

What Xi Jinping, the CCP Leadership, and Other People in China Learned from June Fourth

Jeremy Brown

「習近平為首的當前中共領導人以及其他中國人從「六四」學到了什麼？」

Paper presented at the International Conference on the Chinese Communist Party's Historical Experience and Governance in the Xi Jinping Era, National Chengchi University, Taipei, August 31, 2022 (hybrid conference)

What did Xi Jinping learn from the Tiananmen protests and Beijing massacre of 1989? How did the events of 1989 shape his leadership and thinking in the years that followed, through the present day? These are challenging questions to answer. Unlike Jiang Zemin, who in 2000 had a remarkable exchange with Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes* about “tank man,”¹ Xi Jinping has not had public dialogues about 1989. Nor was Xi a major political figure in 1989, when he was serving as party secretary of Ningde Prefecture in Fujian Province. This paper begins by discussing how a retrospective account of Xi’s time in Ningde shows what he wants the world to know he learned as a local leader in 1989. As for what broader lessons Xi learned, we can only speculate based on how the Chinese Communist Party’s approach has changed or deepened since Xi became China’s top leader in 2013. I explore how Xi’s leadership during crises reveals lessons that Xi learned from June Fourth. I conclude with thoughts about what other people in China, including non-elites, have learned from June Fourth.²

Xi Jinping in 1989: What He Wants Us to Think He Learned

In 2020, a team of interviewers from the Central Party Academy published *Xi Jinping in Fujian* online; a hard copy of the book came out in 2021. The book’s text remains

¹ “President Jiang Interview,” September 4, 2000, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?159079-1/president-jiang-interview&playEvent>.

² Following Wu Renhua, I refer to “June Fourth” as a three-part event (distinct from the date of June 4, 1989), that encompassed: 1. The protests of April and May 1989, 2. The Beijing massacre of June 3 and 4, 1989, and 3. The crackdown that followed.

available online today on official Party websites. In chapter 12, Chen Youcheng 陈由诚, who was Ningde's prefectural public security chief in 1989, describes Xi Jinping's handling of student protesters and the post-massacre purge as one of the three most memorable contributions Xi made in the area of public security. Chen's oral history testimony does not shed any light on what Xi Jinping actually did, thought, or said in 1989. In fact, it is extremely likely that Chen's depiction is inaccurate and misleading. But its publication signals what Xi's image makers think it is acceptable for people in China to know about Xi's actions in 1989. In other words, the publication in 2020 of Chen's memories, uncensored and available for anyone in China to read, reveals several lessons Xi wants people to think he learned in 1989. The appearance of Party unity must be protected, independent protest movements are bad and must be decisively crushed, the post-massacre purge was a necessary but difficult process, and—the newest and freshest lesson of all—it is proper and correct to talk about these things, including the purge, an event that until now has been largely hidden from now. Public opinion about what happened in 1989 must be properly guided, as always, but mention of Xi's role in handling protests and purges need not be censored.

Chen Youcheng's testimony about Xi in 1989 contains two parts. The first paragraph, about student protesters from Wenzhou trying to enter Ningde from Zhejiang Province, is worth quoting in its entirety:

采访组：您长期在公安战线工作，请讲一讲习近平同志是如何指导公安工作的？有没有什么让您记忆深刻的事情？

陈由诚：… 二是习近平同志妥善处置学潮风波。1989年春夏之交，全国各地发生学潮风波，宁德地区也受到影响。当时，有一批温州学生搞串联，准备从福鼎入境福建，乘坐的汽车上都刷有刺眼的大幅标语。我们及时向地委作了汇报。习近平同志明确批示：第一要认定中央、跟定中央，一切听从党中央指

挥；第二要坚决阻止学生入闽串联，汽车上的标语更不能进宁德、进福建。我们根据他的指示，配合福鼎县在省界分水关设立检查站，一方面劝说学生返回各自的学校，另一方面把汽车上的标语通通洗掉。³

Chen did not specify when the protesters' attempted incursion took place, but my guess is that it must have been on June 4 or June 5, 1989, perhaps even a few days later, when protesters enraged by news of the massacre in Beijing vented their anger and condemned the murders. Why those dates? Students traveling before the imposition of martial law on May 19 would not have been stopped by local leaders, who lacked clear orders from Party Center. Before May 19, a prefectural Party secretary like Xi Jinping would have been watching and waiting for directions. Between May 20 and June 4, it is unlikely that protesters would try to cross provincial borders, especially heading south away from Beijing. It is also unlikely that a cautious local leader like Xi would order security officials to confront and vandalize the property of a small group of students during a time of marked political uncertainty.⁴

