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China

The Forgotten Socialists of Tiananmen Square

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What the world remembers about the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests were the students. But above all, it was a mass workers' uprising for socialist democracy.

Public discourse on the 1989 Tiananmen Democracy Movement has been dominated by two narratives. The most prevalent interprets the movement in the framework of “democracy vs. authoritarianism.” The “democracy” in this narrative almost always refers to liberal democracy. In this telling, intellectuals and college students deeply influenced by Western liberalism hoped to push the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to accelerate political liberalization, which had been rolled out only intermittently during the 1980s. The goal of the movement was to keep democratization advancing apace with marketization.

The second narrative, much less influential than the first but nonetheless widely circulated among segments of the Chinese and international left, interprets the movement in the framework of “socialism vs. capitalism.” In this narrative, China’s marketization reforms in the 1980s produced severe inflation and rising inequality, which hurt the livelihoods of urban populations and gravely intensified discontent. Therefore, the 1989 Tiananmen Democracy Movement was in fact an anti-market, anticapitalist movement triggered by material grievances.

Both of these narratives are flawed. In the “democracy vs. authoritarianism” narrative, the protagonists were always intellectuals and students. Almost completely ignored were workers and ordinary residents of Beijing, who played a significant role in the movement. In fact, measured by both the estimated death tolls during the final massacre on the evening of June 3 and early morning of June 4 and the intensity of repression thereafter, workers paid a much higher price than students and intellectuals, in a way similar to the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea. Yet in the liberal narrative, workers are largely absent.

The “socialism vs. capitalism” narrative acknowledges workers’ role in the movement but obscures the fact that democratic aspirations were indeed the dominant theme. These aspirations cannot be captured by the economic dimension of “anticapitalism.” Moreover, even though discontent with marketization proved crucial in forging workers’ participation, workers in the movement did not express any wish to return to the era before marketization. Almost absent as well was any nostalgia about the Maoist era or Mao himself.

We need to simultaneously break away from both of these narratives, rejecting the exclusive focus on students and intellectuals, taking workers seriously, and at the same time acknowledging that “democracy” was the core demand of workers as well. Most importantly, “democracy” as understood by workers was different from the liberal notion embraced by students and intellectuals; it was a distinctly *socialist* vision of democracy premised on the agency of the working class. This dimension of the 1989 Tiananmen Democracy Movement, as a workers’ movement fighting for socialist democracy, is important both for the writing of history and politically, but has been mostly forgotten.

A Workers’ Movement

A paper published in 1993 by Andrew Walder and Gong Xiaoxia traced the trajectory of workers’ participation in the movement through the rise and fall of the Beijing Workers’ Autonomous Federation (WAF). After Hu Yaobang, a much-revered pro-reform CCP leader, passed away on April 15, 1989, students in Beijing’s universities started setting up memorials on their campuses. At the same time, pockets of workers started gathering in the Tiananmen Square to exchange views about current affairs. Over the next few days, the number of workers gathering in the

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square increased, reaching more than a hundred at times. On April 20, after a student sit-in in front of Zhongnanhai, the CCP leaders' residential compound, was suppressed by the police, a few angry workers decided to form an organization, which turned out to be the WAF in embryo. The workers' organization was established even earlier than the Beijing Students' Autonomous Federation.

However, the WAF at that time was just an informal, loose network of dozens. It didn't operate publicly or have established organizational structures. Members barely knew each other. In April, students remained front and center in the movement. From the first big march on April 17, to the Zhongnanhai sit-in, to the April 22 rally outside Hu Yaobang's official memorial ceremony, to the April 27 march against a harsh editorial published in the official CCP mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*, in which tens of thousands participated, and finally an even bigger march on May 4 — the participants were almost exclusively university students.

But after May 4, the students' movement stagnated and declined. Students didn't know what to do next, and were hesitant to escalate further. Most of them returned to the classroom. Facing such a deadlock, a group of radical students started planning a hunger strike to reenergize the movement. In this sense, the hunger strikers accomplished their goal. On May 13, its first day, a record-breaking 300,000 protested in and occupied Tiananmen Square.

