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## INTRODUCTION

The 1989 Tiananmen Square crisis marked a watershed event of the late 20th century. The June 4th military crackdown on pro-democracy protests remains a reminder of the Chinese government's determination to maintain political control. As revolutionary upheavals swept through most of Eastern Europe and dismantled communist regimes, China's leadership reacted differently, suppressing the demands for political reform and restated its authoritarian ambitions. This decision reaffirmed China's unique path in the post-Cold War era, setting it apart from nations that were leaning toward democratization. This thesis reconstructs the historical developments leading to the Tiananmen crackdown, analysing its political, social, and international implications.

The crisis will then be studied through the lenses of the dominant academic schools of thought in International Relations at the time, such as for example Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, and critical theories. In this way the global impact of the 1989 Tiananmen developments will be explained and theoretically understood in the international state system of shifting alliances. By examining the Tiananmen crisis through the lenses of international relations theories, this thesis investigates its role in broader discussions on authoritarian stability, state sovereignty, and global power dynamics.

The 1989 protests unfolded after years of economic reforms, deepening grievances on the part of intellectuals and students, and a crisis within the Chinese Communist Party leadership regarding the scope and direction of modernization process. As demonstrators gathered in Tiananmen Square demanding greater political freedoms and governmental accountability, the Chinese leadership faced a dilemma: embrace political liberalization, thus aligning with international trends, or consolidate state control in order to maintain the existing power structure. The following military intervention marked a clear decision in favour of stability over reform, and repression over dialogue.

Domestically, it reinforced a governance model that combined economic liberalization with strict political control, proving the regime's resistance to democratic reforms. Internationally, it drew condemnation from Western democracies while consolidating China's resistance to external political pressures.

The Tiananmen Square crisis was not an isolated event but part of a broader wave of political upheavals that defined 1989 as a turning point in global history.

1989 is a year that has remained in the collective memory of humanity as an important historical watershed. Recognized as the “year of revolutions”<sup>1</sup>, its echoes continued to propagate in the dynamics that have shaped the international system to contemporary days. The year 1989 went down in history as *annus mirabilis* <sup>2</sup>, and has been, and continues to be, the subject of attention of many political, historical and economic scholars. In the book “1989- The World as a Political Event”, Rudnik and Gasbarri analysed the year 1989 in the bigger frame of a world event, and not merely as a constellation of events with no connection to one another<sup>3</sup>. In fact, 1989 represented a transition year in the world system. It ended an historic momentum started with the French Revolution in 1789<sup>4</sup>. Communism and Fascism distorted the values of equality and nationalism, taking them to extremes in the ugliness of violence.

The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9 also represented the epilogue of a conflict between two great powers and the end of a world and a Europe dramatically divided in two political, geographical and economic blocs. Like in a tragic poetic climax, this period saw a series of events unfold that paved the way for the end of the Soviet model. The winds of change swept through Central Europe sweeping East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Romania and spreading far beyond Europe's borders, upsetting India and China and still pushing overseas to Latin American countries<sup>5</sup>, marking the victory of liberty and liberalism<sup>6</sup>.

The year 1989 represented a turning point in Chinese history. China experienced unprecedented social unrest and demands for reform, mirroring the revolutionary changes occurring globally. As other nations underwent significant political shifts, China faced its own internal turmoil and mounting pressure to reform its system of governance.

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<sup>1</sup> European Parliament, ‘1989: the Year of Revolutions- a look back 20 years on’, *European Union*, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/presse/pr\\_post\\_story/2009/EN/03A-DV-PRESSE\\_STO\(2009\)08-26\(59792\)\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/presse/pr_post_story/2009/EN/03A-DV-PRESSE_STO(2009)08-26(59792)_EN.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> F. Gasbarri, Review - 1989 as a Political World Event: Democracy, Europe and the New International System in the Age of Globalization, *Routledge*, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> R. Cooper, The meaning of 1989, *Prospect*, December 1999, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/essays/56071/the-meaning-of-1989>.

<sup>5</sup> G. Rachman. *Zero-Sum World*, Atlantic Books, London, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> R. Cooper, The meaning of 1989, *Prospect*, December 1999, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/essays/56071/the-meaning-of-1989>.

June 4 was only the tip of the iceberg, since the underlying crisis at the origin of this rupture displays deeper roots. 1989 remains an important year for the People's Republic of China, considering also that it marks the 40th anniversary of its founding<sup>7</sup> (occurred in October 1949) and the 11th year of a period of reform inaugurated starting from 1978<sup>8</sup>. The political journalist Gideon Rachman in his book “Zero-Sum World” explains how starting from 1978 the theory of “Democratic Peace” acquired more relevance, as the overall trend tended to equate technological growth, economic growth and democratic strengthening as three elements inseparable from each other. In contrast, the brutal authoritarian suppression of the June 4 demonstrations constituted a setback in this trend and in political liberalization, drawing the attention of academics and policymakers. As Zhou Fengsuo<sup>9</sup>, one of the student leaders during the protests at Tiananmen Square, recalls, the reason to remember Tiananmen is to paint a picture of what a different China could have been, in light of the efforts of the Chinese people in their fight for democracy and freedom.

Although to this day the Chinese leadership continues in an effort of *damnatio memoriae* in censoring any reference to the crisis of the spring of 1989, the events culminating in the Tiananmen Square massacre have left an indelible trace in contemporary history. The internal crisis faced by the People's Republic of China was not simply a matter of domestic affairs but was deeply embedded in the global balances and imbalances of the contemporary system.

The first part of this study is dedicated to a reconstruction of the historical framework in which the crisis built up, using primary and secondary sources. It will explore the political developments that shaped China during the years preceding 1989, focusing on the rise of Deng Xiaoping, his reformist policies, and the broader context of Sino-Soviet and Sino-American relations. Attention will be given to the delicate political relationship between Deng and Mikhail Gorbachev, whose visit to Beijing in May 1989 coincided with the

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<sup>7</sup> W. Gungwu, China, 1989 in perspective, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1990, 17:71,71-85.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Congressional-Executive Commission on China, The legacy and enduring importance of the Tiananmen massacre explored at hearing, <https://www.cecc.gov/media-center/press-releases/the-legacy-and-enduring-importance-of-the-tiananmen-massacre-explored-at#:~:text=Tiananmen%20student%20leader%20Zhou%20Fengsuo,democracy%20through%20their%20protests%20and>.

peak of the protests. This historical analysis will be completed by testimonies from key figures who experienced the protests firsthand, such as Chai Ling and Fang Lizhi, whose accounts offer insights into the purposes, fears, and hopes of the student movement. Finally, declassified documents from the U.S. Embassy in Beijing will be analysed to provide a diplomatic perspective on how the crisis unfolded and how it was perceived by American observers. These sources will contribute to the reconstruction of the climate of uncertainty and tension that characterized the weeks leading up to June 4 and the period following the immediate crackdown.

In this first historical reconstruction it is then possible to exemplify the protests through the main perspectives of three central figures: Deng Xiaoping, Chai Ling, and Fang Lizhi. In fact, each of them represents a different viewpoint -government authority, student leadership, and intellectual critique- offering synergistic perspectives of the protests and their aftermath.

Deng Xiaoping, as the paramount leader of China, embodies the authoritarian stance that sought to preserve the Communist Party's control. Scholars like David Shambaugh, Barry Naughton, and June Teufel Dreyer examine how Deng's focus on maintaining stability led to political repression, and ultimately to the armed crackdown on the protesters. In *"Deng Xiaoping: The Politician"*, Shambaugh illustrates Deng's determination to keep the party in power, even at the cost of bloodshed. Similarly, Naughton, in his paper *"Deng Xiaoping: The Economist"*, discusses Deng's prioritization of economic reforms but also reserve attention to how Deng's approach to economic liberalization was balanced by an iron fist when it came to political dissent. Dreyer, in *"Deng Xiaoping: The Soldier"*, adds that Deng's military background influenced his authoritarian posture, proved by the final decision of mobilizing the army against civilians. Whyte provides a unique lens in his analysis of Deng's social reforms, which were meant to stabilize Chinese society but came at the expense of basic political freedoms.

In contrast, Chai Ling, as a prominent student leader, provides a deeply personal and emotional perspective on the protests. In her interview with the journalist Philip Cunningham, released before leaving her commander position and her country<sup>10</sup> she revealed the internal conflict she faced, being torn between the desire to protect her fellow students and the harsh realization that their struggle might demand great sacrifice.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

The scholar Craig Calhoun, in his paper “*Revolution and Repression in Tiananmen Square*”, emphasizes how student leaders like Chai were not only fighting for political freedoms but also for the dignity and the integrity of people honour.

Finally, the intellectual dissident Fang Lizhi represented a critical ideological support for the movement, despite not being physically present during the protests. In his interview with Marlowe Hood, Fang criticized the lack of democratic governance under Deng's rule, arguing for the necessity of a law-based, democratic system. Fang's ideas influenced many protesters and offered a broader intellectual foundation for the movement, as highlighted by scholars like Whyte and Naughton.

The second part of the thesis shifts from historical reconstruction to theoretical interpretation, analysing the Tiananmen events through the lenses of international relations scholars. This section will provide different perspectives, engaging with the theorizations of Henry Kissinger, Joseph Nye, Francis Fukuyama, Samuel Huntington, Immanuel Wallerstein and Alexander Wendt, each of whom providing a distinctive framework for understanding the crackdown.

Using IR theories to analyse the 1989 Tiananmen crisis allows us to approach this complex event from multiple interpretative angles, enabling us to better understand its dynamism. Tiananmen is often underestimated in terms of the potential impact it could have had on altering China's political trajectory. By examining the political, social, and economic variables concurring in the crackdown of Summer 1989 from various viewpoints, we can break down this otherwise complex event into more manageable components, revealing the intricate layers of forces at play. Each theory offers unique insights into the motives and implications of the crisis, shedding light on both the internal factors, such as the struggle for political control, and external pressures, such as the global reaction to China's political repression.

Henry Kissinger's analysis of the Tiananmen crisis was influenced by his Realist background. Thus, he favoured strategic pragmatism over ideological condemnation. Kissinger considered China as a crucial element of U.S. national security and opposed isolation and sanctions in reaction of the military suppression, advocating instead for keeping dialogue channels open to ensure stability and protect American interests.

As one of the protagonists of the theoretical reconstruction of this thesis, Kissinger has been critically analysed in relation to the Tiananmen events by several authors.

Jussi Hanhimäki, in his article "*Dr. Kissinger" or "Mr. Henry"? Kissingerology, Thirty Years and Counting*", explores his figure and his pragmatist approach to foreign policy, arguing that while Kissinger was a symbol of Realpolitik, he was not immune to the moral repercussions of the violence, even though he sought to maintain a balance between geopolitical stability and human rights. Similarly, Thomas Alan Schwartz, in "*Henry Kissinger: Realism, Domestic Politics, and the Struggle Against Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy*" examines his political realism, suggesting that his stance on Tiananmen reflected the priority of American strategic interests over condemnation of human rights, viewing China as too crucial to jeopardize bilateral relations.

On the contrary, Gordon Chang, in the article "*Compromised: Henry Kissinger's China Syndrome*", criticizes Kissinger's approach, accusing him of justifying the Chinese regime and its repression, highlighting how his realist view came at the expense of the concern for human rights.

Proceeding with the thesis, we come across Joseph Nye. Through Nye's framework the June 1989 events are studied in relation to their implications on China's international standing, as a country part of an increasingly interconnected world.

In this paragraph, the sources used include Nye's monography *Power and Interdependence*, co-authored with Robert Keohane, which discusses the shift from traditional military power to a system of complex interdependence. Nye's concept of soft power, first introduced in his article "*Soft Power*" in 1990, is central to understand how a country can influence others through attraction rather than coercion. In his 2021 essay "*Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept*", Nye further refines this idea, exploring how soft power has developed over time. Nye's theories provide a contrast to Kissinger's realist approach by focusing on the role of economic, cultural, and diplomatic influence. In the context of Tiananmen, Nye's work helps explain how China's violent crackdown damaged its soft power and global reputation, showing the broader impact of internal crises on international relations.

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama published his essay "*The End of History?*", arguing that the end of the Cold War signalled the ultimate triumph of liberal democracy and the end of ideological conflict. In contrast, Samuel P. Huntington's 1993 essay "*The Clash of Civilizations?*" challenged this optimistic view, arguing that post-Cold War conflicts would no longer be driven by ideology but by cultural and religious divides. Huntington



further elaborated on his thesis in his 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, where he explained that civilizations -especially the West and the rising Sinic civilization, led by China- would have been the primary sources of global conflict. Thus, Fukuyama and Huntington offer complementary perspectives on Tiananmen. Fukuyama viewed it as a temporary setback in China's path to liberalism, while Huntington interpreted it as a reaffirmation of China's civilizational identity in opposition to Westernization. Together, they frame the crisis as both an ideological struggle and a cultural resistance.

Finally, Wallerstein's World-System Theory interprets China's 1989 transition as a threshold in its evolution from the periphery to the semi-periphery of the global economic order, where stability was critical to progress upwards.

In this paragraph, the sources used include Immanuel Wallerstein's foundational work on World-System Theory, particularly his 1974 article "*Dependence in an Interdependent World*" where he critiques the assumptions of both Modernization Theory and Dependency Theory, arguing that the global system itself shapes the development of nations. This perspective is further developed in his 1977 paper "*Patterns of Development of the Modern World-System*", co-authored with Terence K. Hopkins, in which they describe the global economy as a single integrated system, shaped by unequal exchanges between core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral regions.

Approaching the end of this work, space is reserved for analysing Alexander Wendt's theorisation. Wendt's Constructivism focuses on how the crisis reshaped China's identity and its understanding of the U.S., from cooperation to mutual distrust. Tiananmen was both an economic turning point, as China moved further into global capitalism, and a turning point in its global relations, leading to growing mistrust between the U.S. and China. Among the more important sources used to interpret the Tiananmen Square crisis in this last paragraph include some of Alexander Wendt's key works. Specifically, his article "*Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics*" and the book *Social Theory of International Politics* offer a structure within which understanding international relations as shaped by social interactions and the construction of identities, rather than being simply driven by material factors. Furthermore, Wendt's 1994 article "*Collective Identity Formation and the International State*" delves into how the collective identities of states influence their behaviour on the global stage. Applying

these ideas to the 1989 crisis, his work helps explain the shift in the Sino-U.S. relationship from cooperation to hostility following the crackdown. This shift can be understood through Wendt's concept of socially constructed anarchy, where China's actions were influenced by its desire to protect its socialist identity in the face of external pressure from the West.

By integrating these schools of thought, this thesis will analyse how the Tiananmen crisis influenced both China's long-term political strategy and the discourse on governance, power and international stability. Through historical reconstruction and theoretical interpretation this thesis aims to present a comprehensive understanding of Tiananmen's importance in Chinese history and world politics.

# CHAPTER 1- ROAD TO THE TIANANMEN CRACKDOWN

## 1.1 A historic threshold

This chapter begins with a comprehensive reconstruction of the historical events that led to the Tiananmen incident, to then proceed with an in-depth analysis of the dynamics that fuelled the violent escalation and its far-reaching consequences. The discussion is framed through the perspectives of key international relations scholars whose ideas shaped political discourse in the late 20th century, providing different viewpoints through which interpret the crisis in its broader geopolitical and ideological context.

Particular attention is given to the distinctiveness of the Chinese case, which diverged from the broader wave of democratization that influenced other communist regimes. The focus is not only on examining the historical causes of the Tiananmen crisis but also on exploring its implications for the international system.

When Deng Xiaoping rose to power in 1978,<sup>11</sup> following the death of Mao Zedong, he set the stage for a period of profound economic transformation. Amidst the global trends of market-oriented reforms, liberalization, and democratization that characterized the late 20th century, Deng's policies emerged as a response to China's need to modernize its economy and assert itself in the international system. The strategy of China's new paramount leader was rooted in pragmatism, as he recognized the necessity for economic reforms to bolster China's modernization, while he also remained committed in preserving the political control of the Communist Party on the country.

This dual approach that encompassed economic liberalization and political conservatism, was a unique feature of Deng's leadership and a direct response to the advance of capitalism and the domestic need for stability. His Socialism with Chinese Characteristics<sup>12</sup> allowed China to participate in the global capitalist economy without

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<sup>11</sup> D. Shambaugh, Deng Xiaoping: The Politician, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 457-490.

<sup>12</sup> Socialism with Chinese Characteristics-Introductory Study Guide, *Qiao Collective*, <https://www.qiaocollective.com/education/socialism-with-chinese-characteristics>

surrendering the party's grip on power. This internal tension created between economic reform and political repression peaked in the summer of 1989.

As protests erupted at Tiananmen Square, China stood at a crossroads, confronted with a choice that would remodel its political system, facing the choice of embracing the wave of democratization that was sweeping the globe or maintaining its commitment to authoritarian rule<sup>13</sup>.

Thus, Deng's policies, and the decision to crush the Tiananmen demonstrations, represented a challenge to the prevailing ideological trends of the time<sup>14</sup>. Where other communist states were dismantling their systems and transitioning towards democracy, China under Deng remained a symbol of authoritarian resilience, defining the country's posture in the years to come.

The Tiananmen Square protests are subject to various interpretations, each offering distinct conclusions about the motivations behind the crackdown. However, all agree that these events highlighted China's emergence as a formidable and determined global power, one not to be underestimated. The 1989 crackdown was not only a local event; it was a global statement of China's refusal to conform to the trends of political liberalization that defined the post-Cold War world.

China began a renewed ascent, reasserting its international stature, clarifying its strategic objectives, and demonstrating its readiness to take whatever measures were necessary to maintain stability.

Hence, this chapter will explore the complexities of this historical critical juncture, showing how Deng's reform policies shaped China's response to world pressures, and how the crisis in Tiananmen Square was a turning point in the history of China's integration into the world system.

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<sup>13</sup> J. Kovalio, The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident: retrospective and prospective considerations, *Asian Perspective*, 1991,15:1, pp. 5-36.

<sup>14</sup> B. Stavis, Contradictions in Communist Reform: China before 4 June 1989, *Political Science Quarterly*, 1990, 105:1, pp. 31-52.

## 1.2 Deng Xiaoping-the reformer

Tiananmen Square is linked to the figure of Deng Xiaoping. A divisive leader and a complex character, under whose guide China has turned a corner, regaining a voice on the international stage.

This paragraph will be dedicated to an analysis of Deng Xiaoping, as a leader and a reformer.

December 1978 is the date that marks Deng Xiaoping's rise to power as the paramount leader of the People's Republic of China, occurred during the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)<sup>15</sup>. His complexity and intrinsic contradiction can be detected even when referring to him as a paramount leader. In fact, Deng was able to seize power without ever holding formally any command position. A perk of this situation was that allowed him to escape, in certain measures, accountability. He was never designated as President, General Secretary of the CCP, nor Premier of the State Council during the period known as *Era of Deng Xiaoping (1978-1989)*<sup>16</sup>. However, he was certainly not new to the political game. Deng's history with the Chinese political scene goes back several decades and has been characterized by ups and downs.

Born in the wealthy Sichuan province, he had the opportunity to travel and complete his education in France and later move to Moscow to delve into the study of Marxism-Leninism<sup>17</sup>. During his stay in France, he joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1924<sup>18</sup>, where he started to build his wide network. An essential figure of these years was Zhou Enlai<sup>19</sup>, prominent member of the CCP and the one who, together with Mao Zedong, recognised Deng's pragmatic skills and was a witness of his political journey. Upon returning to China in 1927, he got caught in the struggle of the revolutionary moment and joined the communists in the clash against the nationalist forces of Chang Kai Shek<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> B. Naughton, Deng Xiaoping: The Economist, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 153, pp. 491-514.

<sup>16</sup> D. Shambaugh, Deng Xiaoping: The Politician, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 457-490.

<sup>17</sup> J. Teufel Dreyer, Deng Xiaoping: The Soldier, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 536-550.