Even though, as Joseph Torigian notes, Xi had condemned Cultural Revolution-style “big democracy” in a speech in May 1989,⁵ it was difficult for any local leader to know how to correctly characterize and handle the marches, hunger strikes, and sit-ins of that month. For several weeks in mid-May, there was no way to follow central orders because General Secretary Zhao Ziyang was publicly calling for using peaceful, legal means to end the protests, which contradicted Deng Xiaoping's harsher language from late April about “taking

³ “习近平同志一直要求公安机关当好人民群众的‘保护神’” 《习近平在福建》（二十一），August 3, 2020, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0926/c441135-32236864.html>. Book published as 中央党校采访实录编辑室, ed., 习近平在福建 (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 2021).

⁴ Joseph Torigian depicts Xi as a cautious local leader in “Historical Legacies and Leaders' Worldviews: Communist Party History and Xi's Learned (and Unlearned) Lessons,” *China Perspectives*, no. 1–2 (June 2018): 11–12.

⁵ Torigian, “Historical Legacies and Leaders' Worldviews,” 12–13.

a clear-cut stand” against “turmoil.” In the absence of clarity from Party Center in mid-May 1989, local leaders tried to pacify provincial hunger strikers and their supporters by affirming their patriotism and persuading them to withdraw. Xi Jinping’s language about “firmly believing” and “determinedly following” Party Center did not emerge from his own action or thoughts during a tense moment that tested his leadership. It comes from the post-massacre mantra that all officials in China had to echo starting in June and July 1989 and for the thirty-three years since, through the present day.⁶ We can therefore see Chen’s story as a message from 2020 that Party Center—meaning Deng Xiaoping in the aftermath of the Beijing massacre and Xi Jinping today—must be obeyed without question.

Chen Youcheng’s story itself is either fabricated or is a distraction and deflection from more uncomfortable realities about the uncertainties that Xi and other local officials faced in the spring of 1989. Most curious is why students from Wenzhou would bother to travel to Ningde—why go to a remote region of a neighboring province instead of hitting the streets of Wenzhou itself? It is also odd that Xi Jinping would see students waving banners as a public security threat that needed blocking. Their numbers must have been small and their role was likely marginal, unlike the large student protests in Ningde city itself on May 18 and 19, 1989, about which Chen says nothing. According to the prefectural gazetteer, close to one thousand students marched in Ningde on those days in solidarity with the hunger strikers in Beijing, as did students in the smaller town of Fu’an.⁷ If Xi Jinping had had the foresight to know what “determinedly following Party Center” meant, how could he have allowed hundreds of students to march in multiple towns under his jurisdiction? And if

⁶ This consensus was forged and verbalized in the grim speeches that top leaders gave at the expanded Politburo meeting of June 19–21, 1989, as shown in *The Last Secret: The Final Documents from the June Fourth Crackdown* (Hong Kong: New Century, 2019).

⁷ 宁德地区志, http://data.fjdsfzw.org.cn/2016-09-19/content_544.html.

banners in support of hunger strikers were flying high throughout Ningde on May 18 and 19, why was Xi Jinping so adamant that protesters' slogans "not enter Ningde and Fujian"?

The answer is too complicated for Chen Youcheng to explain: between May 13 and May 19, nobody knew what was going to happen. Gestures of sympathy with the hunger strikers were so widespread and popular that local leaders did not dare to crack down on them. The martial law order from Beijing did what local officials could not do themselves—it swiftly ended largescale protests and sit-ins in the provinces between May 20 and June 4.⁸ After June 4 it was easy, even politically necessary, for local leaders to find evidence of counterrevolutionary rebellion that needed to be blocked and "washed away," like the slogans on the vehicles that Chen's officers stopped at the Fujian-Zhejiang provincial border.

Chen Youcheng's highlighting of Xi's decisiveness in fending off a small handful of marginal protesters at the provincial border reveals one lesson that Xi learned from June Fourth: ignore, deflect from, and cover up the complexities of April and May 1989. Stick to the crude and simple post-massacre narrative of steadfastly obeying Party Center in curbing turmoil. Why, then, would Chen mention the post-massacre purge? The purge was so complex and thorny that most mainland official accounts of 1989 and 1990 ignore or skip over it. Here is what Chen said about Xi Jinping and the purge:

1989年7月30日，[习近平]…作了即兴讲话。他强调了三點：第一，要用黨的十三屆四中全會精神和要求統一全體民警思想，與黨中央保持高度一致，堅決聽從黨中央指揮。第二，要切实抓好清理清查工作。要实事求是，从本地区实际出发，有什么问题就解决什么问题，区别对待，不搞“一刀切”；清查中要掌握区别两类不同性质矛盾的界限，缩小打击面、扩大教育面，不搞人人过关，不要造成人人自危。总的政策要掌握住，要有坚决的态度、彻底的精神，

⁸ Jeremy Brown, *June Fourth: The Tiananmen Protests and Beijing Massacre of 1989* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 180–182.