The beginning of the hunger strike marked a turning point for the movement. Despite a temporary revival of students' enthusiasm, the movement unavoidably declined again; after May 13, the number of students participating in the Tiananmen Square occupation dwindled, with more and more students returning to campuses. However, the students' hunger strike marked the beginning of workers' participation *en masse*. Workers' enthusiasm was seen not only in numbers, but in the fact that they started to organize their own rallies and marches and display their own banners and slogans. Workers became a major force in the movement from that point on.

Many workers decided to participate both due to sympathy with the hunger-striking students, and from a sense moral outrage against the CCP's indifference. A worker I interviewed told me he decided to get involved "simply because the state was treating students too badly." As the number of workers participating in the movement exploded, the WAF started to go public and recruit members on a large scale.

What boosted workers' participation even further was the declaration of martial law on May 20. As military regiments marched toward Beijing from all sides, a huge number of workers and working-class residents spontaneously went to the streets in Beijing's outskirts, trying to obstruct the military. Workers erected barricades and assembled human walls. They brought water and food to soldiers to fraternize with them and convince them to abandon their arms and stop their march. In other words, it was workers, not students, who directly confronted the most powerful, repressive apparatus of the state. And workers won temporarily: the military was prevented from entering Beijing's inner core for two weeks.

As Rosa Luxemburg famously argued, workers' radical consciousness grows out of the process of struggle itself. Nineteen eighty-nine proved this. During the struggle to obstruct the military, workers started to realize the power of their spontaneous organization and action. This was self-liberation on an unprecedented level. A huge wave of self-organizing ensued. The WAF's membership grew exponentially and other workers' organizations, both within and across workplaces, mushroomed.

The development of organization led to a radicalization of action. Workers started organizing self-armed quasi-militias, such as "picket corps" and "dare-to-die brigades," to monitor and broadcast the military's whereabouts. These quasi-militias were also responsible for maintaining public order, so as not to provide any pretext for military intervention. In a sense, Beijing became a city self-managed by workers. It was reminiscent of Petrograd's self-armed workers organized in the soviets in the months between Russia's February and October revolutions. At the same

time, Beijing workers built many more barricades and fortifications on the street. In many factories they organized strikes and slowdowns. A possible general strike was put on the table as well. Many workers started to build connections between factories, to prepare for a general strike.

Self-arming, self-organizing, and striking had an altogether different meaning than marching, rallying, and occupying. The latter were self-expressive acts, whereas the former were self-empowering, a way to concretely build power over the production process and the management of society as a whole. The radicalism was not in the words workers proclaimed, but in the acts themselves. This was where the movement stood towards the end of May and early June: the students' movement was struggling with declining enthusiasm, dwindling participation, and constant infighting, but the workers' movement, through self-organization and self-mobilization, was growing stronger and more radical by the hour.

There is no way to ascertain why the CCP leaders finally decided to order the military to enter Beijing "no matter what" and crush the movement. But a plausible speculation is that what terrified the party leaders was not the declining students' movement, but the rapidly growing and radicalizing workers' movement. This is consistent with the fact that workers faced much more severe repression than students both during and after the massacre.

What Kind of Democracy?

Throughout the movement, public discourse and international media attention was largely monopolized by university students and intellectuals, partly because they were media-savvy and spoke English. Workers remained relatively silent. As noted above, the workers' vision of democracy was reflected first and foremost in what they did, not what they proclaimed. Through a host of different kinds of actions to concretely build power to control production and manage society, workers put into practice the motto that "workers are the masters of society" — something the CCP had long promised but never realized. The prevalence of self-arming, self-organizing, and striking spoke volumes about workers' radical democratic imaginary.

At the same time, although workers made fewer speeches and published fewer writings than students, their discourses, when examined closely, showed an understanding of democracy very different from that of the students.

According to Walder and Gong's analysis of pamphlets published by the WAF, workers were first and foremost concerned with economic issues directly affecting their livelihoods, such as inflation and inequality. These problems, which emerged during the marketization reforms, produced strongly negative sentiments toward the reforms. However, workers didn't focus solely on the economic dimension, but provided an explicitly political understanding of these economic problems and articulated a vision of democracy accordingly. Workers understood that inflation and inequality had a common, underlying political source: "Stalinist dictatorial bureaucracy."

