The Big March of April 27, 1989

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We all know that the large scale, student-led pro-democracy movement that took place in China twenty years ago was triggered by the April 15, 1989, death of Hu Yaobang, the former General-secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). After a stalemate between the government and the protesters that lasted for almost two months, the Party eventually gave the order to open fire at the masses, resulting in the June Fourth Massacre that saw many peaceful protesters killed or injured by military forces. To this day, there has not been an independent investigation into the crime, nor any open, reliable counting of the victims. Some facts, though, are clear, such as that the majority of victims were not students but ordinary urban residents of Beijing, the capital city.

However, a careful look at the actual development of events reveals that, in the first ten days or so, the great majority of protesters were students. When Hu Yaobang’s funeral was held on April 22 and the casket was carried from the funeral site, the Great Hall of People by Tiananmen Square, to its final resting place in west suburban Beijing, there were not many people spontaneously lining up the big thoroughfare to pay their final tribute to Hu – at least, far fewer than had turned more than a decade earlier, when there was a massive showing at the funeral of former Premier Zhou Enlai in January 1976. Those mourning crowds sent political shock waves through the capital.

A key early turning point in 1989, when the protest changed from a student movement to a movement of the masses, came on April 27, when a big “illegal” march took place in Beijing. It was an unprecedented event in the history of the People’s Republic. The immediate cause of the march was a notorious editorial, issued by the Party’s mouthpiece, the People’s Daily, on April 26. Social discontent had been widespread for some time, due to setbacks of the economic reform (including near-run-away inflation in the summer of 1988) and tightened politico-economic control in early 1989 (including reissued grocery coupons and reduced space for political commentary or proposals at the annual National People’s Congress and National Political Consultative Conference). Deploying formulated expressions from the later stage of the Cultural Revolution of the early-to-mid 1970s and full of implied threats of political suppression, the April 26 editorial provoked immediate and strong reactions among city dwellers. It had been almost a whole decade since the Reform started and general reflections on the Cultural Revolution had gone from redressing wrongs to searching for cultural roots and to appealing for democracy and renewed enlightenment. Why, the people wondered, did the government decide to revert to an “old” sort of rhetoric, just because there had been some student protests?

I still remember vividly the events of those days. On the morning of April 26 we had just announced in our first press conference the establishment of the Beijing Association of College Students (BACS, gao zi lian). That afternoon, the municipal Party Committee held a meeting in the Great Hall of People of ten-thousand Party cadres working in the educational sector, the goal of which was to figure out and mobilize support to implement strategies to control the student unrest. In the evening, our newly elected BACS president was put under great personal pressure in his student dorm and forced to issue a cancellation of the planned march for the next day. The authorities without delay drove him to announce the cancellation on major campuses in the wee hours of April 27. Many campuses saw student internal conflicts in varied degrees, caused by the confusion. Yet, students from the biggest campuses in northwest Beijing broke blocked gates and rushed out to the streets. Soon they joined each other to form a considerably huge, mile-long column.
Most importantly, well before student marchers reached Chang'an Avenue, the main east-west thoroughfare across central Beijing through Tiananmen Square, the west section of Chang'an was already completely empty of motor vehicles. Urban residents from all directions came to fill the broad street, climbing up trees, roofs and billboards along the street, and soon become the major force facing the pre-installed police line on the way leading to Tiananmen. It was these people who eventually pushed away lines of police right in front of Zhongnanhai, the residential compound of Deng Xiaoping and other central Party figures, just to the west of the square. When the marchers kept on eastward after passing the Square and along Chang'an Avenue, supporting bystanders grew rapidly in both number and enthusiastic energy, creating far greater scenes of protest than the then rather exhausted student marchers.

I was walking on the east stretch of the Second Ring Road by early dusk, when all the sudden public loudspeakers on streetlamp poles started broadcasting, after being silent for years since the late 1970s. They said that the government was ready to initiate public dialogues with people from all walks of society. Students and the masses gathered around all broke into cheers. It was rumored at the time that the Party elderly leaders were shocked by what they saw on monitoring screen inside Zhongnanhai and had to rethink how to deal with the crisis. The previous hawkish line was replaced by a softened approach.

When the Big March of April 27 took place, on the student side, the newborn student organization was not only very frail, but had also borne the blow of blackmail from the government in advance. Therefore, though the Big March was a surprise success to both students and the government, it was not a "victory of Reason" as some intellectuals tend to describe it. Nor was it a movement capable of controlling a "victorious retreat," as some others suggested. Instead, it was a success brought about largely by the unprecedented support of the great masses of Beijing. It was a collective refusal by the society to go back to the old model of top-down social mobilization and management, formed in the post-1969 Cultural Revolution years. The success of the Big March, therefore, powerfully demonstrates the political nature of the 1989 protest movement, as well as its essential demands for political reform of democratization.

On the side of the government, how to handle the protest was inevitably entangled in internal power struggles from the start. After Hu Yaobang's funeral on April 22, Zhao Ziyang, the then General-secretary of the Party, went to visit North Korea, leaving the mess to Party functionaries to be handled in an "old fashioned" way that led to the issuing of the April 26 Editorial. On the other hand, the turnaround of official policy on the evening of April 27, trailing the success of the Big March, shows that internal discord and uncertainty were already present inside the highest level of the Party leadership. Policymakers were still searching for ways to get out of trouble—if threatening intimidation did not work, then let us try a friendlier face. Following this, then, we saw a number of new moves: partly televised – and, again, unprecedented in the PRC – dialogue between the State Council's spokesperson and selected students on April 29; a series of talks Zhao Ziyang gave in early May, openly commenting on economic reforms passing the "test of market" and political reforms the "test of democratization"; and the unusual permission secured on May 13 by the famous woman journalist Dai Qing to publish on a whole page of the official Guangming Daily a forum's transcript by leading liberal intellectuals. How could anyone have imagined these "new directions" had there not been the Big March on April 27? To accuse the students of "getting involved in the Party's internal power struggle" after Martial Law was issued on May 20, as if the youngsters uncannily destroyed a wonderful promising future, is an unrealistically optimistic view of the situation before that date.

The fundamental nature of the 1989 Chinese conflict lies in the masses' demands for the rights of political participation, in opposition to the CCP regime's determination not to share its political power with society. To commemorate those who lost their lives in the bloody military suppression, it is necessary for us, I believe, to insist on what the "Tiananmen Mothers" group, led by Ding Zilin who lost her 17-year-old son to the June Fourth Massacre, has put forward as the principles in dealing with this painful historical scar:

Speaking out the truth; refusing to forget; pursuing justice; and appealing to conscience.