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The Modernisation of the People's Liberation Army
and its Repercussions

Jean-Philippe Béja (ed.), *The Impact of China's 1989 Tiananmen Massacre*

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- 1 This eclectic volume of essays grew out of a conference in Hong Kong convening experts to mark the 20th anniversary of the Chinese government's bloody crackdown that ended 1989's popular movement for political reform. From their different perspectives as experts on Chinese politics, international relations, literature, society, and law, each author treats the pivotal, traumatic events of that spring as a "total social fact" whose effects continue to be felt throughout Chinese life and have had a profound influence on contemporary China and its current place in the world. The result is a valuable reflection on the need to remain mindful of both the transformative role of June Fourth and its unfinished struggles.

- 2 Contrary to initial predictions, the Chinese party-state consolidated control following June 4th, and in the decades since has gone a considerable way towards realising the modernising nationalist dream of wealth and power. But as many of the contributors to this volume point out, the traumatic rupture of 1989 has led China's recent transformation to be based on a fragile legitimacy, one in which the imperatives to harmony belie a deeply fractured and increasingly conflict-ridden society. For example, Barry Naughton shows how narrowing the range of opinions on economic

issues after Tiananmen made it possible to carry out new economic reform policies involving strengthening party-enterprise ties, greater privatisation of state assets, and increased central investment in key sectors such as energy, banking, and communications. The policies instituted in the 1990s ushered in the present era of phenomenal growth, but also facilitated the corruption and social inequality that currently plague China. Willy Lam similarly shows a steady strengthening of party control over law enforcement and judicial organs since 1989, particularly after the consolidation of the Hu-Wen administration at the 17th Party Congress, but he argues that the effort to ensure that police, prosecutors, courts, and justice officials act to suppress dissent and preserve the party's "heavenly mandate" will necessarily have negative consequences as justice and professionalism are sacrificed for political loyalty and control.

- 3 The vulnerability that lurks beneath the surface of strength in these accounts of China's post-Tiananmen domestic development is largely absent in other contributors' accounts of China's dealings with the outside world. Jean-Pierre Cabestan traces China's success in the 1990s at emerging from the crisis of diplomatic isolation in which it found itself following Tiananmen, a success achieved through selective integration into the globalised institutions and instrumental deployment of nationalism. Guoguang Wu argues that, contrary to predictions that economic integration into the global system would lead China toward political reform, developed countries' dependence on the markets and resources of countries such as China has resulted in "political impotency" and willingness to sacrifice liberal values of civil and political rights in exchange for access to the tempting China market. This ability to turn back outside pressures is also a feature of Andrew Nathan's sobering assessment of the international human rights regime's impact on China since 1989, in which he contends that by gradually exerting control over the framework whereby human rights pressure is mobilised on the international stage, China has effectively tamed the impact of human rights as a political tool and continues to make efforts to shape the regime to its own interests – a process that Western countries have so far been unable to resist.
- 4 This mixture of strength and vulnerability also features in Perry Link's thought-provoking meditation on memory and ethics, in which he suggests that a profound insecurity lies beneath party leaders' overriding concern with repressing public consciousness of 1989, or at least confining people's memories within an official version of events (both of which are explored more fully in the chapter by Michel Bonnin). Link is troubled by the apparent inability of most victims (aside from a handful of brave souls such as Ding Zilin and the Tiananmen Mothers who actively try to commemorate June Fourth publicly) to probe China's traumatic historical moments for meaning. But his most pointed ethical demand is on "bystanders" to the events of 1989, by which he means all those who observed the events either in the streets of China or through television images beamed abroad. Calling on us to be "ethical bystanders," Link wants us to remain conscious of the lack of distinction between ourselves and the victims of June 4th and refuse to succumb to government-sponsored amnesia about those events – an amnesia that has been facilitated by the West's abandonment of political and ethical concerns about Chinese authoritarianism in pursuit of greater economic integration.
- 5 Most, if not all, of the contributors see the legacy of 1989 in the shape of the continuing struggle between liberalism and authoritarianism that will inevitably shape China's future. Feng Chongyi argues that despite the purge of liberals within the party after

June 4th and competition from a muscular and often strident New Left, Chinese liberalism as an intellectual enterprise has continued to develop and thrive. He agrees with Xiaorong Li, Eva Pils, and several other authors in the volume who see the present-day “rights defence” (*weiquan*) movement as an heir to the political liberalism of the 1980s, one in which an earlier generation’s aspirations for democracy have been transformed into more concrete actions in the goal of political and legal reform. The structural changes that China’s society and economy have undergone over the past two decades have facilitated a gradual reorientation of intellectual concern towards underprivileged individuals and groups in society (a process described in Sebastian Veg’s analysis of the writings of Wang Xiaobo), and struggles over rights have come to constitute an increasingly important field within which to articulate resistance to authoritarian and repressive control.

- 6 Ultimately, the success of these efforts will depend at least in part on the existence and emergence of structural opportunities. As Bonnin notes, it is hard to envision the authorities voluntarily carrying out true political reform, because to do so would unleash forces that would inevitably have to examine the Party’s responsibility for events like June 4th. Similarly, as Jerome Cohen and Margaret Lewis point out, it is difficult to identify the points of pressure that would lead to the authorities giving up instruments of administrative detention such as “re-education through labour.” Facing a party leadership dead set on hiding its internal fissures behind a veneer of consensus and unambiguously willing to employ repressive measures to preserve stability, pressure for political change in today’s China takes place in an environment quite different from that of the late 1980s. But Jean-Philippe Béja and Merle Goldman are optimistic that a new generation of activists is once again taking up the legacy of 1989 and is willing to carry out new actions on behalf of ordinary Chinese people. In this sense, the activism of the online community in China and an emergent discursive sphere that is more vibrant, inclusive, and difficult to control create the possibility for new multi-class coalitions to unite around programs of political reform. In this sense, the future impact of June 4th may wind up being the vulnerabilities of the strengthened party-state that emerged after 1989, for it is in the struggle over these vulnerable spaces that China’s political future ultimately rests.

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