<sup>18</sup> D. Shambaugh, Deng Xiaoping: The Politician, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 457-490.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Dating back to 1949 and the final rise of the CCP, Deng learned how to wisely move among the political circles, even though its career was far from steady. During the years of the Cultural Revolution, Deng had a hard time dealing with Mao Zedong who accused him of showing capitalist sympathies and denounced him, only to rehabilitate and then condemn him again in 1973<sup>21</sup>. The relation with his patron Mao Zedong was indeed a complex one. During the first years of their collaboration Mao showed open approval and admiration for Deng's potential and is undoubtedly that Mao also represented one of the reasons for Deng's rapid ascend<sup>22</sup>. Despite his purge, Deng never stopped learning from Mao, observing him and his mistakes, to later trying to avoid them.

During Deng's leadership, the Communist Party formally assessed Mao's legacy and actions. This official evaluation aimed to acknowledge Mao's contributions while also addressing the mistakes made during his rule, particularly in his later years. In this regard, Deng declared that Mao was "70 per cent right and 30 per cent wrong"<sup>23</sup>. Through this statement Deng affirmed Mao's legacy while distancing himself from the Soviet-style de-Stalinisation. This nuanced approach helped to establish Deng as Mao's legitimate successor. Acknowledging both Mao's successes and mistakes, Deng achieved a balance that allowed him to pursue reforms while maintaining ideological continuity.

Moreover, it was during the heated years of the 1970s that another important milestone was reached by the PRC and that had the merit to facilitate Deng's future political achievements. The two rivals, the USA and the PRC, engaged in a rapprochement effort. In 1972 President Richard Nixon visited the PRC to personally meet with Mao Zedong and the Premier Zhou Enlai<sup>24</sup>. This meeting represented a landmark in the relations between the two countries and marked an improvement after several years of antagonism. The People's Daily on February 22, 1972, showcased the iconic picture of one of the handshakes most famous in history, the one between Nixon and Mao<sup>25</sup>. The handshake was a clear sign that both countries were aiming toward the normalization of relations.

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<sup>21</sup> G. Rachman. *Zero-Sum World*, Atlantic Books, London, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> D. Shambaugh, Deng Xiaoping: The Politician, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 457-490.

<sup>23</sup> H. Schmidt-Glintzer, '70 per cent good, 30 per cent bad', *The Politics of Memory- IPS*, 2017, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/in-focus/the-politics-of-memory/70-per-cent-good-30-per-cent-bad-2216/>.

<sup>24</sup> USA Department of State, Rapprochement with China -1972, *Office of the Historian*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/rapprochement-china>.

<sup>25</sup> M. Kazushi, Why did Mao shake hands with Nixon? Good Americans, Bad Americans and the US-China rapprochement, *Wilson Center*, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/why-did-mao-shake-hands-nixon-good-americans-bad-americans-and-us-china-rapprochement>.

Anyway, if the goals were shared, the US and China gave different interpretation to the handshake. For the US, behind the newfound moment of Chinese openness, loomed the Soviet threat. On the contrary, for Mao this achievement was not driven by fear of Soviet neighbours, instead it was a true victory of the Chinese international commitment<sup>26</sup>.

At the same time, at the start of the 1970s-decade, China timidly began to open its doors to the outside world. The country started to allow a bigger number of Americans on its territory, even individuals that were not classified as left wingers, with the goal of “befriend” as many as possible<sup>27</sup>.

In this lively context, the much needed turning point for Deng came with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. After being rehabilitate once again, Deng committed his efforts to rehabilitate along with him his supporters who had been left behind during the Cultural Revolution<sup>28</sup>.

Mao’s death was a defining cleavage in Chinese history and left a fertile soil for a new type of politics that benefited Deng. After the harsh years of the Cultural Revolution people were aware of the dangers of ideology and were looking for certainties and stability. Deng appeared as the right man to lead them, with his pragmatism and organizational approach to politics he was offering a way out of the abstract vision of ideology<sup>29</sup>. He represented a great departure from Mao’s personal style, showing a business-like attitude and choosing to operate from behind the scenes<sup>30</sup>. His approach was perceived emotionless and straight-forward when it came to deal with colleagues and subordinates, trying to always keep his private and public relations separated from each other<sup>31</sup>. This is another element that differentiated him from Mao’s binary tendency to divide men in friends and foe. In his practical and organizational way, Deng was able to value the people around him based on their skills and abilities. He never took the stage as protagonist.

Before 4 June 1989 his popularity in the West was greater than among his countrymen. Namely, the *Time* magazine named him “Man of the Year”<sup>32</sup>, approving of his internal

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> G. Rachman. *Zero-Sum World*, Atlantic Books, London, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> L. W. Pye, An Introductory Profile: Deng Xiaoping and China's Political Culture, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 412-443.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

and external political posture, and shedding a hope for the economic reforms advocated<sup>33</sup>. The economic reforms that he pursued were influenced by his overall character<sup>34</sup>. Even though he tended to pull the strings from the backstage, his comprehensive advantage as paramount leader in a society strictly hierarchical still ended up influencing the general trend of his agenda. However, some weak notes about Deng's persona proved not to be obstacles along the way. Being concentrate on the imminent present and solving problems step by step as they appeared, Deng didn't rush in a more far reaching, long-term vision<sup>35</sup>. This allowed the reforms to slowly develop and adjust in the ongoing process. Without an end point to aim to, the economic system didn't experience a sudden disruption that didn't lead to shockwaves. An example of Deng reformist acumen was to don't intervene and take a step backwards - pursuing a "wait and see" gamble - <sup>36</sup> delegating his authority without engulfing economic progress in the absolute control of the Communist Party. In his speech "*On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership*" held in 1980, Deng gathered a meeting to discuss about the reform of the Party and leadership matters. As he clearly stated:

It is not good to have an over-concentration of power. It hinders the practice of socialist democracy and of the Party's democratic centralism, impedes the progress of socialist construction and prevents us from taking full advantage of collective wisdom. Over-concentration of power is liable to give rise to arbitrary rule by individuals at the expense of collective leadership, and it is an important cause of bureaucracy under the present circumstances.

It is not good to have too many people holding two or more posts concurrently or to have too many deputy posts. There is a limit to anyone's knowledge, experience and energy. If a person holds too many posts at the same time, he will find it difficult to come to grips with the problems in his work and, more important, he will block the way for other more suitable comrades to take up leading posts. Having too many deputy posts leads to low efficiency and contributes to bureaucracy and formalism<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> G. Rachman. *Zero-Sum World*, Atlantic Books, London, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> B. Naughton, Deng Xiaoping: The economist, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 153, pp. 491-514.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> D. Xiaoping, Speech "On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership", *Deng Xiaoping Archive*, published august 2018.



He pushed for a decentralization of power and delegation of decision-making to skilled individuals in some specialized areas, thus harnessing the full potential of human capital and avoiding the rise of arbitrary rule. Moreover, decentralizing and delegate meant to smoothen the economic reform process.

Deng understood that it was possible to delegate power without losing the grip on command, the trick was in securely manage his appointed subordinates for each task.<sup>38</sup>

He continued, showing his intolerance for bureaucratic inefficiency:

Bureaucracy remains a major and widespread problem in the political life of our Party and state. Its harmful manifestations include the following: standing high above the masses; abusing power; divorcing oneself from reality and the masses; spending a lot of time and effort to put up an impressive front; indulging in empty talk; sticking to a rigid way of thinking; being hidebound by convention; overstaffing administrative organs; being dilatory, inefficient and irresponsible; failing to keep one's word; circulating documents endlessly without solving problems; shifting responsibility to others; and even assuming the airs of a mandarin, reprimanding other people at every turn, vindictively attacking others, suppressing democracy, deceiving superiors and subordinates, being arbitrary and despotic, practising favouritism, offering bribes, participating in corrupt practices in violation of the law, and so on. Such things have reached intolerable dimensions both in our domestic affairs and in our contacts with other countries<sup>39</sup>

Bureaucratism was a major obstacle preventing China from moving from its traditional past to a future of innovation. It would inevitably lead to abuse of power, just as happened in the past. At a certain point the individual would have stripped the collective institutions of their powers and simply manipulated them for personal aims<sup>40</sup>. It follows that a bureaucracy inefficient and corrupted would not benefit the People Republic of China, not at the internal administrative level, not when it came to face the outside rivals.

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<sup>38</sup> L. W. Pye, An Introductory Profile: Deng Xiaoping and China's Political Culture, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 412-443.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> M. Ng-Quinn, Deng Xiaoping's Political Reform and Political Order, *Asian Survey*, 1982, 22, pp. 1187-1205

Deng advocated for an administrative differentiation between the Party and the State bureaucracies: <sup>41</sup>

It is time for us to distinguish between the responsibilities of the Party and those of the government and to stop substituting the former for the latter<sup>42</sup>.

From Deng standpoint this was a way to set free the State from the ideological imposition of the Communist Party, but above all, he could have counted more on his supporters among the State administrative levels<sup>43</sup>.

Having specified this, the implications are far from being that Deng disdained ideology. After all he recognised the superiority of socialism, when it came to mobilize people toward a common goal of well-being and eradication of poverty<sup>44</sup>.

It is largely due to his economic legacy that Deng is appraised as a reformer who made an imprint on China's productive momentum and its significance on the world stage. In his attempt to boost economic and productive growth, he recurred to the plan of the “Four modernizations”<sup>45</sup>. First proposed by the former Premier Zhou Enlai in 1965, the modernizations aimed at improving Chinese industry, agriculture, defence and science. In his speech at the National Conference on Science in March 1978, Deng stated:

Our people are undertaking the historic mission of modernizing our agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology within the present century, in order to transform China into a modern and powerful socialist state. [...] The more our agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology are modernized, the stronger we will be in the struggle against forces which sabotage socialism, and the more our people will support the socialist system. Only if we make our country a modern, powerful socialist state can we more effectively consolidate the socialist system and cope with foreign aggression and subversion; only then can we be reasonably

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<sup>41</sup> L. W. Pye, An Introductory Profile: Deng Xiaoping and China's Political Culture, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 412-443.

<sup>42</sup> D. Xiaoping, Speech “On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership”, *Deng Xiaoping Archive*, published august 2018.

<sup>43</sup> L. W. Pye, An Introductory Profile: Deng Xiaoping and China's Political Culture, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 412-443.

<sup>44</sup> B. Naughton, Deng Xiaoping: The economist, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 153, pp. 491-514.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

certain of gradually creating the material conditions for the advance to our great goal of communism<sup>46</sup>

On this occasion, Deng granted legitimacy to the economic reform justifying it on the basis of an objective of collective national survival. He then continued shifting his attention on the role that scientific and technological progress play in developing the productive system, and therefore to all the intellectuals employed in the field:

The first point is the necessity of understanding that science and technology are part of the productive forces. [...] Marxism has consistently treated science and technology as part of the productive forces. More than a century ago, Marx said that expansion of the use of machinery in production requires the conscious application of natural science. Science too, he said, is among the productive forces. The development of modern science and technology has bound science and production ever more tightly together. It is becoming increasingly clear that science and technology are of tremendous significance as productive forces. [...] The recognition that science and technology are productive forces leads in turn to the following question: How should the mental labour involved in scientific research be regarded? [...] Science and technology are part of the productive forces. Mental workers who serve socialism are part of the working people. A correct understanding of these two facts is essential to the rapid development of our scientific enterprises [...] In a socialist society, the mental workers trained by the working class itself are different from intellectuals in any exploitative society past or present. [...] Everyone who works, whether with his hands or with his brain, is part of the working people in a socialist society<sup>47</sup>.

From these words quoted above is evident the intent of uniting the work forces toward the same goal. By reaffirming the equality of all workers Deng aimed to strengthen the spirit of cooperation and membership, condemning those who were suspicious of intellectuals.

This set the stage for a significant implication: the criteria for the promotion of workers wouldn't have been anymore based on a political base, but instead on a meritocratic

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<sup>46</sup> D. Xiaoping, Speech At the Opening Ceremony of the National Conference On Science, Deng Xiaoping Archive, spoken march 1978.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

stance<sup>48</sup>. Moreover, following a logic of delegation hinted to a delegation of authority and responsibility<sup>49</sup>.

In this way the market production started to slip a bit away from the control of the Party and the State, giving more space to private managers<sup>50</sup>.

Despite everything, these reforms initiated by Deng did not affect the power of the Party system, since they simply concerned different criteria for the promotion of human capital<sup>51</sup>.

Deng's pragmatic attitude and will to make China an independent power with a solid economic backbone is embodied in his famous sentence "getting rich is glorious"<sup>52</sup>.

Nonetheless, Deng's pragmatism and reform drive had limits. His stance on political change was more ambiguous, as he remained unwilling to compromise the Party's integrity and its values<sup>53</sup>. In a balance of interests the economic productivity didn't stand a chance against the importance of structural role of the Party and its grip on political power.

Deng was in fact deaf to the pushes for a parallel political reform of the system called by the country's economic and productive development. His willingness to curb the over-concentration of political power<sup>54</sup> was never translated in concrete actions. He failed to foresee the consequences that his reforms would trigger, stemming from the decollectivization of agriculture through the agriculture responsibility system<sup>55</sup>, flows of private investments and mostly from the meritocracy system. Allowing some private judgements from individuals in the delegation of authority he opened the door to

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<sup>48</sup> M. K. Whyte, Deng Xiaoping: The Social Reformer, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 515-535.

<sup>49</sup> B. Naughton, Deng Xiaoping: The Economist, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 153, pp. 491-514.

<sup>50</sup> M. K. Whyte, Deng Xiaoping: The Social Reformer, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 515-535.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> L. W. Pye, An Introductory Profile: Deng Xiaoping and China's Political Culture, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 412-443.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> The agriculture responsibility system was the most successful among the pragmatic economic reforms pursued by Deng. It gave more space to peasants to make their judgments and consequently, it also attracted critics from the elites, accusing it of promoting capitalism. The system maintained the ownership of farmlands in the hands of the State but left the management of production to the farmers, boosting for an incentive for production. In exchange the family farms had to provide to the State a part of said production. Directorate of Intelligence, China: Reforming Agriculture with the Responsibility System, Research Paper, dec. 1983.

something that could have threatened the party foundations. Families started to see they could benefit from the new market without relying entirely on the Party's efforts<sup>56</sup>.

In his plan of modernization, Deng detached himself from his predecessor and tried to learn from the foreign world. He understood that the most efficient way to development was about ending the Chinese isolationism. He set the foreign agenda based on a policy of "open door"<sup>57</sup>. Without assuming a defensive posture, he engaged with leaders and policy makers outside of China. He showed his commitment to preserve peace and stability during a time of global polarization. In this way he made the prospect for a Chinese growth very appealing for the international system, since a stronger China would have meant a stronger ally for peace<sup>58</sup>. To demonstrate his commitment, he proposed the Special Economic Zones, designated territories where to engage with foreign investors<sup>59</sup>. The open-door policy also showed Deng alternatives for improving the military sector. Thus, the wind of innovation and modernization also swept away the army. A stronger state committed to maintain stability and national security needed a strong-armed force to do it. That is why Deng focused on modernizing the People Liberation Army (PLA) to make it younger and more ready for real-life conflicts<sup>60</sup>. The modernization started from better trainings for the troops, new advanced technological weapons, and the recruitment of more qualified soldiers<sup>61</sup>. Surprisingly, Deng had to face a new conscription<sup>62</sup> problem, due to the difficulties to attract new cadets. In fact, the decollectivization of rural economy and his potential profits threatened the incentives to join the armed forces.

In his reform of the military the most important issue regarded the changing relation between the army and the Party<sup>63</sup>. In visioning its national security interests, China also envisioned its regional security interests, which is a clear consequence for a country caught up in the East Asian Region between the struggle of two superpowers<sup>64</sup>. To defend

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> B. Naughton, Deng Xiaoping: The Economist, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 153, pp. 491-514.

<sup>58</sup> M. Yahuda, Deng Xiaoping: The Statesman, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 551-572.

<sup>59</sup> G. Rachman. *Zero-Sum World*, Atlantic Books, London, 2010.

<sup>60</sup> J. T. Dreyer, Deng Xiaoping: The Soldier, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 536-550.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Z. I. Magribi Sultani, A. G. Wildani, F. S.Wargi, G. A. Z. Zidane, O. Ali, A. D. Rahmawan, Deng Xiaoping's Military Modernization and the National Security Interests of the People's Republic of China in the East Asian Region during the Cold War (1980-1991), *Jurnal Program Studi Pendidikan Sejarah*, 2024, 12.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

a constellation of zones was developed a military defence zoning system<sup>65</sup> for the East Asian region, with fast-moving troops. In this way the PLA shifted towards a state military force, slowly detaching from serving partisan elites interests. However, the military didn't become an uncontrollable force in the Chinese system. State institutions authority was very much present in guarding the national defence, while the Party overall watch never faltered<sup>66</sup>.

Deng's open-door policy exposed the population to alternative political models, challenging the exclusivity of China's political system. Anyhow, Deng never was a liberal, his goal was never to bring democracy to China and allow for political liberalization. To his eyes it was necessary for individual productivity to flourish to remain under the political control of the Communist Party<sup>67</sup>.

Following the characterization of the political scientist James MacGregor Burns about leadership styles, Deng can be considered a transformational leader<sup>68</sup>. MacGregor Burns used for the first time this category in his descriptive research on political leaders<sup>69</sup>. According to the scholar transformational leadership is a process where "leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation"<sup>70</sup>. This kind of leadership produces important changes within the organizations and people, varying their expectations.

Transformational leaders are the ones that usually tend to operate in developing countries, who are intellectuals committed to pursuing an agenda of reforms. This leadership style is the one that has strength to inspire and mobilize masses, and it seems that Deng himself was caught off guard by the consequences of his stimulus.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> D. Shambaugh, Deng Xiaoping: The Politician, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 457-490.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> N. C. Roberts, Transforming Leadership: A Process of Collective Action, *Human Relations*, 1985.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

### 1.3 Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping

In the 1980s, China was facing numerous challenges not only on the domestic front but also on the external front. Caught in between a struggle for global influence by two superpowers, China was stuck into a position of uncertainty and instability. Over the East Asian region weighed the shadow of the giant U.S. on the one hand and the Soviets on the other.

In recent decades, relations between the two communist neighbours had been deteriorating. During Mao Zedong's politics, the clash between the two was strongly set on an ideological basis, in a rivalry to assert themselves at the head of the leadership of the communist order<sup>71</sup>. This conflict of interests showed that the idea of a monolithic communism was just a façade. Adding up to the tension, in 1970s the US and China started a path towards normalization that worried Moscow, envisioning a potential alliance between the US, China and Japan in the military field in the East Asian Region<sup>72</sup>. The shared border between China and the Soviets represented a real threat. While the Chinese government feared an invasion, Moscow was making its calculations regarding a two fronts war<sup>73</sup>.

The prospects weren't benefiting either of the two actors and a de-escalation was necessary. A tentative step for rapprochement was made by Brezhnev in 1982 when he accepted the legitimacy of Chinese socialism<sup>74</sup>, but the real turning point occurred with Gorbachev.

As well as Deng, Gorbachev was a figure who found greater fame outside his own country and whose legacy in the West was more positive than the one he left behind in his homeland. Upon becoming Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev, too, went down in history as a reformer. He ushered in a new momentum, under the banner of the "new thinking"<sup>75</sup> and prepared for a newfound spirit of cooperation with China.

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<sup>71</sup> V. Zubok, The Soviet Union and China in the 1980s: reconciliation and divorce, *Cold War History*, 2017, 17:2, 121-141.

<sup>72</sup> N. Bernkopf Tucker, China as a Factor in the Collapse of the Soviet Empire, *Political Science Quarterly*, 1995-1996, 110:4, pp. 501-518

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> D. Shambaugh, Deng Xiaoping: The Politician, *The China Quarterly*, 1993, 135, pp. 457-490.

<sup>75</sup> N. Bernkopf Tucker, China as a Factor in the Collapse of the Soviet Empire, *Political Science Quarterly*, 1995-1996, 110:4, pp. 501-518.