把清查工作深入下去。…在处理学潮风波过程中，习近平同志在关键时刻指挥有力、处置果断和勇于担当，给我留下了深刻印象。这段经历，也使我终身受益。

On July 30, 1989, Xi Jinping was on firmer ground telling his police chief to align with and follow Party Center. But why was he prioritizing “purge work” (清理清查工作)? In *June Fourth* I discuss how central leaders called the delicate operation of confessions, exposing and informing, and Party membership reregistration “work” (工作), rather than a political movement (运动).⁹ Chen Youcheng’s recollection aligns with this label, even though in such high-profile work units as Xinhua and *People’s Daily* the purge looked more like a Maoist movement than like a bureaucratic exercise.

But was a purge even required in Ningde? Regions and provinces far from Beijing investigated and punished people for having taken part in the protests of 1989. Local leaders had broad leeway in deciding who and what to probe and penalize. Central Document Number Three of June 30, 1989, noted that all work units in Beijing had to do purge work. It also recognized that because the situations of other provinces were different from Beijing’s, provincial and municipal leaders could use Beijing’s methods as a reference point while making their own distinct plans according to local realities.¹⁰ Rather than detailing how Ningde’s particular circumstances required special handling, however, Xi Jinping’s supposedly extemporaneous remarks to Chen Youcheng on July 30, 1989 directly parroted language from Central Document Number Three. Both Xi and the central document wanted

⁹ Brown, *June Fourth*, 218.

¹⁰ 中共中央, 国务院转发中共北京市委, 北京市人民政府“关于彻底清查, 坚决镇压反革命暴乱分子的工作方案的请示”的通知, June 30, 1989, in *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun zong zhengzhi bu bangongting, 政治工作手册* [Political work manual] (N.p.: 1990), 34, reprinted in *Zhongwen chubanwu fuwu zhongxin, ed., 中共重要历史文献资料汇编* [Collection of the Chinese Communist Party’s important historical documents] special series 27, volume 69 (Los Angeles, CA: Zhongwen chubanwu fuwu zhongxin, 2013).

to “seek truth from the facts,” use a “firm attitude,” and distinguish between a small number of enemies and the people.

Chen’s recollection of Xi Jinping’s directive about Ningde’s purge includes a phrase that does not appear in the central document governing purge work: “Do not make everyone pass a political test, don’t make everyone feel insecure.” This language captures the contradiction of the purge in places far removed from Beijing. If there was no genuine test and the stakes were so low that everyone would feel secure, then going through the motions or lying about what one had thought and did in April and May 1989 was a rational response to the fill-in-the-blank forms and written summaries that grassroots work units used to prove that they had done purge work. But in the aftermath of tremendous political uncertainty and tumultuous protests cut short by a military crackdown, people could be forgiven for feeling insecure and nervous. Easing people’s anxieties was easier said than done.

Chen Youcheng’s testimony tells us nothing about how the purge unfolded in Ningde, but it does present Xi Jinping as a leader who was brave and decisive while also being reasonable and flexible, willing to educate and persuade rather than to broadly attack in the aftermath of a complex situation. This is reminiscent of how Chen Yun’s biographers describe the senior leader’s role in ending the purge in May 1990, when Chen told Bo Yibo and Song Renqiong that members of the Central Advisory Commission (中顧委) should be allowed to keep their party membership and not face punishment.¹¹ I was surprised to see Chen Yun’s remarks and letters about ending the purge quoted in such detail in his biography, similar to my surprise when I read Chen Youcheng’s statement about Xi Jinping’s purge principles. This is because, until recently, I did not expect the purge to appear in officially vetted publications in China; I assumed that mentions of it would be censored. The

¹¹ Jin Chongji and Chen Qun, 陈云传 [Biography of Chen Yun] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2005), 2:1805–1806.

purge was an awkward moment for the party, rarely acknowledged in print. This means that on the rare occasions that the words “purge work” appear in a Chinese publication, nothing is accidental or coincidental. Somebody is sending a message.