The WAF's analysis of inflation attributed rising prices to the bureaucrats who controlled pricing of domestic and imported goods and deliberately set the prices high to make room for their own hoarding and profiteering. Therefore, the only way to eradicate inflation and inequality was to overthrow the bureaucracy as a whole and restore to workers the power to control the production and circulation of goods. This democratic vision based on anti-bureaucratism is reminiscent of the workers' rebellions of 1966 and 1967, the early years of the Cultural Revolution.

Workers' direct experience with the oppressiveness of bureaucracy didn't arise from the absence of freedom of speech or voting rights in the formal political sphere, but from the lack of power in the workplace. For workers, the bluntest manifestation of "dictatorial bureaucracy" was one-man rule in the factories. A worker interviewed by Walder and Gong said:

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(I)n the workshop, does what the workers say count, or what the leader says? We later talked about it. In the factory the director is a dictator; what one man says goes. If you view the state through the factory, it's about the same: one-man rule... Our objective was not very high; we just wanted workers to have their own independent organization.

In other words, while the workers who participated in the movement were undoubtedly fighting for democracy, “democracy” in workers’ eyes meant first and foremost democracy in the workplace. The WAF’s articulation of the democratic ideal was intertwined with sharp criticisms of China’s official trade union system, which didn’t really represent workers, and with a vision of workers having the right to organize independent unions, supervise managers, and bargain collectively.

This ideal far exceeded opposition to marketization per se, directly attacking the political foundation of the marketization reforms: bureaucratic dictatorship. Democracy as defined by workers meant the replacement of bureaucracy by workers’ self-management, and the first step towards this goal was to establish democracy and independent organization in the workplace.

This vision of democracy clearly had a class character. It was premised on the agency of the working class. In sharp contrast, the democratic ideal articulated by intellectuals and students was composed of a set of supposedly universalist liberal values. Even though students were also deeply discontented with corruption and official hoarding, their discontent pointed towards an abstract notion of democratic rights and liberty, unlike workers’ belief that democracy should first be established in the workplace, over the production process. In other words, the democratic ideal embraced by students was devoid of class content — although students’ demands still ended up revealing their class interests: among the seven demands formulated by students during their April 17 rally, one was to increase state spending on education and elevate the material well-being of intellectuals.

For workers, democracy and marketization were diametrically opposed. Marketization emboldened the same bureaucrats who already monopolized political power. Since bureaucracy and marketization were mutually constitutive, they had to be overthrown together. But for students, it was democracy and marketization that were mutually constitutive. Corruption and official hoarding during the marketization reforms reflected, not the flaws, but the incompleteness of marketization, as well as the fact that democratization was lagging behind economic reform. Therefore, students argued that democratization and marketization should go hand in hand. In fact, “further expansion of economic liberalization” had already been a core demand articulated by students during their 1986–1987 protest wave, widely seen as the forerunner of the 1989 movement.

To sum up, the core differences between workers’ democracy and students’ democracy were as follows: the former was based on a class discourse, the latter was supposedly class-neutral; the former targeted the workplace first, the latter was based on an abstract notion of individual liberty; the former solidly rejected marketization, the latter embraced it. It is in this sense that workers had a socialist democratic vision whereas students held a liberal democratic one.

The Disconnect Between Students and Workers

Workers and students displayed different trajectories of participation, and held different conceptions of democracy. So, it’s not surprising that a notable disconnect existed between students and workers throughout the movement. Students constantly tried to exclude workers, seeing the movement as “their own,” and sought to maintain its “purity.” Walder and Gong pointed out that until the end of May, students had been adamant that workers’ organizations not be allowed to enter Tiananmen Square proper. Students had little interest in communicating or coordinating with workers’ organizations, especially the organization formed by construction workers who were mostly villagers from Beijing’s rural outskirts. Historian Maurice Meisner argued that “in the early weeks of the movement, student demonstrators often marched with arms linked to exclude workers and other citizens.” A student who participated in the movement also recounted that students took great care to ensure that the logistical supplies donated by supporters in Hong Kong went to themselves, not to workers.

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Here lies the irony of the movement. Student leaders repeatedly said that they intended to use their actions to “awaken” the masses. But in fact, a significant part of the masses was already “awake” and actively participating in the movement, yet the students showed little interest in talking to them. Students’ inflated sense of superiority and self-importance was in part nourished by the elitism of China’s top universities, and also partly reminiscent of China’s traditional gentry-intelligentsia, which saw itself as the moral mainstay of society, the conscience of the people, responsible for articulating what is right and wrong on behalf of the masses. Indeed, sociologist Zhao Dingxin has pointed out that students in the movement used a combination of Western liberal vocabularies and China’s traditional moralist language.