It is possible to draw a comparison between Deng and his Soviet counterpart, both united in the spirit of reform but at the same time incredibly distant. Deng and Gorbachev embarked on two different paths of reform, both developing from the communist order during the 1980s and that led to divergent results. These two different reforms programs that developed from the communist order during the 1980s had very divergent results, marking the productive rise of China and the dissolution of the Soviet Union<sup>76</sup>. China's "reformed socialism" allowed the productive system to sustain limited private enterprise, with responsibility systems and self-management, but still maintaining governmental political structures<sup>77</sup>. Similarly, Gorbachev also recognized the importance of economic decentralization, however he embarked in a more ambitious process, following his belief that democracy was an essential element to reform economics.<sup>78</sup> With his *perestroika*, the soviet leader "aimed at a qualitative change in society, by linking socialism with democracy"<sup>79</sup>. Both the leaders acted out of necessity. The one-party model inherited by Stalin was in crisis, together with a model of centralized planned economy with no private ownership of means of production<sup>80</sup>.

Gorbachev started to promote his *perestroika* for the USSR and the world, dreaming to reach cooperation under a reformed socialism<sup>81</sup>. This dream met with Deng's more pragmatic exertion. He was looking favourably at a Sino-Soviet normalization, prioritizing national economic power and aiming to finally solve the pending issue of the "three obstacles". China's cooperation with the communist neighbour was standing firmly on these three conditions, asking the Soviet to end the occupation of Afghanistan, recall the troops stationed on the border shared with China and to end the support of the Cambodian occupation made by Vietnam<sup>82</sup>. Gorbachev showed great commitment in solving the three obstacles and started promptly working on the matter. During the Vladivostok speech in 1986, Gorbachev announced the withdrawal of 8000 troops from

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<sup>76</sup> V. Zubok, The Soviet Union and China in the 1980s: reconciliation and divorce, *Cold War History*, 2017, 17:2, 121-141.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> S. Hua, The Deng Reforms (1978 1992) and the Gorbachev Reforms (1985 1991) Revisited: A Political Discourse, *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2006, 53:3, pp. 3-16.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p.12.

<sup>81</sup> V. Zubok, The Soviet Union and China in the 1980s: reconciliation and divorce, *Cold War History*, 2017, 17:2, 121-141.

<sup>82</sup> J. W. Garver, The "New Type" of Sino-Soviet Relations, *Asian Survey*, 1989, 29:12, pp. 1136-1152.



Afghanistan by the end of the year and to “reduce conventional forces along the Sino-Soviet border”<sup>83</sup>.

Having reestablished economic cooperation, excluded the military threat and recognized mutual respect, Deng showed his willingness to meet with his soviet counterpart<sup>84</sup>. On 15 May 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev arrived in Beijing for the sixth Sino-Soviet Summit that lasted till May 18<sup>85</sup>. The summit is a watershed in the evolution of relations between China and the Soviet Union, marking an end to a long-lasting period of conflict. However, it happened to occur when China was dealing with an ongoing internal crisis and turmoil, which tarnished the importance of Gorbachev’s visit to Beijing. The summit held symbolical relevance for both sides. It would have helped Gorbachev to bolster his image at home while using China’s achievement to prove the importance of reforms for progress, thus gathering support for his own programme; for Deng it would have meant to increase international visibility and show China as a global actor<sup>86</sup>.

In his speech greeting Gorbachev, Deng expressed his concrete hope for an improvement in Sino-Soviet relations, tracing historically the dynamics that had driven them apart and the abuses that China had to endure. He believed that in a rapidly evolving world Marxism needed to be carried forward with a new thinking, building socialism in each country based on its conditions<sup>87</sup>. In the end he reiterated how the goal of the summit was not to linger on empty talks but to do more practical things to increase the intensity of cooperation<sup>88</sup>.

Despite the hopes for the meeting, the Chinese prodemocracy movement crushed the organization for the summit, leading to change schedule, delay and cancel events, which upset Deng and the government. The weekend preceding Gorbachev’s arrival, the movement started a hunger strike in Tiananmen Square and even the government

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<sup>83</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, USSR-Gorbachev’s speech on Asian security, 28 July 1986.

<sup>84</sup> C. G. Jacobsen, Sino-Soviet Relations: New Perspectives, *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, 1989, 20:1, pp.37-46.

<sup>85</sup> S. M. Goldstein, "Diplomacy amid Protest: The Sino-Soviet Summit", *Problems of Communism*, 1989, 38:5.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Excerpts from the Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping, May 16 1989, Wilson Center Digital Archive, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Volume III* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press), 284-287.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

ultimatum of clearing the square seemed to not affect them.<sup>89</sup> The demonstrations continued in the capital, amid the enthusiasm of the participants. The students admired Gorbachev's political reforms, and a student delegation visited the Soviet embassy to invite Gorbachev to speak with them<sup>90</sup>. That surprised the Soviet delegation which was not expecting such a warm welcome. Anyhow, the protests affected Gorbachev goal of using the summit for the promotion of his reforms back home. He had to move in a slippery situation, balancing his discourse among two sides. In fact, he had to deal with the Chinese leaders already distressed and humiliated by the difficulties of managing the protests and the Soviet delegation; and on the other hand, siding completely against the protesters would have meant losing the opportunity to gather that much needed support for his political reforms<sup>91</sup>.

The Soviet leader found himself in a transformed China, that now escaped the old patterns in which the international system had relegated it. The period of reforms initiated by Deng had launched the country in an economic ascend and boosted its productive potential. China was not scared anymore of portraying its strength on the international scene and was growing more confident in the changing foreign scenario, by rewriting its relations with the main actors of the time, namely the US and the URSS. At the same time China was traversed by a deep internal turmoil. Chinese people were also aware of the mutated historical conditions they were facing and their spirit had been reinvigorated by the decade of reforms, that showed them new possibilities. Following Gorbachev's visit the demonstrators saw a window of opportunity to harness their newfound strength as catalysts for social change within the country. Students and workers were united in a single voice calling for greater political openness, demanding the end of corruption and censorship and advocating for the basic rights of freedom of speech, press and associations. Gorbachev had in this way the chance to experience what the tension between economic progress and democratic stagnation would lead to. At this regard he said to his delegation "Some of those present here have promoted the idea of taking the

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<sup>89</sup> S. M. Goldstein, "Diplomacy amid Protest: The Sino-Soviet Summit", *Problems of Communism*, 1989, 38:5.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

Chinese road. We saw today where this road leads. I do not want the Red Square to look like Tiananmen Square”<sup>92</sup>.

As for the students, they were well aware of the importance of the Summit and Gorbachev’s presence in the capital. They were planning on exploiting all the international media’s attention to pursue their cause. In their scheme, the huge media presence would have pressured the government in opening to dialogue and agreeing to their demands <sup>93</sup>. Sadly, their assumptions turned out to be fallacious and had the opposite effect. The Chinese government was humiliated on global scale and later tried to minimize the scope of the summit<sup>94</sup>. The government acted divided and unsure in dealing with the protests, failing to demonstrate unity and organization.

On May 18 the Soviet delegation left the country with a bittersweet taste. The meeting had successfully reached the normalization of bilateral relations, but the judgment remained clouded by a shadow pending on China’s future<sup>95</sup>. The fears were not unfounded since the escalation of brutality was soon to unfold. The day after, on May 19, martial law was declared and the bloody destiny marked. Gorbachev could not help but look with concern and regret at the developments of the crisis in China, stating that the Chinese authorities should have talked to the students to avoid the massacre, as he would have done the same. He expressed disappointment at Zhao Ziyang's political decline<sup>96</sup>, since he had found in the CCP General Secretary a reliable ally and a like mind who showed a softer approach towards the protesters. During the Summit’s days the two had in fact engaged in conversations regarding socialist reform and found their pace<sup>97</sup>.

In sum, the Sino-Soviet summit truly marked a major political development not only for the bilateral relations of the two countries involved, but also for the systemic balance, in a scene where power was disputed among actors belonging to rival sphere of influence. Nonetheless, the summit did not get the attention it deserved as the media's focus on pro-

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<sup>92</sup> V. Zubok, The Soviet Union and China in the 1980s: reconciliation and divorce, *Cold War History*, 2017, 17:2, 121-141.

<sup>93</sup> A. Lewis, Injurious exploitation: the effects of the Sino-Soviet Summit on the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, Kansas State University, 2011.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> V. Zubok, The Soviet Union and China in the 1980s: reconciliation and divorce, *Cold War History*, 2017, 17:2, 121-141.

<sup>96</sup> J. W. Garver, The "New Type" of Sino-Soviet Relations, *Asian Survey*, 1989, 29:12, pp. 1136-1152.

<sup>97</sup> A. Lewis, Injurious exploitation: the effects of the Sino-Soviet Summit on the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, *Kansas State University*, 2011.

democratic protests dimmed its glow and troubled Deng, leading to a faster and more agonizing culmination.

#### **1.4 Demands of liberalization in a divided China**

To fully understand the rationale for the crackdown, it is necessary to take a step back, to before the escalation of events that characterized the Beijing Spring of 1989. In fact, the June 4 incident represented only the tip of the iceberg of a series of contradictions and tensions that swept through China, accentuated with the advent of the Deng Era. The 1989 protests were only the most recent manifestation of a wave of dissent that started to grow already from the death of Mao Zedong. Specifically, the most heated years were the biennium 1978-79, 1986-87 and finally 1989. Even though it was remembered under the general appellative of “democracy movement”, at first it was merely a broad-based protest and not yet an effective movement pursuing a common democratic goal<sup>98</sup>. Under Deng’s input China experienced a period of prosperity, thanks to the decentralization of the market system, the open-door policy, and the new flow of foreign investments. The new paramount leader’s policy created the conditions for a new social and political consciousness to develop, freeing Chinese people from a rigid ideological pressure and showing tolerance rehabilitating the former officials purged by Mao<sup>99</sup>. Deng’s reforms significantly boosted China’s economic growth. However, the open-door policy also exposed the population to alternative political models, challenging the exclusivity of China’s political system. Along with the “four modernizations” of the economy, a young generation of students and workers started to call for a fifth modernization, namely

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<sup>98</sup> D. Kelliher, Keeping Democracy Safe from the Masses: Intellectuals and Elitism in the Chinese Protest Movement, *Comparative Politics*, 1993, 25: 4, pp. 379-396

<sup>99</sup> A. Chubb, Democracy Wall, Foreign Correspondents, and Deng Xiaoping, *Pacific Affairs*, 2016, 89:3, pp.567-589.

democracy<sup>100</sup>. Handwritten big posters filled with individual grievances, *dazibao*, started to appear in the capital and in particular on a street wall located at a busy crossroads. Starting from the end of 1978, it was addressed as the Xidan Democracy Wall (Xidan Minzhu Qia)<sup>101</sup>. Blooming slowly, the members of the Democracy Wall movement were advocating for greater freedom of speech, but they never aimed to challenge the established authority, since their support for Deng and for the CCP never faltered<sup>102</sup>. As proof of this statement, among the posters exposed in the streets was not uncommon to find complaints against Mao's operate in relation to the purge of Deng and his supporters. Thus, given their continued loyalty to the party-state and the heavy presence of foreign media in the country, the activists of the movement did not feel truly in danger. The most daring foreign journalists engaged in a true "poster hunting"<sup>103</sup>, searching the city's streets for controversial accusations toward party leaders on the same page as Mao. The people advocated not only for democracy but also for human rights, as reported by a London's *Daily Telegraph* correspondent: "We want democracy and freedom"<sup>104</sup>. In this wave of protests, just like will later happen in 1989, the foreign press played a crucial role and both the CCP leaders and the activists tried to take advantage of it. The formers felt shielded by the media and their coverage, thinking that the regime would not take too severe measures against them so as not to trigger outrage. At the same time, it would have allowed the protesters to amplify their voices. On his side, Deng Xiaoping proved to be an excellent proved to be a good strategist, juggling obstacles and turning them in his favour. At first, he did not repress the protests, showing himself as a tolerant leader and allowing his name and that of the party to be shown positively through China and abroad. His message was clear, depicting a country where unity and stability were the main goal; thus violence would not have been his answer<sup>105</sup>. The movement and the press favoured his foreign policy of reproachment with the US, crucial for the further economic and technological development of the country. Once his political aim was reached, Deng

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<sup>100</sup> S. Bond, An archive of the 1989 Chinese Prodemocracy Movement, 1991, *The British Library Journal*, 17:2, pp. 190-197.

<sup>101</sup> A. Chubb, Democracy Wall, Foreign Correspondents, and Deng Xiaoping, *Pacific Affairs*, 2016, 89:3, pp.567-589.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p.577.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p. 578.

<sup>105</sup> S. Bond, An archive of the 1989 Chinese Prodemocracy Movement, 1991, *The British Library Journal*, 17:2.

effectively smutted the movement down. In a change of heart, the foreign press became his scapegoat, seen as the foreign arm plotting and interfering in Chinese private affairs and fomenting chaos.<sup>106</sup> The Democracy Wall movement had a short life span, being permanently sedated in late 1979.

However, although it ended with nothing concretely achieved, the movement did not struggle in vain, opening the door to the awareness of a new popular force.

In these years of changeability for China's leadership and its citizens, the Chinese Communist Party was transformed too, in its composition and relation with the people. The new position of the Party was, in fact, one of the factors that allowed for the emergence of contained dissenting statements.

The CCP had lost its monolithic unity, shaped now by different generations of officials and driven by conflicting interests<sup>107</sup>. Faced with the loss of the ideological force and the opportunities offered by the new reformed economic system, the party was unable to maintain its legitimacy and moral compass in the eye of the public, falling prey to corruption<sup>108</sup>. The structure power remained free from accountability systems, preventing any independent interference from outside.<sup>109</sup> Chinese people started to value their state based principally on an economic performance, linking the legitimacy of the government to the productive developments<sup>110</sup>. In sum, popular perception shifted while the majority of the top state officials, who joined the party during the 1920s and 1940s, continued to feel their authority as legitimate based on a more ideological stance<sup>111</sup>. From this main cleavage will develop the chasm that engulfed China in the 1980s.

Initially, Deng's performance as party leader considering it from an economic perspective, was appreciated by the citizens. The population experienced a period of economic growth that allowed the government to deal with the social expenses generated by the reforms<sup>112</sup>. In spite of it, the system was preparing for a severe backlash. As

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<sup>106</sup> A. Chubb, Democracy Wall, Foreign Correspondents, and Deng Xiaoping, *Pacific Affairs*, 2016, 89:3, pp.567-589.

<sup>107</sup> S. Rosen, The Chinese Communist Party and Chinese Society: Popular Attitudes Toward Party Membership and the Party's Image, 1990, *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, pp. 51-92.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> D. Zhao, State legitimacy, state policy, and the development of the 1989 Beijing Student Movement, *Asian Perspectives*, 1999, 23:2, pp. 245-284.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> T. Shi, The Democratic Movement in China in 1989: Dynamics and Failure, *Asian Survey*, 1990, 30:12, pp. 1186-1205.

mentioned earlier, Deng failed to foresee the consequences of his own success. The rapid economic growth fuelled expectations of further ongoing wellness. The high ranks officials grown deaf of any criticism, being too prideful<sup>113</sup>. Moreover, such an impressive economic growth gave the false perception that the benefits generated by the reforms would have been able to compensate for any social group any eventual loss of wellbeing (especially intellectuals and teachers), and so the state officials didn't take the problem too seriously, continuing to focus only on those who had been benefited by the reforms.<sup>114</sup> When the state lifted price controls, many officials' relatives and family members established their own businesses. They used their influence to buy goods cheaply from producers and then sold them at higher prices, making quick profit. This practice, relying on political power, was labelled "official profiteering"<sup>115</sup>. The price reform and the obstinate corruption led to a staggering increase in prices, paving the way for inflation which started to erode the purchasing power of consumers<sup>116</sup>. The leadership was not capable of answering to the grievances and frustration in an effective and unified way. Divisions among the high ranks let the country in a stalemate.

When economic frustrations begin to add up with intellectuals' discontent for a stagnant political scene, the recipe for crisis escalation was complete.

According to the English scholar Craig Calhoun, the main causes of the tensions that have swept through China since the late 1970s can be grouped into three sorts. First, Calhoun refers to all those grievances stemming out from the shortcomings of the economy. Under this spectrum are listed the mounting inflation, the shortage of material goods and services and the consequent appeal to bribery, corruption of high ranks officials and inequitable wages<sup>117</sup>.

Calhoun's second clustering comprehend the new relevance of intellectuals. When addressing to "intellectuals" in China is usually a reference to everyone with a university education, so a heterogenous group<sup>118</sup>. In Deng's new China, their role was critical to the country's advancement, which the political elites and intellectuals themselves soon

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p.1190.

<sup>116</sup> T. Saich, The Rise and Fall of the Beijing People's Movement, *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 1990, pp. 181-208

<sup>117</sup> C. Calhoun, Revolution and repression in Tiananmen square, *Society*, 1989, 26:6, pp. 21-38.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

realized. Strong of this new balance of power, they started to become more confident and push the government action toward greater liberalization measures. Among them, professor Fang Lizhi soon became a famous vanguard of the intellectuals efforts to awaken consciences in society<sup>119</sup>. Lastly, China found itself in the dynamics of a succession crisis. Despite Deng's efforts to find a solution to the past heritage of the power struggle for leadership succession among senior elites, the paramount leader himself was unable to let go of his position. Indeed, to avoid the instability that would arise among the old elites after his retirement from the power scene, Deng tried to open the door to younger members in the party, promoting a generational change. However, when fresh ideas started to roam the government halls, he refused to let go of his authoritative grip. That is exactly the case of what happened with the dismissal of his potential heir Hu Yaobang in 1987<sup>120</sup>.

During 1986 in the divided political leadership, some of the party leaders realized the need to allow the politics to reform alongside the economy<sup>121</sup>. They thought that the best way to unleash all the potential of the enterprises in the reformed market was to reform the governmental structure. A political reform would have strengthened the legitimacy of the government among the new generations and improve the overall efficiency of the bureaucratic system<sup>122</sup>. The intellectuals welcomed this change of posture and started a prolific production of articles in favour of liberalization. Students joined the quest and demonstrations bloomed in the country at the end of 1986. The conservative wing of the government started to fear a possible intervention of the working class in the protests and saw the potential for instability.<sup>123</sup> It was in this occasion that the General Secretary of the CCP, Hu Yaobang, was dismissed<sup>124</sup> since his behaviour toward the demonstrators was considered too lenient by the hard-liners and the military. Yaobang was looked upon with suspicion by his opponents even given his open disposition toward the West and his invitation to the intellectuals to be sympathetic with more Western ideas<sup>125</sup>. Hu's

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> B. Stavis, Contradictions in Communist Reform: China before 4 June 1989, *Political Science Quarterly*, 1990, 105:1, pp. 31-52.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> C. Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 1994, University of California Press.



departure from the political scene also decreed the end of the momentum of demonstrations.

However, the conservatives' reaction proved to be unpopular. Yaobang successor, Zhao Ziyang, tried to find a compromise between the different factions but without significant advancements. The decision-making structure continued to be divided and the main issues of dissent were never truly solved. Inflation and corruption remained heated themes and reforms proposed by Zhao exacerbated the situation.

During June 1988 was aired a documentary called *River Elegy*<sup>126</sup> which denounced China's current cultural situation. The minds behind the show were of young and educated individuals, trying to awake the minds of the population. The main complaint pursued was linked to the Chinese people mentality, still attached to a feudal past and humiliated by the rest of the world<sup>127</sup>. According to them the authoritarian model was struggling to compete with Western modernization and needed to be revitalized.

The documentary became popular in little time, appealing to a big audience through the television, before being restricted.<sup>128</sup> *River Elegy* was an alarm that things were changing. Its wide audience showed that the public debate was not anymore only engaging the intellectuals and students, but larger segments of the Chinese population were increasingly interested in the country's future and critical toward its potential developments. Moreover, the initial broadcasting of the documentary confirmed that the leadership had long lost its unity, in the narration of the Chinese ideology and the degrees of spaces allowed for dissent<sup>129</sup>.

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<sup>126</sup> B. Stavis, Contradictions in Communist Reform: China before 4 June 1989, *Political Science Quarterly*, 1990, 105:1, pp. 31-52.