The publishers of *Xi Jinping in Fujian* approached the issue differently than Chen Yun’s biographers did in 2005. Chen Yun’s biographers wanted to depict him as a master of smoothly settling high-level political drama, so they provided a surprising level of detail about his magnanimity toward wayward comrades. Because the situation was delicate, the biographers implied, it required a man of Chen Yun’s caliber and stature to solve it. Xi Jinping’s stature in the late 1980s was much lower. The stakes of Xi’s decisions at the time were also low. The point of *Xi Jinping in Fujian* is to show that in the remote local context of Ningde, Xi was decisive and correct during a pivotal historical moment.

Xi was so decisive and correct, in fact, that mentioning Xi and the purge in the same sentence was not taboo in 2020. This supports Glenn Tiffert’s argument that, to Xi Jinping, June Fourth is not an embarrassing moment to cover up, but a leadership success to emulate and learn from. By this logic, ongoing censorship of news and imagery related to June Fourth represents unnecessary stasis and caution on the part of censors. According to Tiffert, any time that Xi Jinping refers to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, he is in fact speaking about June Fourth. Tiffert writes, “Recalling the Soviet collapse is the oblique way the CCP reminds its rank-and-file of how narrowly it escaped the same fate, and cautions them that it may be tested yet again. ...Xi Jinping is a notable devotee of this practice.”¹²

The 2021 resolution on the Communist Party’s historical experience replaces the euphemism with a direct connection. It states the quiet part out loud. The resolution refers to the late 1980s and early 1990s as a discrete period when the Soviet Union broke up,

¹² Glenn Tiffert, “30 Years After Tiananmen: Memory in the Era of Xi Jinping,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 2 (April 2019): 39.

communism fell in Eastern Europe, and “serious political turbulence” occurred in China. That’s when China’s “party and government relied on the people to take a clear-cut stand against turmoil, defended socialist state power, and upheld the basic interests of the people.”¹³ The resolution’s fuzzy history and reverse chronological order is not accidental: first, the Soviet Union was disintegrating and communist regimes in Eastern Europe were collapsing; then came 1989 in China, caused by the support and incitement of “hostile international anti-communist and anti-socialist forces.” By characterizing separate places and processes as a single event culminating in a tragedy for the Soviet Union and ending victoriously for China, the resolution erases the hope and solidarity of China’s democracy movement and cuts off all the alternative scenarios that a peaceful or negotiated solution in Beijing could have resulted in.

June Fourth and the post-massacre purge are not taboo topics as long as people depict them in the way that Chen Youcheng did. I expect that propaganda bureaus and internet enforcers will slowly catch up to Xi Jinping on this issue in the next few years. They are still lagging, as shown by the shutdown of internet personality Li Jiaqi’s livestream when he displayed a “tank cake” on June 3, 2022.¹⁴ If Xi Jinping had been aware of the incident in real time, he probably would have said that the censors had been overzealous—in the unlikely event that Li Jiaqi was referring to 1989, there is no longer a need to censor photos or videos featuring Tank Man. When Jiang Zemin told Mike Wallace in 2000 that no tank ran over or killed Tank Man in 1989, Jiang was hearkening back to propaganda created in 1989 arguing that the famous image should be seen as nothing more than a symbol of the

¹³ 中共中央关于党的百年奋斗重大成就和历史经验的决议, November 16, 2021, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-11/16/content_5651269.htm.

¹⁴ Vincent Ni, “Li Jiaqi: Chinese Influencer’s Career Hangs In Balance After ‘Tank Cake’ Stream,” *The Guardian*, June 9, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/09/li-jiaqi-chinese-influencer-career-tiananmen-square-tank-cake-stream>.

PLA's restraint in handling a lawbreaker.¹⁵ I expect that Xi Jinping will be more and more willing to openly celebrate the crackdown in the years to come, possibly returning to the loud "Defenders of the Republic" message of 1989 (a message that Xi's wife Peng Liyuan helped to promote by singing "Most Beloved People" to soldiers in Tiananmen Square).¹⁶ In the second half of 1989, as traumatized survivors recoiled in disgust from pro-PLA propaganda and went through the grim motions of the purge, euphemisms and silence replaced open celebrations of the military operation. That was then. In Xi Jinping's new era, events that prove the Communist Party's correctness can and must be mentioned; messy details and incorrect historical depictions must be squashed. This approach means that because purge work after June Fourth was correct and necessary, it is acceptable to depict Xi Jinping as correctly and capably leading Ningde's purge.