Excluded by students, many workers started to lose faith in them. For workers, students felt too good about themselves, didn’t respect workers, and were much better at talking than doing things practically. What alarmed workers most was that traces of bureaucratic elitism, which they deeply resented, started to appear within the students’ organizations. As Walder and Gong noted, student leaders “had titles like ‘General Commander,’ ‘Chairman,’ and so forth,” and their internal jockeying for power, position and privilege left workers disgusted. In contrast, the WAF and other workers’ organizations were much more horizontal in structure, with individual leadership playing a much smaller role.

What workers found even more intolerable was the material perks enjoyed by student leaders. According to Walder and Gong,

It was widely rumored among workers on the square that the two top leaders among the student protesters (they were married) not only had the largest tent of anyone but also slept on a Simmons mattress; that the size and quality of tents and sleeping mats were allocated among student leaders according to their relative rank; that many of the student leaders had electric fans in their tents.

Though these rumors cannot be verified, they clearly show that workers were extremely sensitive to any traces of hierarchy and bureaucracy.

At the same time, workers and students also disagreed about strategy. From the very beginning, students assumed a posture of petitioning the party, seeking to convince the party leaders to make concessions. To win the party’s trust, students even held banners with slogans like, “We Support the CCP” during marches. In contrast, workers were much more hostile to the party and argued for an insurrectionary strategy. The WAF’s leaflets always called on people to rise up and overthrow oppressors.

When disagreements about how to deal with the movement emerged among the CCP’s top leadership in May, some students were inclined to cooperate with the “moderate” leadership faction headed by Zhao Ziyang, then the CCP’s general secretary, against the “hardliner” faction headed by Deng Xiaoping, the de facto supreme leader, and Li Peng, the premier. For students, factional fights among the CCP leadership provided leverage for the movement. This is why students were firmly opposed to workers’ call for a general strike, seeing such initiatives as “instigating chaos.”

However, for workers, the students’ strategy didn’t make any sense. They saw Zhao Ziyang as a perfect example of a dictatorial bureaucrat who used his power to make millions for his family during the marketization reforms. They saw no difference between the moderate and hardliner factions. The WAF argued that if the movement sought cooperation with party bureaucrats, only one thing would result: the movement would end up being appropriated by party bureaucrats to advance their own interests, in a way similar to how Deng Xiaoping used the 1976 “April 5”

Movement to strengthen his power. The WAF believed that the only way for the movement to attain success was to build power through self-organizing and self-arming until the party bureaucracy could be overthrown. This is why the WAF's leaflets called on the masses to "storm the twentieth-century Bastille," referencing the 1789 French Revolution.

In this sense, one could argue that what transpired in 1989 was not one movement, but two movements. The students' movement and the workers' movement, though overlapping in time and place and somewhat related to each other (as mentioned above, workers were initially motivated to participate en masse in mid-May in order to support and protect students), didn't become one. Between students and workers there was little trust, insufficient communication, almost no strategic coordination, and only a very weak sense of mutual solidarity.

The 1989 Tiananmen Democracy Movement formed a sharp contrast with the 1919 May Fourth Movement seventy years earlier. During the May Fourth Movement, after an initial wave of student protests in May, many students shifted to a focus on propaganda, organization, and agitation among workers and ordinary residents, eventually leading to a general strike in Shanghai in June, which was critical in forcing the Peking government to concede to students' demands. In the CCP's official narrative, the significance of the May Fourth Movement lies in the fact that students learned from the general strike how much power workers could potentially have. These students subsequently devoted themselves to organizing workers and mobilizing labor actions. These student-worker connections later provided infrastructure for the nascent CCP.

Unfortunately, what made 1919 significant in the CCP's official history was exactly what 1989 lacked.

The Rise and Fall of Socialist Democracy

In fact, if we want to trace examples of student-worker solidarity in China before 1989, we don't have to go as far back as 1919. As Joel Andreas shows in a forthcoming book, in 1966 and 1967, the early years of the Cultural Revolution, the links forged between students and workers were critical for the development of the rebel movement. [1] Workers visited universities to learn how students conducted debates and organized themselves, and students went into factories and helped workers form their own rebel organizations and articulate demands.