<sup>127</sup> C. Calhoun, Tiananmen, Television and the Public Sphere: Internationalization of Culture and the Beijing Spring of 1989, *Public Culture*, 1989, 2:1.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 2- ESCALATING VIOLENCE: FIRSTHAND ACCOUNTS FROM THE HEART OF THE CRISIS

### 2.1 The massacre

The trigger for the revival of the pro-democracy demonstrations occurred with the death of the former Party Secretary, Hu Yaobang, on 15 April 1989. A decade after the dissolution of the Democracy Wall Movement, the People's Republic of China was again facing the grievances of its people, but this time they would have resonated much more vigorously. Hu's death represented the students' disillusionment and generated a deep sense of grief and discouragement among them, who saw him as a symbol of reform and political tolerance<sup>130</sup>. Students embraced their role as "conscience of the nation"<sup>131</sup> and saviours of China's future. Compared to the social class of workers, they tended to be less subjected to the state control, being young, educated and promising<sup>132</sup>. This gave them confidence, feeling invested by a tragic heroism in their struggle for China's salvation. Just as happened with the Democracy Wall Movement, foreign media was once again one of the empowering elements for students. In fact, the world's eyes were focused on the region during the 1989 spring because of two major events: the Sino-Soviet Summit and the Asian's Development Bank meeting held in China<sup>133</sup>. Thanks to the press the students were able to spread their battle according to the narrative of a clash between Light and Dark<sup>134</sup>, the pure spirit of the people against the authoritative regime.

Differently from the previous demonstrations of the past years, the movement that sprung in 1989 did not share a full twin character with the Democracy Wall Movement. The students' democratic struggle in 1989 had now different nuances. That is to say, the

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<sup>130</sup> J. Zuo and R. D. Benford, Mobilization Processes and the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 1995, 36:1, pp. 131-156.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> S. Bond, An archive of the 1989 Chinese Prodemocracy Movement, 1991, *The British Library Journal*, 17:2, pp. 190-197.

activists who carried the protests had a conflicting conception of what to fight for. They were divided between a more mainstream line of activists and a more radical one. When reconstructing the nature of the “democratic struggle” that led to the Tiananmen’ s massacre, this subtle difference is often overshadowed. The ideal of democracy pursued by the Chinese educated class is not to be confused with the Western conception of democracy. The mainstream activists were in fact advocating for liberalization<sup>135</sup>, and their vision got the upper hand in the debate internal to the movement. Their aim was simply the protection of people's freedoms from government interference thanks to the establishment of appropriate rights, namely procedural rights. For the mainstream activists an interference in the ruling procedure had to be granted only to the most educated segments of the population. Differently, the more radical line was calling for a true democratization, aiming to the creation of new institutions that would have allowed popular participation on a broader scale in governmental procedure, granting an equal citizenship to everyone<sup>136</sup>. However, after the lesson learnt with the Democracy Wall experience, the more radical line of action was discarded. Their previous attempt in achieving communication between the ruling class and the common people had led them to failure, betrayed by Deng himself, the same leader who had been at odds with Mao's tyrannical policies and the one potentially open to dialogue<sup>137</sup>. Hence, the 1989 wave of demonstrations, backed for legal protection of individuals against the government, both for personal liberty and freedom of expression<sup>138</sup>.

In the universities students and intellectuals felt responsible for the enlightenment of China<sup>139</sup> and determined to inspire as many as possible in this quest. In his speeches in the country’s universities, Fang Lizhi recalled “we should have our own judgment about what is right, good, and beautiful in our academic field, free from the control of political power, before we can achieve modernization and true democracy”<sup>140</sup>. In his discourse he emphasized the collective role of the educated people of China as a class in the pursuit of modernization. The opportunity for him to being actually able to deliver his speeches was

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<sup>135</sup> D. Kelliher, Keeping Democracy Safe from the Masses: Intellectuals and Elitism in the Chinese Protest Movement, *Comparative Politics*, 1993, 25: 4, pp. 379-396.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> C. Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 1994, University of California Press.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

the further indication that something was changing within the system and the manoeuvring space for political opportunities, differently from the repressive moment in which the Democracy Wall Movement was caught up<sup>141</sup>. This time some of the reformers in the government shared a point of contact with the activists. The Secretary General, Zhao Ziyang, showed sympathy for the concept of “New Authoritarianism”<sup>142</sup> which promoted a conception of “elite democracy”, namely a democracy restricted to enlightened and educated people, granting them individual liberty and freedom of expression. This subjugation of popular sovereignty was necessary to innovate the economic system under the propulsion of the authority of the country's brightest minds<sup>143</sup>. In this tense humus of fervent intellectual activity, Hu's death thus represented the necessary opportunity to concretely pursue a collective action. His death triggered new protests, becoming a martyr for the movement<sup>144</sup>. On April 16 hundreds of students from Beijing University reunited in Tiananmen Square to pay tribute to Hu's memory<sup>145</sup>. They showed pictures of Hu and displayed posters and *dazibao* bearing slogans like “Yaobang is dead, but Xiaoping still lives”<sup>146</sup>. They took the opportunity to express grievances toward the leadership and to grieve their lost hope. Some famous posters openly disapproved of the leadership, showing the great propensity to risk adopted by students. Slogans like “Those who should have died live, those who should have lived have died. A sincere and honest man has died, But the hypocritical and false live on. A warm-hearted man has died, Indifference buried him. It is difficult for one man to illuminate the country, but one man is enough to make the country perish”<sup>147</sup> started to take over universities walls, followed by processions in the streets and public displays of grief<sup>148</sup>. The demonstrators' frustration was also compounded by rumours surrounding Hu's death. Indeed, voices suggested that his death was caused by a heart attack occurred during a political meeting in which the former secretary had to endure insults and humiliations<sup>149</sup>.

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> D. Kelliher, Keeping Democracy Safe from the Masses: Intellectuals and Elitism in the Chinese Protest Movement, *Comparative Politics*, 1993, 25: 4, pp. 379-396.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> C. Calhoun, Revolution and repression in Tiananmen square, *Society*, 1989, 26:6, pp. 21-38.

<sup>145</sup> T. Saich, The Rise and Fall of the Beijing People's Movement, *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 1990, pp. 181-208.

<sup>146</sup> C. Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 1994, University of California Press.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> L. W. Pye, Tiananmen and Chinese Political Culture: The Escalation of Confrontation from Moralizing to Revenge, *Asian Survey*, 1990, 30:4, pp. 331-347.

<sup>149</sup> C. Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 1994, University of California.

The students searched for a dialogue with the Vice Premier Li Peng, who denied them the opportunity<sup>150</sup>.

In this first phase the government showed tolerance, in spite of a deep sense of dissatisfaction. The public grieving of a former member of the leadership was a symbol of respect and it would have been unpleasant to obstacle this mourning display; secondly the leadership wanted to avoid further conflict with the students and hoped that once the mourning period was over, things would have quiet down<sup>151</sup>. On their side, the students were also engaged in their calculations. Hu's death offered them an excellent pretext to voice their personal grievances and dissatisfaction. In fact, carrying on only their individual complaints, they would have risked coming across as selfish. In this way, instead, they took the opportunity to bring to the leadership's attention their personal annoyances without being accused of selfishness. Their main complaints regarded their poor living conditions in small dormitories and with repellent food, the belongingness to a society where the government would choose for them the first job, where teachers received less pay than waiters, and overall funds designed to education were terribly scarce<sup>152</sup>. In a China where selfishness represented a major sin, students shifted their attention on more abstract themes, praising a former leader and grieving as a collective<sup>153</sup>. Moreover, students linked their personal grievances with patriotic sentiments for an advanced China.

The 20 April 1989 is remembered as "The 20 April Tragedy"<sup>154</sup>, as the day when police forces beat crowds of students protesting at Zhongnanhai -headquarters of the party Central Committee and State Council- and chanting "long live democracy"<sup>155</sup>. Under these circumstances, the difference between the nonviolent demonstrators and the violent reaction of government forces was evident.

On April 21 the *People's Daily* released an editorial where the leadership launched a warning to the demonstrators. In the editorial the government acknowledged the presence

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<sup>150</sup> J. Kovalio, The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident: retrospective and prospective considerations, *Asian Perspective*, 1991,15:1, pp. 5-36.

<sup>151</sup> C. Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 1994, University of California Press.

<sup>152</sup> L. W. Pye, Tiananmen and Chinese Political Culture: The Escalation of Confrontation from Moralizing to Revenge, *Asian Survey*,1990, 30:4, pp. 331-347.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> C. Cox, Chronology of Events Related to the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident, *World Affairs*, 1989-90, 152:3, pp. 129-134.

<sup>155</sup> C. Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 1994, University of California Press.

of a small number of individuals whose aim was clearly not to respectfully mourn Hu Yaobang but to use it as a pretext to create chaos and directly attacking the established power and the Party's offices. It added that the calm and calculated reaction showed by the elite was not to be mistaken for weakness and that countermeasures would have been taken toward future perpetrators<sup>156</sup>. In the following days, events began to precipitate quickly. On April 22, at Hu's funeral, the students representatives tried to reach for a dialogue with the government officials. They collected a petition with their principal demands and hoped to introduce it to the party leaders reunited at the funeral held at the Great Hall of People<sup>157</sup>. The students' leaders tried to convey a symbolic gesture, kneeling in front of the Great Hall of People, just like petitioners used to do during imperial times. The humiliation they experienced was unspeakable. In the face of their gesture, no official came forward to listen to their demands<sup>158</sup>. They petitioned to fight for the end of corruption, reach for a dialogue with the leadership, rehabilitate the memory of Hu Yaobang and the recognition of the autonomous students' unions<sup>159</sup>. However, despite seeming moderate requests, it is no surprise the government wouldn't allow for them, since they represented an open challenge to the Communist regime<sup>160</sup>.

On April 24 Beijing University students announced the classes boycott, followed on the 25 April by a speech from Deng in which he stated that the government was facing a true "turmoil" and not anymore, a simple movement. He insisted on the necessity to "oppose this turmoil with a clear stand, without being afraid of international circumstances"<sup>161</sup>.

April 26 was a watershed moment for the developments of the protests. Led by the recently established independent students associations, thousands of students took over Tiananmen Square<sup>162</sup>.

On the same day, the *People's Daily* released an editorial, broadcasted on all national television to make sure to reach as large an audience as possible<sup>163</sup>. It echoed Deng's

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> C. Cox, Chronology of Events Related to the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident, *World Affairs*, 1989-90, 152:3, pp. 129-134.

<sup>161</sup> J. Kovalio, The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident: retrospective and prospective considerations, *Asian Perspective*, 1991, 15:1, pp. 5-36.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> L. W. Pye, Tiananmen and Chinese Political Culture: The Escalation of Confrontation from Moralizing to Revenge, *Asian Survey*, 1990, 30:4, pp. 331-347.

words of April 25, in assessing that students had been "incited by a very small number of people with evil purposes,"<sup>164</sup> and that they were carrying on a "planned conspiracy" against the Party<sup>165</sup>. The movement was addressed as "counterrevolutionary turmoil"<sup>166</sup>. If the goal of the editorial was to tame the protests, it ended up having the opposite effect. The students found a new impetus and humiliated by the false accusations, they gave rise to the largest spontaneous demonstration that the PRC ever experienced<sup>167</sup>. Thousands of students inundated Tiananmen Square, supported by the city's citizens. Tiananmen Square, symbol of the authority of the CCP, was under siege.

Wounded in their pride after being labelled as counter-revolutionaries, students shifted their battle on a more heroic ground, pledging to the final act of heroism and pursuing a heroic death<sup>168</sup>. Some of them started to write their wills and displayed them in the walls posters. One of these read "I am willing to go over boiling water and burning fire for democracy and freedom. I will not have any regrets about dying for the Chinese people. My country, my people, when are you going to wake up and stand up as a man? For democracy and freedom I am not afraid of anything. I am ready to fight with my own life."<sup>169</sup>

Facing an expected outcome, the leadership was divided between "hard-liners", who wanted to deal repressively with the demonstrators, and the "reformers" who wanted to adopt a more compliant tactic. The consequences at the decision-making level were that government 'action was never clear, alternating between moments of patience and others less lenient. That is why, again on April 27, the government shifted to a "soft" line<sup>170</sup>. The editorial aroused unpopularity among the citizens too, inflicting on the already eroding legitimacy of the Party.

Despite being caught up in a difficult position, however at this point, the government still did not believe that a repressive crackdown was the only means available and thus tried

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> T. Saich, *The Rise and Fall of the Beijing People's Movement*, *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 1990, pp. 181-208.

<sup>166</sup> D. Zhao, *State legitimacy, State Policy, and the development of the 1989 Beijing Student Movement*, *Asian Perspectives*, 1999, 23:2, pp. 245-284.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> L. W. Pye, *Tiananmen and Chinese Political Culture: The Escalation of Confrontation from Moralizing to Revenge*, *Asian Survey*, 1990, 30:4, pp. 331-347.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, p. 341.

<sup>170</sup> D. Zhao, *State legitimacy, State Policy, and the development of the 1989 Beijing Student Movement*, *Asian Perspectives*, 1999, 23:2, pp. 245-284.

to veer toward a dialogue with the students. At the end of April, a dialogue between the parties seemed to wink to a possible peaceful reconciliation. Surprisingly, this result was achieved without the presence of the Secretary General Ziyang, leading advocate of a conciliatory approach, who at the time was in North Korea<sup>171</sup>. Upon his return to China, Zhao held two public speeches, on May 3 and May 4.

The May 4 Speech occurred during a meeting with the envoys of the Asian Development Bank, and it resulted in a clear sign of a divided leadership<sup>172</sup>. The Secretary confirmed that most of the students had peaceful aims and were supporters of the system, since they were promoters of messages such as “Support Socialism”, “Support the Communist Party”, “Oppose corruption”<sup>173</sup> and he continued expressing his faith that things would have solved out without an escalation.

Comparing the condescended tone of the speech and the strictness of the 26 April editorial, made the leadership indecision evident. However, their disagreement at first days of May was still about the level of compromise allowed, and it did not yet escalate to the final decision of whether resorting to force.

Zhao’s speech had the merit to satisfy the majority of the students, who stopped the classes boycott, while it disappointed the most radical students. It seemed that the movement had lost the impetus of the first days and the radicals realized to need a new bolster<sup>174</sup>. To revitalize once again the moral fervour, radical students came up with an ingenious remedy. Aware of the incoming visit of Gorbachev for May 15, they proposed a hunger strike two days before, on May 13<sup>175</sup>; immolating in a heroic suicide and transforming the protests in a zero-sum game<sup>176</sup>.

To end the strike the students demanded a genuine dialogue with the government, set on an equal basis, and the rehabilitation of the movement’s reputation after the libelous April 26’s editorial<sup>177</sup>. However, denouncing the editorial would have meant to destabilize the

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> L. W. Pye, Tiananmen and Chinese Political Culture: The Escalation of Confrontation from Moralizing to Revenge, *Asian Survey*, 1990, 30:4, pp. 331-347.

<sup>176</sup> D. Zhao, State legitimacy, State Policy, and the development of the 1989 Beijing Student Movement, *Asian Perspectives*, 1999, 23:2, pp. 245-284

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.



authority of the regime by recognizing the validity of the pro-democracy demands and no longer classifying them merely as counterrevolutionary instances.

Chain Ling, as one of the leaders of the strike, held a speech to gather support. Carried by emotion yet remaining lucid, she stated “I am here to tell everyone that I want to go on a hunger strike. Why am I doing it? It is because I want to see the true face of the government. We are fortunate to have parents who raised us to become college students. But it is we are not traitors. We, the children, are ready to die. We, the children, are time for us to stop eating. The government has time and again lied to us, ignored us. We only want the government to talk with us and to say that ready to use our lives to pursue the truth. We, the children, are willing to sacrifice ourselves”.<sup>178</sup>

Slogans hymning for the death of Deng Xiaoping and Li Peng<sup>179</sup> became beacons in the strikes and clashed with the non-violent ways of the demonstrators. Moreover, the strikes had the merit to win the sympathy of other classes, who joined the students.

With the joining of the workers to the protests, events embarked on a dangerous road. Students started to approach more popular themes, drifting away from the promotion of their specific instances and joined their voice to the grievances of the workers. Namely, workers complaints concerned more specific day to day issues, being they are particularly vulnerable to economic swings, inflation, corruption of the officials and susceptible to the unjust distribution of wealth<sup>180</sup>. However, the gamble taken by workers was higher. In fact, they couldn’t count on the foreign attention and support and didn’t enjoy financial security, and at the end of the crisis they were the ones to pay the highest price, being killed and arrested more frequently<sup>181</sup>.

The new participation of the workers ignited the situation, and some student leaders started to concretely fear for a repressive reaction by the authorities.

Shen Tong, one of the student leaders, addressed the protesters and proposed a tactical retreat<sup>182</sup>.

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<sup>178</sup> C. Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 1994, University of California Press.

<sup>179</sup> L. W. Pye, Tiananmen and Chinese Political Culture: The Escalation of Confrontation from Moralizing to Revenge, *Asian Survey*, 1990, 30:4, pp. 331-347.

<sup>180</sup> D. Kelliher, Keeping Democracy Safe from the Masses: Intellectuals and Elitism in the Chinese Protest Movement, *Comparative Politics*, 1993, 25: 4, pp. 379-396.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> C. Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 1994, University of California Press.

Here are reported some of his words: “I’m not saying we have to stop the hunger strike. But we should evacuate the square temporarily. We can’t let our emotions make us forget all reason. Gorbachev is leading the Soviet Union to political reform one step at a time. His visit to China could be beneficial and useful to us. By staying here, we are giving the conservatives an excuse to crack down on the reformers”<sup>183</sup>.

Nevertheless, the situation was already out of control and the leadership of the movement divided.

Shen Tong’s words sparked outrage among workers and many students who had come from outside of Beijing to demonstrate and kept persisting in their cause.

On May 16 the high ranks of the government held an emergency meeting, where hardliners and reformers conflicted on the strategy to pursue. Zhao Ziyang insisted on maintaining a permissive posture, while Li Peng feared it would have only further escalated the situation<sup>184</sup>.

Zhao’s position in the upper levels of power was becoming increasingly precarious and was definitely destabilized by a confession he made to Gorbachev during a meeting. Indeed, Zhao shared with the Soviet leader that the only one responsible for the economic reforms and their shortcomings was Deng.<sup>185</sup> Clearly, it was not a true statement but an effort on Zhao’s side to deny his own responsibility in the country’s economic failures. However, this did not stop the students from labelling Deng as an “an uncrowned emperor”<sup>186</sup>.

On May 19, in a last attempt to resort to the students’ cooperation, Zhao visited the strikes and urged them to retreat, begging for their forgiveness<sup>187</sup>. After his failure in finally negotiating with them, the Secretary disappeared from the public scene<sup>188</sup>. He was kept under house arrest, as prisoner of his own state.<sup>189</sup> However, during his period of confinement, Zhao remained determined not to let his voice be silenced by his political

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid, Ch.2, p. 68.

<sup>184</sup> D. Zhao, State legitimacy, State Policy, and the development of the 1989 Beijing Student Movement, *Asian Perspectives*, 1999, 23:2, pp. 245-284.

<sup>185</sup> J. Kovalio, The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident: retrospective and prospective considerations, *Asian Perspective*, 1991, 15:1, pp. 5-36.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, p.12.

<sup>187</sup> C. Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 1994, University of California Press.

<sup>188</sup> D. Zhao, State legitimacy, State Policy, and the development of the 1989 Beijing Student Movement, *Asian Perspectives*, 1999, 23:2, pp. 245-284.

<sup>189</sup> Z. Ziyang, *Prisoner of the State-The secret journal of Zhao Ziyang*, 2009, Simon & Schuster.

opponents. He kept registering his thoughts about crucial moments of China's modern history, including the developments of the Tiananmen crisis.

With Zhao out of the games and the reformers faction prevailed over, the next step definitely enshrined the crackdown course and on May 19 troops from the PLA started moving toward the capital, to enforce the martial law and end the occupation of the Square<sup>190</sup>. Despite having mobilized the troops, the leadership was still hoping to spare the bloodbath and removing the students without unleashing the massacre. Proving their intentions, the President Yang Shangkun stated the only aim of the troops was to restore order and end the state of anarchy that prevailed in the city. The troops were not directed at the students<sup>191</sup>.