Back in 2015, before Chen Youcheng went on the record about how Xi Jinping's courageous handling of events in Ningde deeply impressed him, I gave my first public talk about the purge and made the point that every general secretary of the Communist Party since June Fourth—Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping—owed his position to the illegal and unconstitutional purge of Zhao Ziyang in 1989. At the time, I meant that a secretive and bloody end run around the Communist Party's own rules and procedures had undermined the credibility and legitimacy of each leadership transition since 1989. But now I see that Xi Jinping himself would happily draw a direct line from June Fourth to his ascension. His

¹⁵ For an observer's account of this moment, including photographs from the People's Revolution Military Museum in Beijing, see David Moser, "It Was 1989: The Tank Man in Beijing's Military History Museum," *The Anthill*, June 2, 2014, <https://theanthill.org/1989>.

¹⁶ 共和国卫士 (Defenders of the republic) was published by Jinan chubanshe in 1989; the PLA's August 1 Film Studio also released a documentary film with an identical title that year, commemorating the soldiers who died. Regarding Peng Liyuan's role, see Gillian Wong, "China Censors Photo of First Lady Peng Liyuan Singing to Tiananmen Troops," CTV News (via The Associated Press), March 29, 2013, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/china-censors-photo-of-first-lady-peng-liyuan-singing-to-tiananmen-troops-1.1216200>.

interpretation of 1989 contains only two possible paths: one road leads to collapse and disintegration, the other leads to power, strength, and prosperity under Xi's indispensable helmsmanship. No wonder Chen Youcheng's testimony about Xi Jinping blocking students and carrying out the post-massacre purge was openly published in 2020. June Fourth is Xi's talisman.

Xi's Longer-Term Lessons

Chen Youcheng's memories indicate what Xi Jinping and his imagemakers want the world to think he learned from June Fourth. We can look at his actions since he became top leader to assess how he has put lessons from June into practice. Examining what practices have intensified or changed since 2013 when it comes to handling protests, unrest, activist organizing on university campuses, and other apparent threats to the socialist system offer clues about how Xi is attempting to prevent—and how he would manage—such crises as a sudden outbreak of huge demonstrations calling for political change in Beijing.

Lesson 1: Minimize Death, Maximize Detentions

The most morally objectionable and indefensible part of the Beijing massacre of 1989 was the mass slaughter of unarmed civilians by heavily armed soldiers who fired machine guns and drove tanks and armored personnel carriers into crowds. Several units of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) vigorously attacked and invaded China's capital, not hesitating to use deadly force, but many other units showed little enthusiasm for the operation and found ways to avoid shooting and killing. After the massacre, such leaders as Li Peng and Chi Haotian implicitly expressed their dismay at the scale of the bloodshed, lamenting that they had lacked sufficient nonlethal equipment.¹⁷ Since 1989, the People's Armed Police

¹⁷ Brown, *June Fourth*, 140–41.

(PAP) has been given the budget and resources to make it, and not the PLA, responsible for internal security. Although the PAP used deadly force in Guangdong in 2005 and again in Lhasa in 2008,¹⁸ its central role in quelling unrest without shooting bullets is a direct result of the lesson that top leaders learned in 1989: strafing civilians reflects poorly on the Communist Party.

Minimizing civilian casualties by equipping the PAP to handle internal security is one lesson that top leaders learned from 1989. More broadly, recently under Xi Jinping the Communist Party has adopted mass surveillance and detention—specifically internment camps in Xinjiang and lockdowns in Shanghai—as an alternative to killing people in the name of internal security. This is new. When I spoke to people about the post-massacre purge during the second half of 1989, many people said something along the lines of: “What are they going to do, arrest everyone who marched? You can’t arrest a million people.” They were implying that the vast scale of the protests in Beijing, when it seemed like most of the city was marching to support the hunger strikers, made it impossible to punish everyone who had participated. At the time, they were correct: the purge made people promise that they would obey the Party, but it ignored and accepted their falsehoods about what they had done in May 1989, allowing them to move on with their lives. And it imposed criminal punishment on a relatively small number of “rioters” (暴徒) and “black hands.”

Xi Jinping has stated that his approach toward internal security in 2014 has emerged from lessons learned after two terror attacks: the Tiananmen vehicle explosion of October 28, 2013 and the Kunming knife massacre of March 1, 2014. But we can also see the pre-emptive internment of Uyghurs and other Muslim peoples in Xinjiang as a lesson learned

¹⁸ Joel Wuthnow, “The Re-Conquerors of Hong Kong? A Primer on China’s People’s Armed Police,” War on the Rocks, August 23, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/08/the-re-conquerors-of-hong-kong-a-primer-on-chinas-peoples-armed-police/>.