Over the twenty-three years between 1966 and 1989, this sense of student-worker solidarity disappeared. To understand why, we have to examine the history of these two decades.

Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966 because he thought that many bureaucrats within the party (the so-called "capitalist roaders") were so infected by bureaucratism that they were *de facto* trying to institute a form of bureaucratic capitalism. By mobilizing mass movements from below, Mao hoped to eradicate the "capitalist roaders" and at the same time concentrate power. As Andreas argues, Mao believed the point of the mass movements was to "reform the party, not overthrow the party." What was problematic for Mao was not the party apparatus itself, but certain cadre within the party. Therefore the party would return to normal functioning once the "capitalist roaders," like a tumor, were removed. This is why Mao repeatedly claimed that the majority of party cadre were good and the "capitalist roaders" were a minority.

But what Mao didn't anticipate was that once he called upon the masses to "educate themselves" and "liberate themselves," the mass rebel movements would grow and radicalize out of his control, transcending the limits imposed by his agenda. Mao had intended to open only a tiny crack for the masses, but this crack unexpectedly widened, unleashing massive radical momentum among workers and students, which, for a period of time, appeared to be on course to bring down the entire facade.

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As Wu Yiching shows, just after Mao called upon workers to self-organize in late 1966, contract and informal workers â€” who were “second-class citizens” in urban factories â€” started to form their own organizations. These organizations didn’t target the “capitalist roaders” as Mao intended, but attacked China’s unjust and discriminatory two-tier labor system. These movements were attacked as “economistic” and demobilized by Mao and other Cultural Revolution leaders.

After the Shanghai People’s Commune (SPC) was established in January 1967, which Mao hailed as an inspiring example of the masses seizing power from the party cadre, some radical organizations of rebel workers developed a quite distinct understanding of the SPC. For these radical workers, the “Revolutionary Committees” established in the name of “seizing mass power” were actually controlled by the military and served as an instrument for Mao and the party to repress the rebel movement and restore status quo. These radical organizations hoped to establish a genuine system of workers’ self-management akin to the Paris Commune, and engaged in armed struggle with the “Revolutionary Committees” for months.

At the same time, many workers and students extended and deepened Mao’s critique of bureaucratism and “capitalist roaders,” arriving at political conclusions much more radical and profound than Mao’s. For these workers and students, Mao’s observations of bureaucratism were astute but his diagnosis was wrong. Bureaucratism was not a result of individual bureaucrats, but of the one-party dictatorial regime, which was inherently capitalist. For these workers, the only way to abolish bureaucratism was to abolish one-party rule and establish workers’ self-control in its stead. These arguments were made most elaborately by a radical workers’ organization called the Alliance of Proletarian Revolutionaries in Hunan Province. These ideals conveyed a conception of socialist democracy akin to Marx’s own understanding.

Mao and other Cultural Revolution leaders were deeply unsettled by these movements, which transcended Mao’s own agenda, clearly challenging the authority of the leaders and calling for systematic change and institutionalized socialist democracy. Starting from 1968, Mao called on the military to intervene en masse, launching a dramatic wave of repression against rebel workers. According to Walder’s calculation, the overwhelming majority of casualties during the Cultural Revolution were committed by the CCP and the military repressing rebel workers after 1968. [2] This remains to this day the bloodiest and most massive state repression in the history of the People’s Republic of China. In some cities, rebel workers’ organizations fought civil wars with the military and were brutally repressed. In the meantime, Mao and the party leadership launched attacks on the workers’ articulation of their socialist democratic vision, accusing it of being anarchist and Trotskyist.

In sum, the mass movement initiated by Mao himself evolved independently into a socialist democratic movement, which threatened Mao and was subsequently repressed by him. In Wu Yiching’s words, the Cultural Revolution devoured its own children. The repression between 1968 and 1971 had a profound impact. On the one hand, the segments of rebel workers who were most militant, radical, and organized were physically decimated. On the other hand, Mao’s complete about-face left many workers and students disillusioned; they felt betrayed by Mao and believed that other Cultural Revolution leaders such as Jiang Qing (Mao’s wife) and Chen Boda had been opportunistically using and manipulating the mass movement in their rise to power.