On their side, the soldiers were unprepared for violence, without the right equipment and being unaware of the reason why they were called for. Meeting popular resistance, the soldiers started to dialogue with the demonstrators who told them that a corrupted government<sup>192</sup> had called them to deal with peaceful students. Troops refused to persist in their advance, arousing the sympathy of the people. Feelings of solidarity and closeness with the students continued to grow, gaining more and more support from residents. Explicative is the case of the "Flying Tigers"<sup>193</sup>, a gang of motorcyclists who reported news regarding troops movements around the city to the protesters busy in the barricades. The government had to take decisive action. The martial law had revealed ineffective, even if out of the game Zhao's fame was still hunting the conservatives, and the more the troops stayed close to the civilians, the more unlikely they were to take action against them.<sup>194</sup>

The Tiananmen crisis was a struggle in which symbols had their valence and in the darkest times a symbol of hope was needed. On May 30, the "Goddess of Democracy" statue was placed in Tiananmen Square<sup>195</sup>, facing and challenging Mao's portrait. The statue recalled to the Statue of Liberty, but it wasn't a simple replica. It was an original symbol for the demonstrations, embodying the ideals of freedom and drawing on Chinese values. The

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<sup>190</sup> D. Zhao, State legitimacy, State Policy, and the development of the 1989 Beijing Student Movement, *Asian Perspectives*, 1999, 23:2, pp. 245-284.

<sup>191</sup> C. Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 1994, University of California Press.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> J. Kovalio, The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident: retrospective and prospective considerations, *Asian Perspective*, 1991, 15:1, pp. 5-36.

female figure originated from a Chinese peasant, with a torch and a robe<sup>196</sup>. This open challenge to the established authority was one of the last remarkable statements occurred during the crisis.

At the end of May and the start of June, the Chinese government urged the foreign journalists on the territory to remain at home<sup>197</sup>, thus minimizing the attention on the Chinese stage. The central government strengthened the totalitarian grip on all the means of communication, while voices of an attack to the Goddess of Democracy started circulating<sup>198</sup>. As intended, that would have been the final symbolic sacrifice, remaining coherent with the narrative of self-sacrifice portrayed by the protesters.

On June 2 a symbolic hunger strike was announced, six weeks after the starting of the protests<sup>199</sup>. At this point the government realized that the only way forward was resorting to violence.

During the night between June 3 and June 4<sup>200</sup> new troops were mobilized and started marching toward the capital. This time the soldiers belonged from outside the city and strangers to the student's propaganda<sup>201</sup>. They surrounded the capital from different points, encountering popular resistance and also engaging in strenuous fights with the civilians<sup>202</sup>. Some eye witnessing of the capital residents reported of a savage brutality and violence in the streets. Chang'an Boulevard, one of Beijing's main thoroughfares, was renamed "Blood Boulevard"<sup>203</sup>.

The students gathered in Tiananmen Square heard the news of the soldiers' killing civilians on their paths and converged around the Monument of the People's Heroes,<sup>204</sup> in a last demonstration of their stoical quest and surrendering their weapons.

Again, Chai Ling's words vibrated of distraught emotion "We were ready to receive the violence and battle forces. We felt that the patriotic democratic movement, butcher's knives in peace. It was a war between love and hate, not between which was based on the principles of peace, would fail if the students tried arming themselves with gas bottles

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<sup>196</sup> C. Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 1994, University of California Press.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> J. Kovalio, The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident: retrospective and prospective considerations, *Asian Perspective*, 1991, 15:1, pp. 5-36.

<sup>201</sup> C. Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors*, 1994, University of California Press.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, Ch. 3, p.126.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, Ch.3, p. 133.

and wooden clubs to resist the machine gunners and tank drivers, who had already lost their ability to reason”<sup>205</sup>.

The students waited for the end, tight together singing the *Internationale*, while two Red Cross employees tried to bargain with the soldiers for a peaceful retreat from the square.<sup>206</sup>

In the mist of the retreat, soldiers started to charge toward the monument but apparently without purposefully killings of students.

Contrary to mainstream belief fed by the foreign media, the massacre did not take place directly in Tiananmen Square<sup>207</sup> but outside the square, and the final tally of students killed and wounded was not high when compared to other participants in the protests, namely workers, peasants, and residents of the capital. The media Voice of America spread rumours about “rivers of blood”<sup>208</sup> in Tiananmen Square, which irritated the Chinese government.

According to the Chinese Government the total number of deaths counted more than 200 people, 36 of which were university students, and more than 3000 were the ones injured.<sup>209</sup> However, these estimates have met with scepticism from Western sources who believe that the numbers were underestimated, dealing not with hundreds but with thousands of deaths.<sup>210</sup>

The People’s Liberation Army had betrayed the trust of its people using against them brutal force and armoured vehicles to crush non-violent demonstrators. “Tank man”<sup>211</sup> became the most evocative image of the days of violence, occupying a place in the history books. “Tank man”, is the photo protagonist of the notorious massacre days. The picture taken by the photographer Stuart Franklin is as simple as powerful. It shows a Chinese man with no defined identity, in a white shirt and shopping bags by his side. He stands alone and fragile against the armoured tanks sent by the government, firmly in place

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid, Ch. 3., p. 134.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid, Ch. 3, p. 141.

<sup>209</sup> Department of State- US, Tiananmen Square 1989, *Office of the Historian*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/tiananmen-square#:~:text=Estimates%20of%20the%20numbers%20killed,students%2C%20were%20killed%20that%20night>.

<sup>210</sup> As found, for example, in the diplomatic documents of the US authorities, later addressed in paragraph 7.

<sup>211</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, Tiananmen Square incident, December 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Tiananmen-Square-incident>.

without letting them advance. He is the embodiment of the spirit of the demonstrators, incapable of giving up on his fight for freedom and the struggle against oppression. As Stuart Franklin stated “It demonstrates one man extraordinary courage, standing up in front of a row of tanks, being prepared to sacrifice his own life for the sake of social justice”<sup>212</sup>.

After the massacre, China was in shock and uncertain about the future. The demonstrators counted their dead and wounded, trying to realize the gravity of what had happened, sharing their grief with family members, friends and comrades.

## **2.2 The voice of survivors**

When reconstructing and analysing significant historical events that deeply affected contemporaries, there's often a tendency to undervalue the importance of listening to firsthand accounts. Eyewitness testimonies provide a unique and valuable perspective, offering details and nuances that might be missed in analyses based solely on official documents or second-hand reports. Incorporating these voices into historical narratives can significantly enrich our understanding, providing a complete and more multifaceted picture of past events and their impact on society at the time.

In fact, without personal accounts from the people who experienced and drove change during moments like the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, scholars are limited to making assumptions about the micro-level perspectives, despite understanding the broader social and systemic impacts. Moreover, when it comes to authoritarian regimes that tend to censor dissenting declarations, documentations such as those reported in this paragraph turn out to be essential to reconstructing events with impartiality.

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<sup>212</sup> Amnesty International UK, What really happened in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, May 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/china-1989-tiananmen-square-protests-demonstration-massacre>.

That is why space in this work is specifically dedicated to the testimony of two key players in the 1989 protests, namely Chai Ling and Fang Lizhi.

Chai Ling, born in 1966, was a student at the time of the protests and embarked among the leadership ranks of the democracy movement. Her name soon appeared among the 20 students most wanted by the regime, and because of this she found herself having to flee into exile in the spring of 1990, starting a new life in the United States<sup>213</sup>. The movement and its quest for political liberalization, disrupted her life. In fact, before the chaos, she was considered a judicious star student with a bright future ahead.

In May 1989, following the imposition of martial law, Chai Ling herself got in touch with an American envoy who conducted a valuable interview. The interview was later distributed across China and outside its border with the clear aim to spread awareness about the impending massacre that was about to take place<sup>214</sup>.

So, on May 28 Chang Li registered her “Final Words” before leaving her commander position and together with it her country<sup>215</sup>. Her words are marked by emotions as she presents herself to the interviewer, Philip Cunningham<sup>216</sup>:

I think these may be my last words. My name is Chai Ling. I am twenty-three years old. My home is in Shandong Province. I entered Beijing University in 1983 and majored in psychology. I began my graduate studies at Beijing Normal University in 1987.

The situation has become so dangerous. The students asked me what we were going to do next. I wanted to tell them that we were expecting bloodshed, that it would take a massacre, which would spill blood like a river through Tiananmen Square, to awaken the people. But how could I tell them this? How could I tell them that their lives would have to be sacrificed in order to win? If we withdraw from the square, the government will kill us anyway and purge those who supported us. If we let them win, thousands would perish, and seventy years of achievement would be wasted. Who knows how long it would be before the movement could rise again? The government has so many means of repression — execution, isolation.

I love those kids out there so much. But I feel so helpless. How can I change the world? I am only one person. I never wanted any power. But my conscience will not permit me to surrender my

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<sup>213</sup>K. E. Brødsgaard, Chai Ling, Danmarks Nationalleksikon, last modified April 2023 [https://lex.dk/Chai\\_Ling](https://lex.dk/Chai_Ling).

<sup>214</sup> Written transcript of Chai Ling interview. The *Gate of Heavenly Peace* Documentary contains a few short excerpts of Chai Ling's speech with audio. <https://prezi.com/ttxwaodw99ra/chai-ling/?fallback=1>

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Chai Ling Records Her "Final Words", 8964museum, <https://8964museum.com/time/en/t-g09-001/>

power to traitors and schemers. I want to scream at Chinese people everywhere that we are so miserable! We should not kill each other anymore!

Chai Ling's words perfectly capture what it means to hold a leadership position in a moment of crisis. She is torn between the desire to protect her friends and fellow students and the realization that a costly sacrifice will be necessary in the struggle with the authorities. Her speech shows her love and pain, combined with a deep sense of frustration against government repression and violent attitude.

She clearly expresses her fears, doubts, and the difficulties of believing in the impact of a single individual. However, her resolute commitment to justice keeps showing her empathy and courage. Despite everything, she is filled with hope for the future calling for the Chinese people to stand together in a moment of crisis.

I had a conversation with a plainclothes cop on April 25. I asked him what the sentence was for counter-revolutionary activities. He said that it used to be three to five years, but now it is seventeen. I'd be forty after seventeen years in prison. I'm really not willing to do that.

Yesterday I told my husband that I was no longer willing to stay in China. I realize that many students won't understand why I'm withdrawing from this movement, and I will probably be criticized for this. But I hope that while I can no longer continue with this work there will be others who can. Democracy isn't the result of just one person's efforts. During the hunger strike I had said that we were not fighting so that we could die but so that we could live. I was fighting for life, because democracy cannot be accomplished by a single generation. Now I'm even more convinced of this. If I don't die, I vow to teach my child, from the day he is born, to grow up to be an honest, kind, fair, and independent Chinese.<sup>217</sup>

Those above are the words of a young student who was abruptly torn from her university life and found herself to be a leader, a guide for many others in a time of chaos and uncertainty.

Chai Ling felt caged, with an arrest warrant on her back and the real possibility of a long prison sentence. Emotion and frustration, however, do not tarnish her judgment. She understands perseverance is necessary, turning back would have meant the end of the political fight and certain punishment.

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<sup>217</sup> Asia for Educators, Interview at Tiananmen Square with Chai Ling, *Weatherhead East Asian Institute* University of Colombia, [https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china\\_1950\\_chailing.htm](https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1950_chailing.htm)



In her words one can understand the meaning of her fight, the hope for a democratic value to be realised in a collective effort to pursue generation after generation.

She then continued:

We were striving for rights, and I felt like telling everyone, including undercover police and soldiers, that the rights that the students were risking their lives for were also for them. I would be ashamed to enjoy the benefits of these rights we are struggling for if I had never participated in this movement.

[...] Some of the students have such a poor understanding of democracy. [...] I believe that democracy is a natural desire. It should guarantee human rights and independence, and foster self-respect — all of which people are entitled to.

Unfortunately, the basic human instinct for independence has been greatly inhibited and degraded among the Chinese. [...] Many of these students are irresponsible; they are accustomed to living in a feudal society in which they do not have to make decisions for themselves<sup>218</sup>.

Chai's, however, is also a critique of Chinese society, which remains anchored in the cultural roots of the past, with a strong division among social classes. The democratic goal, however, being a collective mission, cannot be achieved until people realize that the rights demanded by the democracy movement affect and benefit everyone.

Fang Lizhi, differently from Chai Ling, was not among the leaders of the protests but he was undoubtedly one of the main inspirations for them<sup>219</sup>. In 1978 Lizhi was a simple astrophysics professor, but his voice grew louder and more relevant with the years. As a critic of communist governance, he became a thorn in the side for Deng that listed Fang Lizhi and his wife together in the same list of the most wanted.<sup>220</sup>

The Tiananmen massacre led the couple to seek for help at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, where they remained secluded for a year. After the permit to finally be allowed to leave the country, they moved to England and then finally landed in the U.S. His story, like Chai's, is one of sacrifice and pain, a bitter but inevitable farewell to one's country, in the hope that the struggle for change would not stop.

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> M. Hood, Interview with Fang Lizhi, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 1995, 27:3, 21-27.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

In 1992, the journalist Marlowe Hood visited Lizhi in Tucson where he was teaching at the University of Arizona, to conduct an interview.<sup>221</sup>

Fang envisioned Deng as a contradictory figure, in a perpetual dilemma between promoting economic reforms and at the same time strengthening the control over the political arena, leading to discontent and tension. Under Deng's rule China was experimenting only an apparent renewed stability, since the grip of the authority of the central government was crumbling day by day. Specifically, he stated:

Democracy doesn't mean an absence of government. It means a democratic government. It's a government based on law. Communist authority in China is weak, but there is no democratic or law-based society to replace it. The situation, in fact, is very unstable<sup>222</sup>.

Analysing the period between 1988 and 1989, Fang confirmed that they were years of strong popular demands for structural political reforms, change was especially advocated when it came to freedom of speech and freedom of the press.<sup>223</sup> Once again his suspicions about Deng and his obstructing influence for change came to word and, as Fang confirmed, was in that occasion that he wrote a letter advocating for the release of political prisoners. This was supposed to be a "test", to prove the leader's will in pursuing the path of political reform. A test that Deng failed<sup>224</sup>

With his firsthand experience of the massacre on June 4, Lizhi shared a look to the forgotten victims.

In fact, as he recalled, victims were not simply the one killed that day, they were all the ones arrested, who lost their job, students who weren't able to graduate after being involved in the protest. Together with the people, the tanks destroyed political reforms and all the representatives in power supporting them<sup>225</sup>.

One of the last questions posed by Hood regarded the effective ability of the Chinese dissident community exiled to organize itself. Lizhi's reply let some discouragement seep in. Indeed, as he claimed, when he was operative directly in China his visibility in the

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid, pg. 2.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid, pp. 3-4.

<sup>224</sup> <sup>224</sup>Angle and M. Svensson, 'Open letter to Deng Xiaoping', *Chinese Human Rights Reader*, 2001, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/legal-and-political-magazines/open-letter-deng-xiaoping>.

<sup>225</sup> M. Hood, Interview with Fang Lizhi, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 1995, 27:3, p. 5.

country was more relevant. Being distant from the “native soil” inevitably eroded his power to cause a reaction and to inspire the masses<sup>226</sup>.

These testimonies are more valuable than ever, considering that after the violence in Tiananmen Square, the authorities’ control over the main national (the TV) became stringent, threatening the echoes of the demonstrations<sup>227</sup>.

### **2.3 Analysing the U.S. perspective from declassified documents**

In the aftermath of the crisis and during the following years, the Chinese government enforced strict censorship measures to erase the memory of the Tiananmen crisis. On the contrary, the US National Security Archive provides a critical account of the 1989 Tiananmen Square events, based on firsthand observations of how the U.S. political leadership judged, discussed, and responded to the crisis that was unfolding. The Archive aims to clear up the relations between China and the US, relying on documentation of bilateral exchanges<sup>228</sup> and gives us detailed day by day updates involving Tiananmen crisis development. The Archive boasts a terrific collection of around 15,000 pages of formerly classified materials regarding the operations between US and China in foreign policy<sup>229</sup>.

As previously explained, the protests of 1989 were not an isolate occurrence. Tiananmen Square had already been the stage of student demonstrations. In the biennium 1985-1986

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid, pag. 8.

<sup>227</sup> C. Calhoun, Tiananmen, Television and the Public Sphere: Internationalization of Culture and the Beijing Spring of 1989, *Public Culture*, 1989, 2:1.

<sup>228</sup> Richelson, Edited Jeffrey T, and Michael L Evans, Tiananmen Square, 1989: The Declassified History, *The National Security Archive*, The George Washington University.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

slogans like “Long Live Democracy” and “Law, Not Authoritarianism” crowded the Square<sup>230</sup>.

The documents comprised in the first section of the Archive record the developments occurred during the first wave of demonstrations in the late 1986 and early 1987. The protests mirrored the domestic conflict between the demands for political liberalization and the firm fist of a government focused on maintaining stability. As reported in a US embassy cable dating December 24, 1986, on December 23, 1986, a small student protest took place in Beijing. According to the state-run newspaper, *People's Daily*, there was some understanding of the students' concerns, though it was also emphasized that the boundaries of government tolerance were nearing their limit. Later, embassy officials observed that maintaining political stability was a fundamental priority in China. They noted that if the authorities would perceive a threat to this stability, were likely to respond decisively and with significant force. In the cable are mentioned different sources still classified. One in particular warned the US Ambassador Winston Lord, during a dinner, that “opponents of political liberalization in the leadership would use the protests to underline the dangers of democracy<sup>231</sup>”.

Tensions started growing on January 1, 1987, when thousands of people gathered in Tiananmen Square to protest. The governmental response was severe, arresting approximately 24 demonstrators labelled as "troublemakers" and subjecting them to processes described as "education and examination"<sup>232</sup>. Amidst the chaos, on January 17, the reformist General Secretary of the Communist Party, Hu Yaobang was forced to resign. His sudden resignation appeared to be linked to the recent wave of student protests<sup>233</sup>.

In the second section of this brief collection's review, are listed several US national documents which focus on the critical stages of the Tiananmen crisis, dedicating attention to the Chinese authorities' decision and the subsequent international reaction. In

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, Document 4, US Embassy Beijing, To: Department of State, Wash DC, Student Demonstrations Update (December 24, 1986).

<sup>232</sup> Ibid, Document 5, IPAC Daily Intelligence Summary 1-87, China: Student Demonstrations (January 2, 1987).

<sup>233</sup> Ibid, Document 6, IPAC Daily Intelligence Summary 10-87, China: Hu Yaobang Resigns (January 17, 1987).

particular, the time frame covered goes from May 23 to June 3, 1989, just before the violent military crackdown.

On May 23, just days after the declaration of martial law on May 20, President George Bush met with Wan Li, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China<sup>234</sup>. During the meeting held in Washington, the US President expressed concern about the situation, asking Wan Li how he envisioned the crisis would unfold. However, the Chairman's response remains classified, leaving his perspective unknown.

As the demonstrations continued, the situation in Beijing grew more tense. US intelligence reports dating early June 1989, highlighted the precarious balance between the protester's consistency and the authorities frustration. On June 2, a State Department report for Secretary Baker noted that stricter rules were being placed on foreign journalists, reflecting Chinese government's frustration with the international spotlight on China at the time. On their side, the demonstrators erected the "Goddess of Democracy" statue, aiming to provoke the reaction needed to imprint new momentum to their cause. The following day, on June 3, the prospects for violence began to rise.

As reported in the Secretary of State's morning summary for June 3<sup>235</sup>, the Chinese leadership at that point was still aiming toward a peaceful resolution. However, two incidents negatively affected the course of action, leading to the use of force. At first 5000 unarmed troops marching on Tiananmen Square were dispersed by a force of students and residents, while lately that day the police accidentally fired tear gas into the crowd. The chaotic situation showed how soldiers were unprepared to face a strong popular resistance. After the blockage in their advance to Tiananmen, the PLA soldiers started to retreat, enduring the ridicule from locals and scolding from elderly women who refereed to them as "bad boys" and "a disgrace to the PLA". One U.S. official compared it to Napoleon's retreat from Moscow<sup>236</sup>.