from June Fourth. In 2014, Xi Jinping said, “Arrest those who should be arrested” (該抓的抓) and then in 2018 Xinjiang Party secretary Chen Quanguo repeated an order from 2017 to “round up all those who should be rounded up” (應收盡收).¹⁹ Anthropologist Darren Byler has shown the staggering human costs of the mass internment of more than one million people, with the stated purpose deradicalized them and preventing them from committing terrorist acts. Scholars and governments outside of China have used the term “cultural genocide” or simply “genocide” to describe internments targeting Muslims in Xinjiang, paired with intrusive surveillance, forced labor, family separation, birth limits, and residential boarding schools.²⁰

Genocide in Xinjiang over the past five years is a world apart from the Beijing massacre of 1989, but what binds them together is Xi Jinping’s view that both crackdowns addressed mortal threats to continued Communist Party rule in China (in the Party’s view, such threats are national security threats). In 1989, the Party addressed what it saw as a threat by killing civilians in order to clear Tiananmen Square while declining to arrest the million-plus people who protested. In 2017 in Xinjiang, the method changed. By arresting everyone while avoiding mass killings, the atrocity in Xinjiang has not only persisted over a sustained period of time, but has been endorsed and supported by millions of Han people in China. Han supporters of “anti-terrorism” in Xinjiang see it as a necessary sacrifice of individual liberties to keep the nation safe, and—undergirded by anti-Uyghur racism—dismiss foreign claims of genocide as ludicrous because what is happening in Xinjiang seems so different from the relatively uncontested examples of genocide in Nazi Germany or Rwanda.

¹⁹ David Tobin, “The ‘Xinjiang Papers’: How Xi Jinping Commands Policy in the People’s Republic of China,” University of Sheffield School of East Asian Studies, May 2022, 32, <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/media/33298/download?attachment>.

²⁰ Joanne Smith Finley, “Why Scholars and Activists Increasingly Fear a Uyghur Genocide in Xinjiang,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no. 3 (July 3, 2021): 348–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2020.1848109>.

Han people, regardless of whether they support, ignore, or deplore mass detention in Xinjiang, have not found themselves facing cultural destruction since 2017. They have, however, suffered through their own form of what seemed like indefinite mass detention in 2022 during the Covid lockdowns in Shanghai and other cities. Strict restrictions on movement came at a high cost to mental health and people's livelihoods. But they aimed to—and succeeded in—avoiding the staggering pandemic casualties that have beset many other jurisdictions less willing or able to control the spread of the coronavirus. Compare the cumulative confirmed Covid-19 deaths per million people as of August 11, 2022: China has 3.67, Japan 277.49, Taiwan 391.54, Canada 1,137.67, Hong Kong 1,274.92, United Kingdom 2,768.74, and the United States 3,075.17.²¹ China's number is surely an undercount, and Chinese officials badly botched the initial outbreak in Wuhan. But Xi Jinping's pandemic policy has been consistent with what he learned from June Fourth: lock people up instead of causing their deaths.

Lesson 2: Be a Better Deng (Old-Man Politics 2.0)

In *June Fourth*, I draw heavily from Chung Yen-lin's work about "old-man politics" in describing the broken political system that contributed to tragedy in 1989.²² The eighty-four-year-old Deng Xiaoping wanted to retire and tried to put reliable and loyal younger successors in place. But a team of other elderly senior revolutionaries, troubled by Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang's policies and approaches, and feeling disrespected by insufficient consultation, convinced Deng that he was indispensable and that Hu and Zhao had to be

²¹ "Cumulative Confirmed COVID-19 Deaths Per Million People," Our World in Data, August 11, 2022, <https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer?facet=none&Metric=Confirmed+deaths&Interval=Cumulative&Relative+to+Population=true&Color+by+test+positivity=false&country=USA~ITA~CAN~DEU~GBR~FRA~JPN~CHN~TWN~HKG>.

²² Yen-Lin Chung, "The Ousting of General Secretary Hu Yaobang: The Roles Played by Peng Zhen and Other Party Elders," *China Review* 19, no. 1 (2019): 89–122.

removed as general secretaries. Chung's insights, along with Joseph Torigian's point that Deng's rule was a personal dictatorship rather than what he claimed was collective leadership,²³ point to another lesson that Xi Jinping has learned from June Fourth: emulate Deng's disdain for institutionalized group leadership, while limiting old-man politics to a single indispensable aging man—himself.

