emblazoned headbands) and rock music (Qi Qin, Hou Dejian and Cui Jian were on the scene, their lyrics cited), and technologically innovative use of communications media (battery-operated megaphones, beepers, walkie-talkies, fax machines).

Of the third-person narrative accounts, Chu-yuan Cheng's is unquestionably the most "academic." More than half of his two hundred pages of text (plus three appendices) consists of background material, with early chapters recounting the history of student movements in China since May 4, the structure and role of the People's Liberation Army in China, the history of the reform movement, and a sketch of factional divisions in the Politburo over the past ten years or so. Although this material is useful it is sometimes so tenuously related to the history of the movement that its inclusion is of questionable value. The overall impression is one of a reform gone sour due to serious intrinsic difficulties (e.g., inflation, uncontrolled investment binges, unemployment, transportation and power bottlenecks): Tiananmen thus represents a crisis of reform. This begs the question, however, that if reform was such a failure, why did "the masses" demand more of it with such overwhelming enthusiasm? If the policy of opening to the outside world was a disappointment, why is south China (and Guangdong in particular) doing better than the rest of the country? While condemning the crackdown, Cheng somewhat paradoxically seems to rely quite heavily in his interpretation on the report by the hardline Beijing municipal party committee (an abridged version of which he includes in appendix 3). Whereas much of the detailed information presented by Cheng is accurate and well-documented, the points he makes sound, this is all viewed through an anti-Communist prism that casts everything in a negative pall: the Cultural Revolution was bad, but the reforms were bad, too (either inadequate or excessive, as the case may be); the crackdown was of course very bad, and the post-crackdown reversal of the reforms was also bad. The law of contradiction seems suspended.

Crisis at Tiananmen, by Yi and Thompson, and *Tiananmen Square*, by Simmie and Nixon, are both similar in many respects — written by journalists rather than academics, both straightforward prose narratives, both well done. The fact that the former was published by China Books illustrates the extent to which China's erstwhile overseas missionary agencies have distanced themselves from the oecumene in the wake of the crisis, a tendency also visible in China's Hong Kong outlets. Simmie and Nixon originally intended to write an account of China's intellectuals and artists and their

³ "I'm not going to abandon a chance to go to the United States just for a chance to save China," declares TOEFL (test of English as a foreign language) student (p. 148).

coverage is hence partial to their role in the movement, while Yi and Thompson give pride of place to the role of the press; but both provide quite comprehensive, well-written accounts of the movement. Of the two, the Simmie and Nixon volume seems to be a bit more detailed and comprehensive and to achieve greater objectivity in its coverage.

George Hicks has collected shorter pieces from a wide range of distinguished academic and journalistic commentators ranging from Simon Leys to Fang Lizhi or Orville Schell but generally inclining to the right. The general perspective is essentialist, in the sense that with Tiananmen the scales fall from one's eyes and China stands revealed as what it "really" was all along — corrupt, brutal, dogmatic, incorrigible. Thus Jane Macartney's portrait of the students shows them to have "feet of clay" — suffering certain privations but on the whole naive and protected, mesmerized by a cult of heroism, hungry for power and glory but vague and confused about their ideology and policy demands. And Lucian Pye's perceptive but critical eye discovers a pervasive moralism and hunger for public theater, an eagerness to display self-sacrifice to the point of suicide combined with a great abhorrence of death or even discomfort, a tendency by the authorities to exaggerate the amount of impending chaos combined with a tendency to minimize the students' impact, and other such cultural contradictions. Chalmers Johnson and Miriam London both assail U.S. policy makers (Johnson, rather surprisingly, takes on former ambassador Winston Lord) for having been blind to the nature of CCP totalitarianism, due either to misconceived *Realpolitik* or foolish sentiment. Others gloomily review the damage to the "two systems in one country" policy for the absorption of Hong Kong, the "Death of a Dream in Rural China," the dismal progress of the concept of a "rule of law" or "human rights," and what not. The collection is fittingly concluded by a discussion of "Four Ways Communism Could Die in China" by Juergen Domes — a theme oft heard before, but rarely with such credibility. The air of essentialist disclosure in such chapters, however warranted by the events of June 3-4, comes oddly from the lips of these authors, who were least surprised by the unveiling.