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid, Document 7, Memorandum of Conversation, George Bush Meeting with Wan Li, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and Member of the Politburo, People's Republic of China (May 23, 1989).

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, Document 9, Secretary of State's Morning Summary for June 3, 1989, China: Police Use Tear Gas on Crowd (June 3, 1989).

<sup>236</sup> Ibid, Document 10, Cable from US Embassy to Beijing, Martial Law with Chinese Characteristics (June 3, 1989).

Section three of the Electronic Book deals specifically with the outbreak of the massacre, outlining the hectic dynamics of the peak of the crisis.

By the evening of June 3, the Chinese government started to tighten its grip on the capital. It was at this point that the U.S. State Department established a special task force, "TFCH01," to coordinate information on the unfolding events. The task force informed U.S. authorities that violent clashes had broken out as PLA troops, armed with automatic weapons and supported by tanks, had advanced toward Beijing's city centre from multiple directions<sup>237</sup>.

Two weeks after martial law was declared; the government had regained control of the country's symbolic centre. Civilians resisted against heavy armed troops for seven hours with rocks, bottles, and Molotov cocktails, standing their ground against an overwhelming military presence, setting armoured vehicles on fire, and swarming around military forces<sup>238</sup>. The US embassy cable dating morning of June 4 provides deep in information regarding the clashes between soldiers and protesters<sup>239</sup>. Reportedly, the clashes between soldiers and protesters occurred between June 3 and June 4 resulted in fatalities. Additionally, there were accusations of vandalism by military personnel, with claims that they damaged windows of shops, banks, and other buildings<sup>240</sup>.

The document in detail states "some 10,000 troops, formed a ring around the square and "a column of tanks, and trucks entered Tiananmen from the east [...] PLA troops in Tiananmen opened a barrage of rifle and machine gun fire"<sup>241</sup>. US officials said to have encountered a woman who eye witnessed a tank run over 11 people<sup>242</sup>.

After the crackdown, the PLA moved to secure the city centre, with embassy officials observing tanks and trucks passing the U.S. diplomatic compound towards Tiananmen Square. In one hour, over 70 tanks were reported speeding towards the square. Burned military vehicles were seen throughout the city<sup>243</sup>. In a cable from the US Department of

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid, Document 12, Cable, from Department of State, Wash DC, to: U.S. Embassy Beijing, and All Diplomatic and Consular Posts, TFCH01, (June 3, 1989).

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, Document 13, Secretary of State's Morning Summary for June 4, 1989, China: Troops Open Fire.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, Document 14, Cable, from U.S. Embassy Beijing to Department of State, Wash DC, The Morning of June 4 (June 4, 1989).

<sup>240</sup> Ibid, Document 14.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid, Document 14.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid, Document 14.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid, Document 15, Cable from U.S. Embassy Beijing to Department of State, Wash DC, June 4 Afternoon and ... (June 4, 1989).

State to the US Embassy in Beijing the numbers of deaths are estimated between 500 to 2600, with injured up to 10,000<sup>244</sup>.

US authorities provide a chilling description of the massacre, far from the underestimates of the Chinese government, which has been silent about the real brutality of the fights. Troops carried out the violence, firing indiscriminately into crowds of unarmed civilians, including women and children, often with automatic weapons. Many protesters were shot in the back while fleeing. The streets were littered with destroyed military vehicles, and students had seized an armoured personnel carrier on a university campus, prompting threats of executions. The massacre drew unanimous international condemnation, with foreign leaders criticizing the "bloody repression" regardless of ideology<sup>245</sup>.

More specifically, the 27<sup>th</sup> Army was identified as one of the most brutal unit of the PLA. It was "responsible for most of the death and destruction at Tiananmen Square on June 3"<sup>246</sup>. The unit was commanded by the nephew of the PRC President, Yang Shangkun, who belonged to the hardliners faction.

On June 6, State Department reports indicated Beijing faced a severe political crisis, with signs of divisions within the PLA as some soldiers supported protesters and destroyed military equipment. Unauthorized troops entered the city to confront the 27th Army. Rumours circulated about Deng Xiaoping's death and an assassination attempt on Premier Li Peng<sup>247</sup>.

By June 9, namely five days after the massacre, the US intelligence was expecting a wave of arrests and a military takeover of university campuses. The Chinese leaders' defensive strategy envisaged mass arrests and denial of heavy civilian casualties while emphasizing attacks on police and soldiers. As the leadership crisis deepened, Zhao Ziyang remained in Beijing under the custody of hardliners<sup>248</sup>.

On June 9 Deng made his first public appearance since May 16. The leader supported the military's actions, while the authorities increased the efforts to track down "counterrevolutionaries" and their leaders. These latter were addressed as a "tiny group"

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid, Document 16, Cable from Department of State, Wash DC, To U.S. Embassy Beijing, China Task Force Situation (June 4, 1989)

<sup>245</sup> Ibid, Document 17, Secretary of State's Morning Summary for June 5, 1989, China: After the Bloodbath.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid, Document 18, Cable from U.S. Embassy Beijing To Department of State, Wash DC, (June 5, 1989).

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, Document 19, Secretary of State's Morning Summary for June 6, 1989, China: Descent into Chaos.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid, Document 23, Secretary of State's Morning Summary for June 9, 1989, China: Uneasy Calm.

comprising “thousands of bureaucrats, intellectuals, students, and labour activists guilty of incite chaos”<sup>249</sup>.

The day after, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research released an intelligence report under the title "Current Situation in China: Background and Prospects"<sup>250</sup>. The report highlighted that Zhao Ziyang was the only leader who recognized the people's grievances and the need for reform. However, hard-liners used the crackdown to weaken Zhao's influence and restore authoritarian control. Deng ultimately sided with the hard-liners, giving Yang Shangkun and Li Peng authority to impose martial law and suppress the protests. There was little hope for future political reforms, demands for freedoms, press transparency, and anti-corruption efforts<sup>251</sup>. In the face of ongoing arrests, Chinese leaders attempted to display unity in the policy making process.

After two weeks from the disruptive crackdown, U.S. officials were continuing to monitor the ongoing developments, and in particular of the ongoing arrests, whose numbers now totalled to 1,500, including 6 among the “most wanted” members<sup>252</sup>.

In the meantime, the US embassy was displaying important efforts to grant protection to the dissident Fang Lizhi<sup>253</sup>. Both parties were aware of his potential role as disruptive force in the relations between the US and China. In fact, after Fang Lizhi and his wife Li Shuxian sought refuge at the U.S. Embassy on June 5, the Chinese government escalated its anti-U.S. rhetoric. The U.S. Embassy was accused of sheltering a "criminal" responsible for the violence, with China warning of potential damage to U.S.-China relations<sup>254</sup>. Washington was increasingly concerned that the situation could harm the relationship with China. On their side, Chinese media coverage did not accuse the United States as a whole but divided the blame on specific individuals, like the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, and the American media<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid, Document 25, Secretary of State's Morning Summary for June 10, 1989, China: Mixed Signals on Purge.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, Document 24, Department of State Intelligence Brief, "Current Situation in China: Background and Prospects" (June 10, 1989).

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, Document 24.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, Document 29, Secretary of State's Morning Summary for June 21, 1989, China: Swift Justice.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, Document 27, Secretary of State's Morning Summary for June 14, 1989, China: Back to Business, But Crackdown Continues.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid, Document 26, Cable from: U.S. Embassy Beijing, to Department of State, Wash DC, (June 11, 1989).

<sup>255</sup> Ibid, Document 28, Secretary of State's Morning Summary for June 15, 1989, China: Accusation over Fang Lizhi.



These declassified sources display a detailed and critical view of the events that unfolded during the Tiananmen crisis. Ultimately, these reports convey a picture of a highly tense and complex situation, in which the Chinese government responded to the demonstrations with military action, aiming to restore order and prevent political change. The flow of information from the US witnesses reflects a growing concern about the escalating repression and the possible impact these events would have on US-China relations. The US perception of the Tiananmen events was based on a sense of condemnation for the repression, as well as concern for the geopolitical implications it would have, not only for China itself, but for the entire international system. The documents reveal that, while maintaining a certain diplomatic caution, the US government was critical of China's handling of the crisis, denouncing the Chinese authorities' methods and lack of transparency regarding the victims and the military response. Furthermore, reports reveal the US government concerned about the shortcomings on bilateral relations of the asylum offered to Chinese dissidents like Fang Lizhi, fearing an escalation of anti-American rhetoric from China. Despite ideological differences, Sino-US relations were complex and intertwined, and the Tiananmen crackdown represented a rupture that had long-term effects.

The 1989 Tiananmen movement represented a clash between the desire for political reform and the authoritarian reaction of the Chinese government. Started as a student demonstration in the name of democratization, transparency and governmental liability, the movement turned into a struggle against a regime that feared losing control over its citizens. Despite moderate demands, the government's violent response, culminating in the Tiananmen massacre, proved the Communist Party's inability to engage in dialogue with civil society. Within the ranks of political leadership, the division between reformists and conservatives portrayed a China divided between the desire for modernisation and the fear of political change. Thus, Tiananmen remains a symbol of silent resistance against the regime, reflecting the contradiction between economic progress and political authoritarianism.

## CHAPTER 3 – INTERPRETING TIANANMEN: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS TO UNDERSTAND THE CRISIS

### 3.1 Many glasses to read the world: bridging history and theory

The analysis of international political events provides insights into the dynamics of the global system. Historical developments have continuously shaped the world, often appearing as a sequence of chaos and disorder. However, amid the complexity of historical events and contemporary phenomena, an underlying order and rationale can be discerned. Empirical observation of reality is never straightforward, as it involves studying human behaviour, which is influenced by multiple factors. Ultimately, governmental actions are also human behaviours. Political scientists examine human activities commonly known as politics through empirical observation. One specialized branch of this field is dedicated to the exploration of the dynamics of international politics.<sup>256</sup>

The challenge for political scientists is to identify the most relevant factors to account for political and social events. As a result, different theories have emerged, each providing unique explanations by emphasizing different aspects. Since it's impossible to evaluate the impact of every single factor, these theories serve as lenses that highlight certain features based on their perspectives. Each theory offers a distinct viewpoint, and sometimes these perspectives can conflict. However, this "oculist pluralism"<sup>257</sup> is essential, as without it, understanding complex phenomena would be challenging.

The Tiananmen events were driven by a combination of political and social factors. Consequently, the crisis has been interpreted in different ways, depending on the aspects that political scientists have chosen to prioritize in their analysis.

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<sup>256</sup> G. D'Arrigo, 'Le Teorie delle Relazioni Internazionali: tanti occhiali per leggere il mondo ', *Treccani*, 2023, [https://www.treccani.it/magazine/chiasmo/diritto\\_e\\_societa/Potere/SSC\\_DArrigo\\_potere\\_relazioni\\_internazionali.html](https://www.treccani.it/magazine/chiasmo/diritto_e_societa/Potere/SSC_DArrigo_potere_relazioni_internazionali.html).

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

The following pages will examine the Tiananmen crisis through various interpretative frameworks.

Focusing on the theorisation of international relations scholars, the crisis will be analysed within its historical context, considering both its global significance and its specific implications for China.

International Relations (IR) is the academic field focused on the analysis of interactions between countries, governments, and various international actors. It covers a wide range of issues, such as diplomacy, foreign policies, conflict management, globalization, and international legal frameworks<sup>258</sup>.

International Relations, like other social sciences, relies on theories to understand the complexity of the world. Within IR, various schools of thought present differing and often opposing views, highlighted conflicting ideologies about global politics.<sup>259</sup> For instance, the competing view between the two school of thought Realism and Liberalism (Idealism) has shaped the dialectic development of the discipline. The end of the Great War and the creation of the League of Nations had marked the start of a new period focused on international collaboration and the creation of global institutions<sup>260</sup>. Idealists aimed to foster a deeper understanding of international relations to advance the cause of peace. They believed in a natural harmony of interests among nations and their goal was to create institutions, procedures, and practices that could channel this harmony and prevent, or at least control, war.<sup>261</sup> However, Idealism ultimately proved to be an inadequate tool as it failed to prevent the outbreak of World War II. Thus, a more pragmatic approach gained momentum, namely Realism. In accordance with the principles of this theory, in their international relations states are in competition with each other to gain power and preserve their national security, following the logic of the balance of power.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> O.P. Jindal Global University, 'What is International Relations? Definition, scope, importance and more', *Blog*, February 2024, <https://jgu.edu.in/blog/2024/02/20/what-is-international-relations/>.

<sup>259</sup> N. McCarthy, 'A Critical Analysis of the 'Great Debates' That Structured Traditional International Relations Theory', *E-International Relations*, 2009.

<sup>260</sup> O.P. Jindal Global University, 'What is International Relations? Definition, scope, importance and more', *Blog*, February 2024, <https://jgu.edu.in/blog/2024/02/20/what-is-international-relations/>.

<sup>261</sup> N. McCarthy, 'A Critical Analysis of the 'Great Debates' That Structured Traditional International Relations Theory', *E-International Relations*, 2009.

<sup>262</sup> O.P. Jindal Global University, 'What is International Relations? Definition, scope, importance and more', *Blog*, February 2024, <https://jgu.edu.in/blog/2024/02/20/what-is-international-relations/>.

The end of World War II and the establishment of the United Nations, along with various other new international institutions, brought important developments to International Relations. Liberalism resumed its pre-eminence. Nation states agreed to foster cooperation through economic and security organizations in order to minimize the chances of future economic crises or global conflict.<sup>263</sup> Still, Realism persisted in the Cold War especially in superpower competition between the Soviet Union and the US, where security concerns and balance of power theory dominated the study of international relations. In these years the Realism-Idealism debate gained greater intensity with realists emphasizing power politics, security, and the balance of power, and idealists promoting the potential for international institutions and diplomacy to prevent war.<sup>264</sup>

Until the 1970s, the study of international relations was largely focused on issues of war and peace, emphasizing international security. Scholars believed military strength was central to determining state-to-state relationships. Thus, academic research compared military powers between states, their alliances and diplomacy, as well as mechanisms for defending respective territories and serving national interests.<sup>265</sup> From the 1970s, economics became a central factor in international relations, with the study of international political economy gaining more focus. Economic factors, rather than military ones, were now the main drive in the interactions between nations<sup>266</sup>.

With the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Liberalism dominated world ideology. However, new challenges arose with globalization, the emergence of rising powers like China, and the complexities of global economic interdependence. Hence, the post-Cold War era saw the spread of liberal democracy but also new challenges in an increasingly multipolar world<sup>267</sup>. In this more intricate scenario, it became essential to develop new perspectives to interpret the world and thus the academic debate was enriched with new voices. In the 1990s Constructivist theory took root as a reaction to the limits of traditional theories, such as Realism and Liberalism. It sought to move beyond the limitations of these theories by focusing on the influence of human agency, social interaction, and how international relations are constructed by individuals'

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<sup>263</sup> C. M. Stephenson, 'International Relations, Overview', *Elsevier Inc*, 2008.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> K. K. Baral, 'International Relations Meaning Definition and Scope', University of North Bengal.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> C. M. Stephenson, 'International Relations, Overview', *Elsevier Inc*, 2008.

actions and perceptions, and not just the interests of states.<sup>268</sup> Alongside the development of Constructivism, Marxist scholars analysed world politics in the post-Cold War era focusing on global inequalities and exploitation within the international arena<sup>269</sup>.

Within this extensive theoretical framework, a multitude of perspectives exists to help interpret and understand the international system dynamics. Each theoretical lens, with its distinct emphasis, offers a unique approach to examine complex phenomena, uncovering aspects that might otherwise remain hidden. By applying various international relations theories to the 1989 Tiananmen crisis, we can bring clarity to the chaotic events, unravelling their underlying causes and motivations. This approach not only enhances our understanding of the immediate crisis but also allows us to assess its broader historical significance, revealing its impact on the political and social evolution of China at a defining moment in global history. Through these diverse theoretical perspectives, the complexity of the Tiananmen events becomes more accessible, offering profound insights into their domestic and international consequences.

### **3.2 Kissinger's Realpolitik: balancing power and pragmatism in the aftermath of Tiananmen Square events**

The reaction of former US diplomat Henry Kissinger in the aftermath of the tragic events in Tiananmen Square caused a stir and drew criticism. As former National Security Advisor and Secretary of State under President Richard Nixon's and his successor Gerald Ford, Henry Kissinger was aware of his position of prominence in the American political debate and his popularity. Nevertheless, he did not hesitate to offer his personal account

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<sup>268</sup> S. Theys, 'Introducing Constructivism in International Relations Theory', *E-International Relations*, 2018.

<sup>269</sup> M. Pal, 'Introducing Marxism in International Relations Theory', *E-International Relations*, 2018.

of what happened in China, even facing going against the prevailing sentiment of American and Western public opinion.

He referred to the *Los Angeles Times* that the crisis between the protestors and the Chinese authorities and the subsequent escalation of violence was purely a Chinese domestic matter<sup>270</sup>. Despite his disliking for the resorting to brutality<sup>271</sup>, Kissinger reiterated the strategic importance of China, affirming that “China remains too important to U.S. national security to risk the relationship on the emotion of the moment”<sup>272</sup>. His disappointment mainly concerned the US Congress for its strong reaction devoid of strategic calculation and its meddling in the internal politics of a sovereign country. In fact, the US Congress harshly pushed the Bush Administration for the imposition of severe economic sanctions on China, losing sight of the detrimental complications this would have had on bilateral relations between the two countries<sup>273</sup>.

According to Kissinger “No government would have tolerated to have the main square of its capital occupied for eight weeks by tens of thousands of demonstrators”<sup>274</sup>.

Two months after the crackdown, with Chinese authorities still determined to carry out arrests and persecutions of demonstrators, Kissinger’s position hardly found support among western democracies, committed to the defence of human rights. For his part, Kissinger was not afraid to be the voice out of the chorus and lucidly argued his stance. According to him, the Chinese government had shown great restraint in his efforts to find a peaceful dialogue and resolution with the demonstrators, resorting to the use of armed force only as a last resort<sup>275</sup>. On the contrary, his critics pointed out that such a delayed reaction was only due to the inaction of a divided Chinese leadership.

In his book *On China*, published in 2011 as an attempt to analyse Chinese foreign policy during history, Kissinger noted that the Chinese premises in the management of the country were different from the start. The PRC never claimed to be aligned with the mechanisms of western democracies<sup>276</sup> and thus was incapable of understating their

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<sup>270</sup>A. Lewis, ‘Abroad at home: Kissinger and China’, *New York Times*, 1989, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/08/20/opinion/abroad-at-home-kissinger-and-china.html>.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> E. A. Hyer, ‘Values versus Interests: the US response to the Tiananmen Square massacre’, *Georgetown University- Institute for the Study of Diplomacy*, 1996

<sup>273</sup> H. Kissinger, *On China*, Penguin Books, 2012.

<sup>274</sup> F. Costello, ‘Kissinger’s complaint’, *Fortnight Publication*, 2002, 405, p.23

<sup>275</sup>F. Zhengyuan, ‘Kissinger’s view of China crisis’, *L.A. Times Archives*, august 1989, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-08-14-me-293-story.html>

<sup>276</sup> H. Kissinger, *On China*, Penguin Books, 2012.

strong reaction over a matter that was completely domestic. The narrative in western media was suddenly turned upside down. From a reforming state in the 1970s and 1980s under the leadership of a reformist leader like Deng, the PRC now had become an arbitrary authoritarian state led by a tyrant<sup>277</sup>.

Kissinger refusal to condemn the violence resounded unacceptably when he supported the Communist Party's general justification -to preserve the nation's stability- for continued authoritarianism and implied that the protesters had provoked the regime into committing the massacre<sup>278</sup>. Kissinger's opponents suggested that basic human rights were for Kissinger privileges to be reserved exclusively to his compatriots<sup>279</sup>.

The figure of Kissinger has attracted controversy. However, to understand his political action and vision it is necessary to place Kissinger as a diplomat and a man in the dynamics of his time. Indeed, he was never an advocate of authoritarianism, but a pragmatic politician who found himself operating in a complex historical moment.