Xi is not yet elderly. He is fifteen years younger than Deng was in 1989. By amending the constitution to remove term limits on the General Secretary, however, he is set to rule into his eighties and beyond, should he live that long. In the 2020s, propaganda about Xi Jinping's historical greatness and indispensability far surpasses celebrations of Deng Xiaoping's role in history. Nonetheless, as Glenn Tiffert argues, Xi Jinping sees Deng's decisiveness in 1989 as a model of how to save China from ruin. If it worked for Deng to hold on to power well into his ninth decade, why would Xi Jinping shy away from doing the same? It is difficult to see how Xi will avoid the challenges of choosing a suitable successor as he ages, but by sidelining previous top leaders and eliminating rivals, he has attempted to minimize the headaches that he knows afflicted Deng Xiaoping during the 1980s.

Lesson 3: Be Patient

Many of the alternative paths available to Deng Xiaoping, Li Peng, and Yang Shangkun in 1989 that would have avoided bloodshed involved waiting for the protests to fizzle out. Instead of waiting, the leaders lost patience and imposed an arbitrary deadline to clear Tiananmen Square. They feared that large crowds would flock to the square on Sunday, June 4, because Sunday was workers' only day off. They were nervous about a plan to use the National People's Congress Standing Committee's next meeting, scheduled for June 20,

²³ Joseph Torigian, "The Shadow of Deng Xiaoping on Chinese Elite Politics," *War on the Rocks*, January 30, 2017, warontherocks.com/2017/01/the-shadow-of-deng-xiaoping-on-chinese-elite-politics.

1989, to sack Li Peng and cancel martial law.²⁴ So they insisted that the army clear Tiananmen Square by dawn on June 4.

As much as Xi Jinping seems to admire Deng Xiaoping's decisiveness in ending the Tiananmen protests, the CCP's relative patience in handling protests in Hong Kong over the past ten years shows that Xi has learned the value of using space and time to meet his goals. Initial blunders reinforced this lesson. In Hong Kong in 2014 and 2019, impatient police use of tear gas against peaceful protesters fueled further demonstrations and united millions of people who marched to condemn police misconduct.²⁵ For the CCP, encouraging Hong Kong's government to back off and let the Umbrella Movement lose momentum fizzle out in 2014 proved to be an effective alternative to a violent crackdown. As weeks turned into months, instead of raging against police violence, some Hong Kongers tired of the inconvenience of detouring around blockades and sit-ins.²⁶ In 2019, violent police crackdowns against protesters were more sustained and extreme than in 2014, but the authorities used the new National Security Law to patiently arrest protesters in the weeks, months, and years after they allegedly took part in demonstrations.²⁷

At this stage in his reign, Xi Jinping can afford to avoid making impatient moves during crises because he can envision himself ruling for another ten-plus years. He has time to plan, wait to see how things develop, devote additional resources to problems, shuffle personnel, and regroup. If an octogenarian Xi were to face a crisis in the mid-2030s, as Deng Xiaoping did in 1989, he could find it difficult to maintain the patient, long-game approach

²⁴ Brown, *June Fourth*, 146–48.

²⁵ Ming-sho Ho, *Challenging Beijing's Mandate of Heaven: Taiwan's Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), 127–28.

²⁶ Ho, *Challenging Beijing's Mandate of Heaven*, 136–38.

²⁷ Eric Yan-ho Lai and Thomas Kellogg, "Arrest Data Show National Security Law Has Dealt a Hard Blow to Free Expression in Hong Kong," ChinaFile, April 5, 2022, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/features/arrest-data-show-national-security-law-has-dealt-hard-blow-free>.

he has adopted in his sixties. The older he gets, the more his horizon will shrink. Xi's new era of old-man politics could prove dangerous for people, movements, opponents—and countries—he sees as threats or obstacles to his goals.

What Have Other People in China Learned?

Leadership matters, especially during crises like June Fourth. This is why studies of elite politics are crucial, in spite of the difficulties in interpreting the behavior of leaders in a system as opaque and authoritarian as China's. But it is equally important to ask what lessons other people in China—farmers, workers, students, teachers, entrepreneurs, peddlers—have learned from June Fourth. Participants and observers from all walks of life affected how events unfolded in 1989; their lives since then have been shaped by what they did and did not learn.