In 1974, the “Criticize Lin Biao, Criticize Confucius” campaign unexpectedly provided a platform for disgruntled rebels to voice their frustration with the 1968–1971 repression wave. This awkward top-down campaign, which targeted two completely unrelated individuals, was launched by the Cultural Revolution leaders to assist their factional fight within the party. But rebel workers had an altogether different source of resentment towards Lin Biao, Mao’s heir apparent before he died after a failed coup attempt in 1971. In 1968–1971, as a leader of the military, Lin played a major role in repressing the rebels. Therefore, many rebels participated in the “Criticize Lin Biao, Criticize Confucius” campaign, using Lin as a target to criticize the period of repression and call for a return of the mass rebel movement of 1966–1967. The most well-argued and influential criticisms along these lines were made in a series of big-character posters issued under the name “Li-Yi-Zhe,” which referred to three co-authors who actively participated in the

1966–1967 rebel movement and were later punished harshly.

To the rebels' disappointment, Li-Yi-Zhe's call was not received well by Mao, with other Cultural Revolution leaders calling for a ban on these posters. The rebels' discontent with Mao and Cultural Revolution leaders led to the April 5 Movement in 1976. During this movement, tens of thousands gathered in the Tiananmen Square, apparently mourning the recent death of premier Zhou Enlai but actually expressing discontent with the Cultural Revolution leaders. Slogans and banners like "Down with Emperor Dowager Ci Xi" and "Down with Indira Gandhi" appeared everywhere in the Square, all referring to Jiang Qing. Moreover, slogans like "Down with the First Emperor of Qin Dynasty" also appeared, referring to Mao himself.

The April 5 Movement in 1976 further energized broad discontent with Mao and the Cultural Revolution leaders. This popular sentiment provided support for part of the party leadership to strip the Cultural Revolution leaders of power in a palace coup after Mao's death in the same year. In turn, the downfall of the Cultural Revolution leaders ignited hope and optimism among repressed rebels. They hoped the party could right the wrongs inflicted on them during the 1968–1971 repression and open up space for bottom-up mass movements again. At the same time, between 1976 and 1978, the rebels' hopes were inflated by Deng Xiaoping, who was engaged in fierce factional struggles with other party leaders and expressed some pro-democracy views in order to consolidate his popular support.

The rebels' optimism culminated in the 1979 Democracy Wall Movement. As Meisner points out, most of the participants in this movement were not intellectuals, but rebels who were active in 1966–1967 and later repressed. They formed political organizations, organized public debates, distributed their own publications, and posted big-character posters. The influence of the movement quickly spread from Beijing to other major cities. The movement discourse revived the socialist democratic vision first articulated in 1966–1967, and focused criticism on one-party rule, which the rebels saw as the source of bureaucratism. For the participants, the 1979 Democracy Wall Movement picked up where the Cultural Revolution rebel movement left off. It was the second socialist democratic movement, after the first in 1966–1967.

Just as the 1966–1967 movement terrified Mao, the 1979 Democracy Wall Movement terrified Deng. In a manner similar to Mao, Deng accused the participants in the 1979 movement of being "anarchists" and launched harsh repression. This wave of repression heightened political disillusionment among the masses. Thereafter, socialist democratic discourse almost completely disappeared from the public. This also meant the marginalization of class politics as a whole — after all, socialist democratic discourse was premised on class politics.

This fundamental shift was entirely consistent with Deng's wholesale promotion of policy pragmatism and retreat from the discourse of class struggle. As socialist democratic activists, most of whom were workers, were silenced, public political discussion was increasingly monopolized by liberal-minded intellectuals and university students, and discussion about democracy was increasingly de-classed and cast in a liberal framework. In the late 1980s, both sides in the "democracy or authoritarianism" debate acknowledged the legitimacy of the marketization reforms and didn't consider its effects on workers. Anita Chan's research shows that "if one sifts carefully through the writings of Chinese intellectuals of all persuasions [in the late 1980s], one is hard pressed to find any mention of working class grievances." [\[3\]](#)

Many commentators have romanticized China's 1980s as a decade of freedom, hope, pluralism, and idealism. However, a balanced assessment of the decade requires one to consider not only what was present during the decade, but also what was absent. Much of what those commentators love about the decade — the burgeoning influence of Western liberalism, the increased freedom of speech and expression, and the vitality of intellectual groups — was accompanied by the retreat of the working class from politics and the vanishing of socialist democratic ideals, which resulted from repression in the wake of the 1979 Democracy Wall Movement. In a sense, the "liberty" of 1980s China was born in the shadow of repression.