Kissinger refused to brace with the democratisation mission that influenced US foreign policy following the Wilsonian paradigm of engaging in a crusade for democracy, and likewise criticised isolationism as a guiding principle of foreign policy<sup>280</sup>. He advocated for a pro-active foreign policy focused on engaging with states based on their foreign policy actions rather than their domestic systems<sup>281</sup>. American foreign policy, he argued, should be framed to safeguard national interests. The rationale for his reasoning is to be found in his adherence to the Realist school of thought, paradigm with which he tried to shape US foreign policy, first as National Security Advisor and then as Secretary of State. He aimed to push ideology away from foreign policy. However, in the end his realistic foreign approach, was proved to be unrealistic. His claim that foreign policy should be "based not on sentiment but on an assessment of strength"<sup>282</sup> ultimately fell short, as he

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> G. Chang, 'Compromised: Henry Kissinger's China syndrome', *Review works On China by Henry Kissinger*, 2011, 174:2, pp. 95-100

<sup>279</sup> F. Zhengyuan, 'Kissinger's view of China crisis', L.A. Times Archives, august 1989, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-08-14-me-293-story.html>.

<sup>280</sup> T. A. Schwartz, 'Henry Kissinger: Realism, Domestic Politics, and the Struggle Against Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 2011, 22:1, pp.121-141

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> H. V. Pant, 'The Kissinger overhang on contemporary global politics', Observer Research Foundation, December 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-kissinger-overhang-on-contemporary-global-politics>

failed to ensure that American foreign policy was guided purely by pragmatic and realistic considerations, remaining partially influenced by ideological stances”<sup>283</sup>.

In his life Kissinger attracted supporters and opponents, encapsulating multitudes and sometimes contradictions. As according to the Finnish historian Jussi Hanhimaki in his essay titled *"Dr. Kissinger" or "Mr. Henry"? Kissingerology, Thirty Years and Counting*, Kissinger the professor, National Security Advisor, Secretary of State, Nobel Prize winner<sup>284</sup>, memoirist and opinion-maker, remains a class of his own<sup>285</sup>. In the essay Hanhimaki offers a picture of a two-faced Kissinger. Namely, ‘Dr Kissinger’ embodied his academic side, as a realist philosopher and prince of Realpolitik. On the other hand, ‘Mr. Henry’, represented the power-hungry, bureaucratic schemer bent on self-aggrandizement<sup>286</sup>. This representation doesn’t seem flattering. It suggests that when tempted by power and political authority, Kissinger was prone to abandon his realist philosophy in the pursuing of his career<sup>287</sup>.

Kissinger considered himself a realist and, together with Hans J. Morgenthau, is remembered as a cornerstone of Classic Realism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>288</sup>. However, reducing Kissinger to this single categorization would fail to capture his complexity. Morgenthau himself depicted him as “many-sided”<sup>289</sup>. According to the scholar Nial Ferguson, Kissinger was aware of the limits of Realism. He believed that acting too rigidly following a narrow application of the dictates of Realism could have led to inaction in politics<sup>290</sup>. Ferguson moved forward and stated that Kissinger was a philosophical idealist<sup>291</sup> in the early years of his academic career.

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<sup>283</sup> D. Allen, ‘Realism and Malarkey: Henry Kissinger’s State Department, Détente, and Domestic Consensus’, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2015, 17:3, pp. 184-219

<sup>284</sup> In 1973 Henry Kissinger was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize “for jointly having negotiated a cease fire in Vietnam in 1973”. The Prize was awarded to Kissinger together with his counterpart Le Duc Tho, who refused to accept it. The decision to award Kissinger sparked protests since the man who ordered the bombing over Hanoi was at the same time spearheading cease-fire negotiations.

The Nobel Prize Henry Kissinger – Facts. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach 2025. Sat. 25 Jan 2025. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1973/kissinger/facts/>

<sup>285</sup> J. M. Hanhimaki, ‘“Dr. Kissinger” or “Mr. Henry”? Kissingerology, Thirty Years and Counting’, *Diplomatic History*, 2003, 27:5, pp. 637-676.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> D. Brostoff, ‘Politics among Realists: Morgenthau, Kissinger, and the Problem of Vietnam’, *Crimson Historical Review*, 2023

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> N. Ferguson, The Meaning of Kissinger: A Realist Reconsidered, *Foreign Affairs*, 2015, 94:5, pp. 134-138, 139-143

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid, p.136.



Hans J. Morgenthau is considered the father of Classical Realism<sup>292</sup> and his postulation shares many points of contact with Kissinger's. Both the scholars believed that global politics operates in a Hobbesian state of nature and its tragic character is linked to the selfishness of human nature<sup>293</sup>. Mankind has always been engaged in a struggle for power and a quest for dominance over each other. Power as defined by Morgenthau, is the control over the minds and actions of others, influencing their ability to choose how to behave<sup>294</sup>. The international system reflects this struggle. Lacking a superior authority in charge of checking on state behaviour, the outcome is a condition of anarchy<sup>295</sup>. In absence of a world government each state has to defend its security and fight for its survival and the pursuing of its national interests<sup>296</sup>. In this condition of self help states have no choice but engage in power politics, struggling to maintain their relative power, considered in terms of their capabilities relative to other states<sup>297</sup>. Nonetheless, when determining state behaviour, the anarchy is not the only variable to consider. In the struggle for power in global politics different factors intervene, namely the character of a leadership, cultures and the pressure overall exercised by the domestic structure<sup>298</sup>. Indeed, these elements had a bearing in Kissinger's shaping of American foreign policy. In particular, Kissinger found himself caught in a thorny historical conjunction where the individuality of each leader made the difference in leading to certain outcomes. In grasping the implicit tragedy of global politics, leaders have to wisely act for the wellbeing of their nation and aim to the maximization of their benefits<sup>299</sup>. Thus, the defence of the citizens and national security follows the attainment of a stable order of things, an equilibrium.

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<sup>292</sup> A. Kumari, Classical realism vs structural realism, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research*, 2023, 9:3, pp. 56-58

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> P. Toledo, 'Classic Realism and the balance of power', *Glendon Journal of International Studies*, 2005

<sup>295</sup> V. Jepson, 'The differences between Classical Realism and Neo Realism', *E-International Relations*, January 2012

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> P. Toledo, 'Classic Realism and the balance of power', *Glendon Journal of International Studies*, 2005.

<sup>298</sup> V. Jepson, 'The differences between Classical Realism and Neo Realism', *E-International Relations*, January 2012.

<sup>299</sup> A. Kumari, Classical realism vs structural realism, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research*, 2023, 9:3, pp. 56-58.

During the Cold War era, realists aimed at reaching a stable equilibrium<sup>300</sup> among the two big players of the time, the U.S. and the USSR. Such an achievement would have hindered the competition and allowed for a steady balance, trying to mitigate the logic of the zero-sum game.

In a balanced equilibrium the power of one state or a group of states is equivalently balanced by the respective power of another state or group of states<sup>301</sup>.

Balance of power diplomacy was for central for Kissinger. It was a way to reach a higher end, allowing for stability in a chaotic system while restraining the brutal drives of human nature<sup>302</sup>.

In a competitive anarchic world with no superior centre of power, morality is scattered. Different centres of power acknowledge disparate conceptions of justice, thus is responsibility of a sharp leader not to be affected by domestic moral concerns and simply focus on pursuing national interests<sup>303</sup>.

In light of the above, Kissinger's lack of condemnation of the Tiananmen events takes on a different meaning.

In a speech held in Bloomington, Minnesota, on July 15, 1975, the Secretary of State Henry Kissinger reminded his audience that the US, like many other nations in history, could neither escape from the world nor dominate it<sup>304</sup>. Aware of the new threats of the contemporary scene, especially in the field of military weapons innovations, in the same speech Kissinger reaffirmed:

“In our relations with Communist powers we must never lose sight of the fact that in the thermonuclear age, general war would be disastrous to mankind. We have an obligation to seek a more productive and stable relationship despite the basic antagonism of our values”.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> T. A. Schwartz, 'Henry Kissinger: Realism, Domestic Politics, and the Struggle Against Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 2011, 22:1, pp.121-141.

<sup>301</sup> P. Toledo, 'Classic Realism and the balance of power', *Glendon Journal of International Studies*, 2005.

<sup>302</sup> D. Brostoff, 'Politics among Realists: Morgenthau, Kissinger, and the Problem of Vietnam', *Crimson Historical Review*, 2023.

<sup>303</sup> M. J. Prowant, Henry Kissinger's imbalance of power, *The National Interest*, December 2023, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/henry-kissingers-imbalance-power-207763/>

<sup>304</sup> Addressed by Secretary Kissinger, 'The moral foundations of foreign policy', 15 July 1975, Département of State- Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume XXXVIII, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v38p1/d59>

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

From these words it is therefore clear which were the priorities in Kissinger's agenda. In the face of the security imperatives in the geopolitical scenario, human rights values defended by the United States necessarily moved to the background. Following his thinking, the best way for national authorities to safeguard a country's interests was through a strategic understanding of global power dynamics. Constantly assessing internal and external changes in the distribution of power, national policymakers could manipulate to their own advantage these shifts<sup>306</sup>. Precisely by following this logic, Kissinger has carried out his foreign policy efforts toward China. Embracing a *realpolitik* stance, which holds that "interests are constant, alliances are not,"<sup>307</sup> Kissinger and Nixon redefined U.S. foreign relations, building new strategic connections with former rivals like Russia and China to expand their geopolitical reach. By wisely exploited the escalation of the Sino-Soviet rivalry stemming from the armed confrontations along their shared border, they initiated a rapprochement between the U.S. and China<sup>308</sup>. One of the first key moments in shaping this new alliance was Kissinger's secret visit to China in 1971, from July 9 to 11. In this occasion Kissinger met with the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, to who he made clear that President Nixon's philosophy was not about engaging with communism in an abstract or ideological way, but interacting with individual communist states based on their concrete actions toward the U.S.<sup>309</sup>

However, the delicate rapprochement between the two powers was overshadowed by the contentious and sensitive issue of Taiwan's status. Indeed, the PRC's rival was effectively recognized by the U.S. government and was seating in China's place as a permanent member in the UN Security Council<sup>310</sup>.

In this regard, the PRC's position was stark. Zhou urged the U. S. to recognize the PRC as the only legitimate government of China and to acknowledge Taiwan as an inalienable part of Chinese territory, thus withdrawing all U.S. military forces from the island. On his part, Kissinger responded by distinguishing between actions that could be taken immediately and those that would require a more patient historical and political evolution.

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<sup>306</sup> A. K. Henrikson, 'Henry Kissinger, Geopolitics, and Globalization', *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 2003, 27:1, pp. 95-123

<sup>307</sup> A. O. Ozelik, 'Rapprochement between America and China during the Nixon Era: a product of timing or the leadership?', *Bilge Strateji*, 2017, 9:16, pp.131-147

<sup>308</sup> G. Warner, 'Nixon, Kissinger and the rapprochement with China, 1969-1972', *United States Government Printing Office*, 2006

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

He proposed a gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces from Taiwan, tied to the overall state of U.S.-China relations, while clarifying that the U.S. would accept any political evolution agreed upon by the parties, hoping for it to be peaceful<sup>311</sup>.

At the end of the day, this meeting successfully paved the way for the first visit by a U.S. President to Chinese territory, demonstrating the extent of Kissinger's political pragmatism. Before his visit to China, Nixon confided Kissinger his ambitious plan, namely to leverage on China to screw the Russians and gain some help for the Vietnam War<sup>312</sup>.

Nixon's meeting with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in February 1972, was not merely part of a reproachment policy with China, but a part of a bigger triangular diplomacy strategy<sup>313</sup> pursued following a realist approach in foreign policy. The tensions in Asia that were stemming out of the Cold War represented an important concern for Kissinger and his President, who placed great value on achieving a more peaceful Asia-Pacific region, recognizing its importance for overall global stability. Thus, a reproachment with China to be truly effective needed to be paired with a parallel strategy of détente with the Soviet Union<sup>314</sup>. This dual approach allowed the United States to leverage its relationships with both communist powers, creating a more balanced and flexible diplomatic position. The Sino-American partnership was a strategic diplomatic gambit aimed at countering Soviet expansion in Asia while reducing political tensions over contentious security issues like Taiwan and Vietnam. This indirect agreement, driven by mutual distrust of the USSR, allowed both nations to align their interests in fostering stability in the Asia-Pacific region. This initiative emerged from the United States' internal political turmoil and its declining strategic position on the global stage<sup>315</sup>. By exploiting the shared mistrust between the USSR and China to the US's benefit, Kissinger showed his realpolitik pragmatism in the implementation of triangular diplomacy. He used an asymmetric information strategy, giving China more information about the détente than to USSR about the rapprochement. He successfully used each connection as

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> T. A. Schwartz, 'Henry Kissinger: Realism, Domestic Politics, and the Struggle Against Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 2011, 22:1, pp.121-141.

<sup>314</sup> T. Preston, "'Synergy in Paradox': Nixon's Policies toward China and the Soviet Union", *University of Chicago*, 2015

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

leverage against the other by carefully controlling the flow of information to create a situation where both communist regimes aspired to strengthen their ties with the United States, thus placing the U.S. at the top of a strategic triangle<sup>316</sup>.

At the end of the 1970s, in concordance with President Carter's administration, the period of détente between the United States and the Soviet Union experienced a sharp turn<sup>317</sup>. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979<sup>318</sup> undermined the trust between the two nations, signalling the end of détente as the prevailing strategy in Soviet American relations. While President Carter continued to support policies based on international cooperation and respect for human rights<sup>319</sup>, he was unable to stop the deterioration of the bilateral relations with the USSR. As a result, his pragmatic vision was gradually neglected in favour of a more confrontational approach, which would define the following Reagan era. Ronald Reagan's rise to power and his more aggressive foreign policy marked a significant shift from Henry Kissinger's management and his policy of détente. With the rise of the neoliberal era, there was a shift towards a more rigid, ideologically driven approach, emphasizing an unflexible confrontation with communism<sup>320</sup>. This paradigm switch, which gave rise to the Second Cold War<sup>321</sup> (which formally ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the USSR), led to the abandonment of Kissinger's ideas in favour of a more confrontational line, showing the growing divide between Kissinger's realist vision and the new direction taken by the United States under President Reagan in the 1980s. In this context, the policies of détente and dialogue between the two superpowers that had characterized the late 1960s and 1970s were rejected in favour of a renewed ideological and military antagonism.

With the arrival of George H.W. Bush to the presidency in early 1989, many of Henry Kissinger's ideas, particularly those relating to the pragmatic management of international

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> G. Schweigler, 'Carter's Detente Policy: Change or Continuity?', *The World Today*, 1978, 34:3, pp. 81-89.

<sup>318</sup> R. A. Strong, 'Jimmy Carter: Foreign Affairs', *Miller Centre*, <https://millercenter.org/president/carter/foreign-affairs>

<sup>319</sup> G. Schweigler, 'Carter's Detente Policy: Change or Continuity?', *The World Today*, 1978, 34:3, pp. 81-89.

<sup>320</sup> 'Relations with the Soviet Union of Ronald Reagan', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ronald-Reagan/Relations-with-the-Soviet-Union>

<sup>321</sup> M. Lind, 'Welcome to the Cold War II', *The National Interest*, 2018, 155, pp. 9-21.

relations and the importance of a balance of power, came to the fore<sup>322</sup>. Instead of an ideological approach, like Reagan's, Bush preferred a pragmatism that favoured international stability and multilateral diplomacy while maintaining a position of global strength, similar to the *realpolitik*<sup>323</sup> strategy that had characterised US foreign policy during the Kissinger years.

In Tiananmen aftermath, Kissinger held on his realist pragmatism in advising President Bush and delineating a proper response to the crisis.

When the Congress pushed for heavy sanctions in reaction to the massacre, Bush was caught up in having to approve punitive measures on China, suspending high-level government exchanges, stopping military cooperation, and opposed new loans to China from international financial institutions like the World Bank<sup>324</sup>. However, to prevent a completed diplomatic break, Bush tried to mitigate the American reaction and find an open line for dialogue sending a personal letter to Deng Xiaoping in June 21 and playing on their long-lasting relationship. In his letter to Deng Xiaoping, President Bush respectfully acknowledged China's history and traditions. He then explained that the American public was upset by the Tiananmen Square events because of their strong belief in democracy and freedom. He appealed to Deng to show compassion for the protestors to ease the tension between the two nations. Deng's response was friendly, but he also criticized the U.S. for interfering in China's internal affairs, asserting China's resilience against external pressure<sup>325</sup>. Ultimately, this situation highlighted the complex balancing act that Bush and Deng faced due to their countries' differing political systems and values and how relevant is the role of the statesman in pursuing the best strategic choice given the historical and political context he acts within.

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<sup>322</sup>T. Switzer, 'George H.W. Bush: the quintessential realist', *The Strategist*, 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/george-h-w-bush-the-quintessential-realist/>

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> H. Kissinger, *On China*, Penguin Books, 2012.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

### 3.3 China after the crisis: rebuilding soft power and its international reputation

While Henry Kissinger's analysis of the Tiananmen Square crisis, remains deeply rooted in the realist tradition, the political scientists Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye provided a different imprint in understanding global power dynamics. Kissinger, in accordance with the principles of state sovereignty, balance of power, and the pursuit of national interests, the Chinese government actions were a reflection of its internal political structures, with the resulting international consequences shaped by the strategic interests of major powers. However, as Kissinger's realist framework seemed increasingly inadequate in explaining the evolving interdependence of the global system, Nye and Keohane provided with an alternative framework.

In 1977 they published the book *Power and Interdependence*<sup>326</sup> aiming to explain the changes of an interdependent international economic system, in which the stakes placed on the deploy of force by great powers in their foreign relations were rising. In their theorisation they addressed the transformations occurring in the mid-1970s shaping an international system where the border between domestic and foreign policy was softening<sup>327</sup>. Kissinger himself acknowledged that “we are entering a new era. Old international patterns are crumbling. The world has become interdependent in economics, in communications, in human aspirations”<sup>328</sup>.

Thus, even though the Tiananmen Square crisis was a matter of Chinese domestic politics, it had deep international ramifications, showing the interconnected nature of world politics and the role of information, economic ties, and international reputation in shaping a state's power. China's management of the Tiananmen crisis eventually undermined, albeit temporarily, its international reputation. Nye and Keohane response to such crises can be seen in critical reaction to Kissinger's framework, focusing on the broader and more complex forms of power that define international relations.

In his academic career, Nye has taken on prestigious roles in academia, having been University Distinguished Service Professor and former Dean of Harvard's John F.

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<sup>326</sup> R. O. Keohane and J. S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, Longman Classics in Political Science, Fourth Edition, 2012

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> J. S. Nye, 'Soft Power', *Foreign Policy*, 1990, 80, pp. 153-171

Kennedy School of Government<sup>329</sup>. He had the opportunity to closely observe the dynamics of politics, particularly US politics during his mandates as Deputy to the Under Secretary of State for Security Assistance, Science and Technology, chair of the National Security Council Group on non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, chair of the National Intelligence Council and Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security Affairs<sup>330</sup>. In an interview for the journal “Thought Economics” held in October 2023, Joseph Nye reflected on his academic achievements. In particular, he expressed his views on being regarded, alongside Robert Keohane, as a co-founder of the International Relations theory known as Neoliberalism, following the publication of their influential work *Power and Interdependence*. He felt sceptical regarding the use of such expression. As he recalls, the book was written to challenge the dominant realist approach in international relations, which mainly focused on states, military force, and security issues. Instead, in the minds of both authors the world had become more complex and so they developed theories—labelled neoliberalism—that emphasized institutions and transnational relations. However, their effort was unrelated to the economic neoliberalism of Reagan and Thatcher. In their theoretical impetus, Keohane and Nye aimed to start from realism but go beyond it, as deemed insufficient to explain the world complexity<sup>331</sup>. *Power and Interdependence* comes at a time in history when the global scene was changing, and China was evolving within it. Deng’s policy of “opening up” was set in an international scenario where military threats were declining, China was receiving significant flows of foreign investments coming from expatriate Chinese communities<sup>332</sup>, while benefiting from the collaboration for the promotion of modernization and innovation with the World Bank, started after a meeting in April 1980 between Deng Xiaoping and Robert McNamara – the World Bank President<sup>333</sup>.