The irony of extensive censorship about June Fourth in China is that if people do not know what happened, they cannot learn lessons from it. The central lesson that the CCP has wanted to convey since 1989—obey Party Center or else—goes unlearned if the Party's erasure of history is too complete. Is this what got Li Jiaqi in trouble? Did he not know the significance of livestreaming a tank cake on June 3? Possibly. He would not have been the first to pay a price for ignorance about June Fourth. In June 2007, Chen Yunfei took advantage of an advertising agency worker's obliviousness by placing a notice in the *Chengdu Evening News* stating, "Pay tribute to the strong mothers of the June Fourth victims." As Louisa Lim writes, "When she called [Chen] back to ask what the date meant, he told her that it referred to the anniversary of a mining accident." After the ad ran, Chen was detained, "three editors at the paper were demoted, and the advertising agency was

dropped. All of them were paradoxically victims of both the success and failure of government censorship,” Lim writes.²⁸

Even if someone knows nothing about the Tiananmen protests and Beijing massacre of 1989, they still live in a post-June Fourth political culture that has taught them key lessons. One is that organizing for a better future can be costly. Rather than being a source of hope and inspiration, as it was during the 1980s, getting together in groups to discuss political change has become a dead end. Collective advocacy for political alternatives in China is too costly for most people. The consequences of activism—prison, house arrest, constant surveillance, exile—are career- and life-destroying.²⁹ Individuals who buck the system, like Liu Xiaobo, know that they must be prepared to sacrifice everything. They know that their family members will suffer because of their actions. As Perry Link has argued, dissidence is an irrational choice, which is why so few people dare to take the risk.³⁰

In 1989, many people at China’s universities, including students, teachers, and administrators, took big risks. They were central participants in the protest movement in Beijing, Changsha, Xi’an, and many other cities. A scholarly atmosphere that encouraged risk-taking and critical thinking fueled widespread participation in the demonstrations of 1989. Under Xi Jinping, Chinese universities are no longer sites of critical inquiry. Elizabeth J. Perry has documented a “remarkable turnaround in China’s campus climate” since 1989. Universities do not promote liberal inquiry, but are instead “oases of political compliance,” Perry writes. This is because the system provides “attractive incentives to encourage certain types of scholarly productivity” and “diverts interest and energy away from

²⁸ Louisa Lim, *The People’s Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 96.

²⁹ Xu Youyu and Hua Ze, *In the Shadow of the Rising Dragon: Stories of Repression in the New China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

³⁰ Perry Link, “The Evolution of Liu Xiaobo: From Tiananmen Hunger Striker to Grassroots Rights Defender,” Department of History, Simon Fraser University, May 27, 2020, <https://youtu.be/WL8KOVC32hQ>.

independent criticism in favor of enjoying state-supplied rewards.”³¹ Learning from the lessons of 1989, China’s top leaders have turned Chinese universities into sources of regime support rather than criticism. Students and professors alike have learned that critical thinking and organizing will not be rewarded. The risks are too high.

On the ground in Chinese cities and villages, some older lessons from June Fourth have been superseded by new lessons in the Xi Jinping era. One grassroots lesson emanating from 1989 that many people learned well was: keep your mouth shut, do not get involved in politics, make money, and everything will be fine. This mantra led to comfortable lives for hundreds of millions of people. The problem under Xi Jinping, however, whether in Xinjiang since 2017 or Shanghai in April 2022, is that life can suddenly turn upside down for people who had been content to quietly pursue wealth while staying away from politics. Genocide in Xinjiang and extreme lockdowns in Shanghai show that anybody anywhere in China is vulnerable to the arbitrary wielding of power by an unaccountable dictator.

Xu Xinyue, a psychologist in Shanghai interviewed by Vivian Wang of the *New York Times*, witnessed the toll on mental health caused by pandemic controls that rocked the sense of security many Shanghai residents previously took for granted. Callers to a national counseling hotline “were questioning why they had worked so hard in the first place, having seen how money could not ensure their comfort or safety during lockdown,” according to Xu. “Money has lost its original value,” Xu said, “This has upended the way they always thought, leaving them a bit lost.” After the months-long lockdown lifted at midnight on June 1, 2022, Anna Qin told the *New York Times* how great it felt to be free to walk and bicycle around the

³¹ Elizabeth J. Perry, “Educated Acquiescence: How Academia Sustains Authoritarianism in China,” *Theory and Society* 49, no. 1 (2019): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-019-09373-1>.

city. But the freedom felt fragile. “Now it’s closed, now it’s open, and we have no control. And now we’re supposed to be happy,” Qin said.³²

Defenders of China’s direction since 1989 point to China’s stability and wealth to justify the June Fourth crackdown as a necessary sacrifice. But when money does not provide protection from the arbitrary wielding of state power, and when the state’s attempt to promote stability deeply destabilizes families in Urumchi, Shanghai, and elsewhere, June Fourth looks more like a wrong turn than a necessary sacrifice. What if the deepest lesson of June Fourth is that grassroots political engagement is an essential part of a healthy society?

³² Vivian Wang, “‘Very Fragile’: Shanghai Wrestles With Psychological Scars of Lockdown,” *The New York Times*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/29/world/asia/shanghai-lockdown-china.html>.