The document collections by Han and by Oksenberg et al. are most valuable, easily avoiding the *longheurs* typically associated with this genre. Although both collections are fine, the latter perhaps deserves preference for avoiding the tendentiousness of the former, whose vision is one of a noble political dream being senselessly smashed upon the flagstones of the square. Han Minzhu ("Chinese Democracy") wears his commitments on his sleeve (or book jacket), sketching a scene in which there are unambiguous heroes and villains; the unabashed purpose is to spread the "gospel," giving the perspective of Deng Xiaoping and his hardliners only derisory consideration. Still, with the understanding that it is limited in this sense, this is without question the most comprehensive collection of both formal and informal communications (including big-character posters, poems, speeches,

even snippets of conversations) by democracy movement participants currently available. The collection by Oksenberg et al. is more ideologically comprehensive and somewhat more “formal,” including the statements and reports of Chen Xitong, Li Peng, Deng Xiaoping, and Yang Shangkun, as well as those of Su Shaozhi, Zhao Ziyang, or Yan Jiaqi. Indeed it perhaps tries to do too much, gathering materials, for example, on the Thirteenth CCP Congress or on Neo-Authoritarianism that are only tenuously related to the crisis.

What may we tentatively conclude from this gripping, heart-wrenching set of books? On many points, they agree: the decade of reform had achieved economic progress sufficient to build an overwhelming popular constituency, yet political reform lagged behind, and economic reform itself had encountered serious obstacles. This was a context ripe for protest, and Hu Yaobang’s death was merely the catalyst. The protest itself was unusually civil by Chinese (or even by international) standards, particularly given its unprecedented size — though this was to some extent a tactic to avoid inciting the crackdown many were convinced was impending. In that sense Feigon’s comparisons of the democracy movement with Shengwulian or other Red Guard groups is overdrawn. Yet there are also without question points of tangency in the style if not the substance of communication: big-character posters, “linkups,” and so forth. Even in substance there were traces of the anarchic, antibureaucratic animus that characterized its raucous predecessor, particularly after the declaration of martial law on May 20. It is not really surprising that leaders who had been humiliated by the Cultural Revolution would have drawn the analogy. The students were clearly motivated by idealism, but the purity of their motives was artificially enhanced by the excessive violence with which the demonstration was terminated; as in western anti-war protests, motives were mixed, both festive and crusading, and their leadership seems to have been incredibly fragmentary and confused, prompting CCP allegations of conspiracy that strain credibility. The crackdown, when it came, seems to have been decreed by Deng Xiaoping, who alone wielded the authority necessary to persuade soldiers to earn widespread popular enmity. Reports of strife in contending army units seem to have been wishful thinking.

On many issues the jury is still out. The source of the movement is clear to everyone if one is sufficiently vague about it, but if we want more precision about the factors that had highest priority, further research is called for. Were the protesters opposed to corruption (*guan dao*) and impacted, “feudal” authority? Were they simply opposed to authority per se (and hence beyond reasonable compromise), or did they represent protest against the consequences of reform? Does the protest and the response to it unveil something about the essence of the CCP regime, or does it simply show, as Kissinger opined in an early apologia, that any regime has its threshold of tolerance? Could the confrontation have been avoided, and if so how? One

is tempted to conclude that if either the conservatives or the reformers had been free to pursue their line consistently they might have succeeded in dispersing the multitudes, but this may be overoptimistic in view of the tenacity and resourcefulness of shifting movement leaders in again and again reviving the flagging morale of their followers with new demands or new tactics. Yet even if a confrontation was unavoidable the question of technique remains open; that Chinese security forces simply lacked the necessary crowd control equipment to prevail without lethal force seems hard to believe. Once the regime had stained its escutcheon with the blood of its citizens, what was the appropriate response of the west to this violation of human rights? Do sanctions punish the wicked or the righteous, or both alike, and with what effects and opportunity costs? Finally, in the light of the dramatic changes taking place in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union it is not too early to begin to think about Dome's question concerning the end of the CCP regime, although the answer must remain speculative for the time being.

University of California, Berkeley, U.S.A.

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