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Any discussion of “liberty” has to face the question: liberty for whom? The benefits of political liberalization in 1980s China “ranging from the space to air a wider range of political views, to pluralization of intellectual life, to diversification of lifestyles” were reaped almost exclusively by intellectuals and university students. In order to consolidate support and gain legitimacy for marketization, Deng greatly improved the material well-being and social status of intellectuals, and made the higher education system much more elitist. [4] Consequently, the participation of intellectuals and students in political discussion helped reinforce their elitist self-identity. The Chinese documentary *River Elegy*, extremely influential and widely viewed in the late 1980s, exemplified such elitist liberalism.

In the meantime, what kind of “liberty” did the urban working class enjoy? What affected urban workers’ life most during the 1980s was probably not the liberalization of prices, but the substantial expansion of managers’ power over the operation of state-owned factories at workers’ expense. Managers gained almost unopposed power to allocate the means of production as they please, resulting in much strengthened one-man rule in urban workplaces and *de facto* private ownership.

As workers’ congresses were deactivated, workers lost their limited power over decision-making in factories and directly experienced “bureaucratic dictatorship” at the point of production. With workers feeling oppressed, mistreated, stripped of their dignity, and faced with increasing power inequalities, managers had no choice but to resort to material incentives and bonuses to achieve labor discipline. The rise of workers’ living standards in the mid-1980s was thus a result of the systematic weakening of their power in the workplace. And in the late 1980s, as workers’ material gains were eaten away by inflation, their discontent grew.

The entire 1980s, then, witnessed a widening gap between intellectuals and university students, on the one hand, and workers on the other. What produced this gap was the repression of the two socialist democratic movements “the first under Mao Zedong, the second under Deng Xiaoping” and the resulting retreat of class discourse from politics. In 1989, workers’ accumulated grievances finally translated into large-scale actions, as workers rediscovered the socialist democratic discourse that had appeared in 1966 and 1979. But the growing gap between students and workers meant that students neither understood nor cared about workers’ socialist democratic ideals.

After 1989

In the 1990s, the divergence between intellectuals and the working class widened. The difference in the approaches the party took towards students and workers was evident in the immediate aftermath of 1989: students were let go except for a few leaders, whereas workers were violently prosecuted on a much wider scale. This difference remained pronounced during the 1990s.

The dramatic acceleration of marketizing reforms in the 1990s provided ample economic opportunities for college students who graduated from top universities in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some Chinese observers have noted that through the high tide of marketization, many student participants in the 1989 movement transformed into the new urban middle class that developed a vested interest in supporting the CCP regime. In a sense, the economic reforms of the 1990s were a way for the CCP to absorb and co-opt the generation of college students who participated in 1989. I have talked to dozens of people who studied at Beijing’s top universities in the late 1980s, almost all of whom participated in the movement. Today, as middle-class residents of Beijing, they believe that “political stability trumps everything.” They look back on their participation in 1989 as naïve and manipulated.

Whereas the 1990s marketization reforms greatly benefitted intellectuals and students, they almost completely destroyed the urban working class. As the majority of state-owned enterprises were restructured, downsized, and privatized, workers lost jobs or faced much worse working conditions and meager benefits and protections. Scholars have generally attributed this wave of industrial restructuring to economic factors, but if we take 1989 into account, political considerations seemed to play a role as well. Urban workers’ power and radicalism, as displayed in 1989, alarmed the party leaders and made them determined to break down the urban working class.

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The contrasting fates of the intellectuals who morphed into China's new middle class, and the urban working class, have remained a basic feature of post-1989 Chinese society. It is still there today. This class-based strategy of "divide and rule," one of the most important legacies of 1989, remains crucial to sustaining the CCP regime.

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Source [Jacobin](#). An article published by the author in Chinese at Initium Media advanced the same arguments.

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[1] Joel Andreas [Disenfranchised](#)
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