In these circumstances Nye and Keohane described world politics as being defined by a condition of complex interdependence. Picking up on the definition crafted by them

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<sup>329</sup>Biography: Joseph S. Nye, *U.S. Department of State- Diplomacy in Action*, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/p/fapb/185594.htm>

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> V. Shah, ‘A conversation with Joseph S. Nye Jr. on power in the modern world’, *Thought Economics – a journal of intellectual capital*, October 19th, 2023, <https://thoughteconomics.com/joseph-s-nye-jr/>.

<sup>332</sup> X. Han, ‘Interdependence and the problems of adaptation: the case of China in the 1980s’, *UMI Dissertation Publishing*, 1993

<sup>333</sup> ‘China and the World Bank: A partnership for innovation’, *The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank*, 2007



“*dependence* means a state of being determined or significantly affected by external forces. *Interdependence* means mutual dependence. Interdependence in world politics refers to situations characterized by reciprocal effects among countries or among actors in different countries”<sup>334</sup>. Such effects were the outcomes of international transactions concerning flows of information, money, people and goods beyond the traditional state borders with increasing intensity since the post-war period<sup>335</sup>. However, such exchanges in an interdependent system were not only synonymous of benefits, but also entailed costs and negative effects, and global reactions to the Tiananmen massacre exemplified it. Specifically, the aftermath of the Tiananmen crisis deeply affected Chinese soft power, in a situation of complex interdependence, where the web of political and economic relations between countries was becoming highly interconnected.

In their formulation, Nye and Keohane have identified three conditions of complex interdependence, namely the existence of multiple channels of connection between societies (interstate and transgovernmental channels), the absence of hierarchy among issues (meaning that military security issues have lost their preponderance in the government agenda) and states' reluctance to resort to the use of military force in the resolution of disputes<sup>336</sup>.

In this system, power is no longer defined solely by military force but is increasingly linked to economic influence, technological progress, and diplomatic engagement. States reinforce their standing through trade, resource control, and shaping global norms, making power relations more multifaceted and dynamic.

In his essay *The Changing Nature of World Power*, Joseph Nye outlined Robert Dahl's definition of power as “the ability to get others to do what they otherwise would not do”<sup>337</sup>. Nye suggested a clever analogy, comparing power in international politics to the weather -widely discussed yet often misunderstood<sup>338</sup>. In his theorization, Nye analysed power in its two different articulations, coining the concept of soft power<sup>339</sup> and differentiating it from the one of hard power. Whereas hard power is “the ability to get

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<sup>334</sup> R. O. Keohane and J. S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, Longman Classics in Political Science, Fourth Edition, 2012.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> J. S. Nye, ‘The Changing Nature of World Power’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 1990, 105:2, pp. 177-192

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> R. Herr, ‘Chinese influence in the Pacific Islands’, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 2019.

others to act in ways that are contrary to their initial preferences and strategies, through coercion, inducements and threats”<sup>340</sup>, soft power is “the ability to affect others in order to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment”<sup>341</sup>. Set out in a very simplified manner, hard power is push and soft power is pull<sup>342</sup>. Hard power is the handling of sticks and carrots, while soft power is a magnet<sup>343</sup>.

In setting policies policymakers quantify power in terms of resources and the outcomes that the effective deploy of such resources can produce<sup>344</sup>. These resources can be tangible, defined through the size of the population a state can boast and manage, its territory and the natural resources lying within its border, its economic and military strength and overall internal stability<sup>345</sup>. Furthermore, in the age of interdependence, states can also list in their arsenals additional assets derived from intangible resources,<sup>346</sup> such as national cohesion, cultural identity, influence over international institutions<sup>347</sup>. Thus, power appears less tangible and less coercive. Indeed, soft power is a cooptive power, it does not coerce but exerts an attraction toward ideas and political values embodied by a state, it legitimates its policies and gives them moral authority<sup>348</sup>, ultimately allowing the state to set the agenda and shaping the framework of the debate internationally<sup>349</sup>.

If a state's culture, and ideology are appealing, others will be more inclined to follow its lead. By shaping international norms that align with its own values, it can reduce the need for adaptation to them in the international system<sup>350</sup>.

Soft power coopts and attracts by shaping other preferences<sup>351</sup>, ultimately depending on intangible resources. The three main pillars when investigating a country's soft power are

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<sup>340</sup> M. Gomichon, ‘Joseph Nye on Soft Power’, *E-International Relations*, March 2013.

<sup>341</sup> J. S. Nye, ‘Public Diplomacy and Soft Power’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 2008, 616, pp. 94-109

<sup>342</sup> J. S. Nye, ‘Soft power: the evolution of a concept’, *Journal of Political Power*, 2021

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> J. S. Nye, ‘Soft Power’, *Foreign Policy*, 1990, 80, pp. 153-171.

<sup>347</sup> B. Gill and Y. Huang, ‘Sources and limits of Chinese soft power’, *Survival*, 2006, 48:2, 17-36.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> J. S. Nye, ‘The Changing Nature of World Power’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 1990, 105:2, pp. 177-192.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid. For example at the end of World War II, the U.S. crystallised its power in the international system in outlining the Bretton Woods agreements.

<sup>351</sup> J. S. Nye, ‘Public Diplomacy and Soft Power’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 2008, 616, pp. 94-109.

its culture, its political values and its foreign policies<sup>352</sup>. These elements imply a notion of power as a relationship, consequently suggesting the notion of context<sup>353</sup>. This is crucial when analysing the scope of the Tiananmen crisis in the context of China's relations with other nations. Since values and ideals are shaped by the context they arise in, depending on it they may lose or increase their effective power of attraction. It is no coincidence that Western countries reacted differently to the Tiananmen crackdown compared to Asian countries, which were more aligned with China's values and more drawn to Sinic influences.

The Chinese government explicitly addressed soft power for the first time at the 17<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007, where President Hu Jintao declared that “The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture”<sup>354</sup> and recognised the importance of an effective soft power together with a strong hard power for becoming a global power<sup>355</sup>. Nonetheless, by the 1990s soft power had already begun to attract interest in China's academic and political spheres<sup>356</sup>, when the authorities had to deal with the “Tiananmen effect” on the country's national image and reputation.

After resorting to brute force, the Chinese Communist Party faced severe damage to its legitimacy, building on a crisis of legitimacy that had begun earlier. In post-Mao China, no longer locked in the blind grip of a totalising ideology, the Chinese Communist Party under Deng's leadership found itself having to rebuild the foundations of its governing legitimacy. The paramount leader tried to regain faith and confidence toward the CCP with the promotion of a decade of reforms and improving the economic sector. Such admirable reforms reached a surprisingly fast success, implementing an image of prosperity and affluence<sup>357</sup>.

However, despite the economic liberalization and the adoption of an open-door policy, the party failed to maintain the high level of public trust it had previously enjoyed. Through the affirmation of the Four Cardinal Principles—adherence to the socialist path,

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<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

<sup>353</sup> J. S. Nye, ‘Soft Power’, *Foreign Policy*, 1990, 80, pp. 153-171.

<sup>354</sup> A. Sud, ‘The Progression of Chinese Soft Power’, *ICS Research Blog*, October 2020, <https://icsin.org/blogs/2020/10/28/the-progression-of-chinese-soft-power/>.

<sup>355</sup> Y. N. Cho and J.H. Jeong, *Asian Survey*, 2008, 48:3, pp. 453-472.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> B. Gill and Y. Huang, ‘Sources and limits of Chinese soft power’, *Survival*, 2006, 48:2, 17-36.

loyalty to the leadership of the Communist Party, support for the people's democratic dictatorship, and commitment to the principles of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought- Deng did not break all the ties with the ideology that was guiding the country few years before and ultimately proved inadequate in providing a novel legitimation basis to the regime<sup>358</sup>. In the final instance, the brutal reaction of the authorities only proved that the PRC's governing methods had never really changed, and the economic reforms had failed to make a dent in the authoritarian nature of the CCP<sup>359</sup>. Such a great challenge to China's legitimacy put the foreign policy of the country in jeopardy, subjecting it to *neiluan* and *waihuan*, namely internal disorder and external calamity<sup>360</sup>.

In fact, external calamities were not long in coming. The United States and the Western European powers issued numerous economic sanctions. Already on June 5, U.S. President Bush announced a sanctions package, aimed primarily at damaging the Chinese economy and weakening its diplomatic prestige. All weapons exports to China were suspended, along with reciprocal visits by senior military officials. Additionally, the review of visa extensions for Chinese students in the U.S. began to be handled with more sensitivity<sup>361</sup>. Following the American lead, the World Bank suspended its lending to the PRC, peaking the country's international debt and delegitimizing it in the global financial community.<sup>362</sup> Furthermore, considering in the overall picture the decline and immanent defeat of the USSR, Deng's China had lost its strategic rationale in the alliance with the US<sup>363</sup>. However, this did not imply that China's global significance had diminished, nor that the harm to its reputation in the eyes of Western powers was sufficient to isolate the Chinese giant on the international stage.

In fact, although Chinese authorities were concerned about being isolated both from their own citizens and the outside world, China's role in an interconnected world was already

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<sup>358</sup> X. Han, 'Interdependence and the problems of adaptation: the case of China in the 1980s', *UMI Dissertation Publishing*, 1993.

<sup>359</sup> R. Kluver, 'Rhetorical Trajectories of Tiananmen Square', *Diplomatic History*, 2010, 34:1, pp. 71-94

<sup>360</sup> S. S. Kim, 'Chinese Foreign Policy After Tiananmen', *Current History*, 1990, 89:548, pp. 245-248, 280-282

<sup>361</sup> D. Panda, 'Sino-U.S. relations after Tiananmen incident', *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, 1995-1996, 8/9:1/2, pp. 80-92.

<sup>362</sup> S. S. Kim, 'Chinese Foreign Policy After Tiananmen', *Current History*, 1990, 89:548, pp. 245-248, 280-282.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*

firmly established. In the international system China's card<sup>364</sup> still maintained its uniqueness.

Military, China was starting to be under less pressure. Its 7000 kilometres territorial border shared with its former strong Soviet rival was now not an immediate concern and allowed the country greater focus on its military modernisation and nuclear power. Despite the sanctions, Chinese economy remained robust and kept developing. Finally, the country's permanent membership in the Security Council confirmed its role as a great power<sup>365</sup>.

On June 30, 1989, at the meeting of the National People Congress Standing Committee, Deng reiterated the official propaganda narrative of the government, which considered the counterrevolutionary uprising as the outcome of conspiracy forces -internal and external to the country- aimed at subverting the Chinese socialist system<sup>366</sup>. Following the same narrative, Chinese authorities agreed that Western media, including broadcasts, newspapers, magazines, and books, were being manipulated to spread misinformation, disrupt social order, and promote capitalist ideals<sup>367</sup>. In the debate for the defence of its sovereignty from the western interference, China realised the need to restore for good its image as a reliable great power and disciplined member of the United Nations.

In accordance with the pillars of soft power, Deng capitalized on the appeal of Chinese culture and values, but most importantly, focused on its foreign policy and diplomatic strategy, reasserting China's identity as a leader of the Third World.

The Chinese quest for regaining its power of attraction after the massacre revolved around three elements: benignity, brilliance and beauty<sup>368</sup>.

Chinese traditional culture encompasses benign values of social harmony, benevolence and loyalty, in accordance with the teachings of Confucius<sup>369</sup>. Its benign culture is a dominant part of China soft power and adds great value to the promotion of a worldwide picture of disciplined state. In response to strong western reactions after Tiananmen,

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<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> D. Panda, 'Sino-U.S. relations after Tiananmen incident', *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, 1995-1996, 8/9:1/2, pp. 80-92.

<sup>366</sup> S. S. Kim, 'Chinese Foreign Policy After Tiananmen', *Current History*, 1990, 89:548, pp. 245-248, 280-282.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> M. N. Mirza, H. Abbas, M. Q. Nizamani, 'Evaluating China's Soft Power Discourse: Assumptions, Strategies, and Objectives', *Global Strategic & Security Studies Review*, 2020, 5:4, pp.40-50

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

China projected an image of a peaceful nation, suggesting it would have preferred a different approach to solve the crisis but was forced by circumstances. This narrative underscored a fundamental contrast with western hegemonic culture, portraying the defence of human rights as deeply hypocritical. In the end the *wang dao* (the way of the benevolent authority, the kingly way), would have prevailed over the *ba dao* (hegemonic way)<sup>370</sup>.

China's economic strength was a crucial factor in sustaining its soft power and enabling it to withstand the backlash after June 4. The country's economic growth had painted a picture of success and brilliance<sup>371</sup> and it was precisely this image of prosperity and confidence that suggested to Joshua Cooper Ramo, vice chairman and co-chief executive of Kissinger Associates, the term Beijing Consensus<sup>372</sup> to refer to the Chinese economic miracle. Ramo interpreted it as the antithesis of the Washington Consensus, an attractive model of political and economic policies that rejects uniform solutions, and instead prioritizes approaches tailored to each country's unique context. Rather than supporting abrupt reforms, it prioritizes gradual progress, innovation, and experimentation.

Indeed, the Chinese ideal of beauty that the government has aimed to promote is evident right here. The strength of Chinese soft power lies in the promotion of an alternative model of development. Its global appeal transcends cultural, economic and political boundaries. In contrast to Western soft power, particularly the American approach centred on modern liberal values, Chinese soft power draws its strength from its heritage and communist values. It emphasizes China's economic success and development model, which has gained special appeal among the developing countries as a pathway to rapid economic growth<sup>373</sup>. In this way China established itself as a unique and influential global power. Thus, by embracing this alternative identity and positioning itself as a banner within the developing world, post-Tiananmen China obtained the key to regain its role as a pivotal force in shaping international politics. To reassert itself as a good global citizen and a responsible great power<sup>374</sup>, China sought legitimation in its foreign policy toward

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>371</sup> B. Gill and Y. Huang, 'Sources and limits of Chinese soft power', *Survival*, 2006, 48:2, 17-36.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>373</sup> M. N. Mirza, H. Abbas, M. Q. Nizamani, 'Evaluating China's Soft Power Discourse: Assumptions, Strategies, and Objectives', *Global Strategic & Security Studies Review*, 2020, 5:4, pp.40-50.

<sup>374</sup> S. Breslin, 'Understanding China's Regional Rise: Interpretations, Identities and Implications', *Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 2009, 85:4, pp. 817-835.

Southeast Asian countries and the Middle East. The PRC aimed to foster a narrative of Chinese peaceful rise<sup>375</sup> in the global system, depicting China as a pacificator in international disputes. In the late 1980s, the Middle East became a crucial strategic area for China's political, economic, and military goals. The relationship with the Middle East remained strong even after the Tiananmen Square incident, thus helping the country to overcome its isolation from the West and allowing it to rejoin the international community. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, China seized the opportunity presented by the Persian Gulf crisis to reestablish itself as a significant global player whose involvement was needed to resolve international conflicts<sup>376</sup>.

Due to their significant oil resources, the Middle East countries offered China a valuable alternative for investments and foreign exchange, which helped to lessen the impact of economic penalties imposed by the West. In addition, the Middle East had developed into a key consumer of Chinese products and labour, including weapons, spare parts, and military supplies<sup>377</sup>. Hence, in assisting for a peaceful resolution for the Persian Gulf crisis was a winning Chinese strategy, gaining in this way economic and financial advantages and diplomatic ones, restoring with the West its diplomatic image and reasserting its influence on global stage.

The Tiananmen Square incident did not significantly impair China's diplomatic ties with Southeast Asian nations. Rather, these relations strengthened as China positioned itself as a peaceful rising power committed to global stability. China's active role in de-escalating international conflicts reinforced its credibility among Southeast Asian countries, leading to closer cooperation.<sup>378</sup> China's reaffirmation of its identity as a Third World country reinforced its friendly cooperation with the Southeast Asia and the Middle East<sup>379</sup>, finally allowing the country to revitalize its international image and rise from the Tiananmen storm.

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<sup>375</sup> G. Rachman, *Zero-Sum World*, Atlantic Books, London, 2010.

<sup>376</sup> Y. Shichor, 'China and the Middle East since Tiananmen', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1992, 519, pp. 86-100.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

<sup>378</sup> A. J. Nathan, 'Human Rights in Chinese Foreign Policy', *The China Quarterly*, 1994, 139, pp. 622-643.

<sup>379</sup> D. Panda, 'Sino-U.S. relations after Tiananmen incident', *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, 1995-1996, 8/9:1/2, pp. 80-92.

### 3.4 The struggle for recognition: Fukuyama's End of History and the Tiananmen crisis

A few months before the Tiananmen Square massacre, the Asian-American political scientist Francis Fukuyama was invited to deliver a lecture at the University of Chicago. In February 1989, his talk became part of a series organized by his former professor, Allan Bloom, focusing on the decline of the West<sup>380</sup>. On this occasion, Fukuyama introduced his controversial thesis on the "end of history," a concept that has sparked both criticism and support, yet remaining undeniably significant for political theory and global historical analysis. His framework has provided valuable insights for interpreting historical events, including the 1989 Tiananmen crisis.

By the summer of that same year, his lecture was published as an article in the Washington journal *The National Interest*. Such article went down in history under the title 'The End of History?', thus becoming the foundational essay for his later, expanded work, published in 1992 as the book *The End of History and the Last Man*<sup>381</sup>. In his speech, the thirty-six years old Fukuyama provided an alternative to Bloom's pessimism, celebrating instead the victory of the West and not its decline. After his doctorate graduation in Soviet foreign policy, Fukuyama had been working in the State Department, to later join the Rand Corporation think tank where he continued his studies on Soviet politics until when he finally came back in the government's offices as deputy director of the State's Department's policy planning staff<sup>382</sup>.

Some scholars may argue that in his theorising, Fukuyama made a high-risk gamble, betting on the current trends of the time to continue<sup>383</sup> without facing a turnaround. Changes in the communist world were moving towards the end of the Cold War, while China, under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, was undergoing a period of economic modernization and opening up to the outside world. Against those who postulated America's decline, Fukuyama responded that from a long-term historical perspective what

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<sup>380</sup> G. Rachman. *Zero-Sum World*, Atlantic Books, London, 2010.

<sup>381</sup> P. Lemieux, 'The End of History and the Last man and Liberalism and its Discontents', *Regulation*, Fall 2022, <https://www.cato.org/regulation/fall-2022/fukuyama-interesting-books-some-baggage>

<sup>382</sup> G. Rachman. *Zero-Sum World*, Atlantic Books, London, 2010.

<sup>383</sup> L. Menand, 'Francis Fukuyama postpones the End of History', *The New Yorker*, August 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/09/03/francis-fukuyama-postpones-the-end-of-history>.



truly mattered was not the U.S. relative international power in terms of wealth and military strength, but rather the power of ideas<sup>384</sup>. History follows a process that brings coherence and structure to daily events, a process that needs to be comprehended in terms of ideas<sup>385</sup>. The victory of the Western liberalism and its ideas of freedom and equality seemed clear in the international system of the 1980s<sup>386</sup>. The dominance of the Western idea became evident with the crumble of any viable alternatives to Western liberalism. The collapse of Communism revealed not just the end of the Cold War, but also the end of history itself, namely marking the final stage of humanity's ideological development and the global acceptance of Western liberal democracy as the ultimate form of governance<sup>387</sup>. Fukuyama's thesis was not about the ending of global political events, but rather the ideological triumph of liberalism. He argued that while liberal democracy had prevailed conceptually, its complete manifestation in the physical world remained a work in progress. Fukuyama posited that the inherent strength and appeal of liberal democratic principles would, over time, lead to their widespread adoption and implementation across societies<sup>388</sup>.

At this regard, five years after his first publication, Fukuyama responded to his critics who had misinterpreted his claim of the 'end of history', specifying that this was not a descriptive statement but a normative one. It did not describe what it is, rather what is ought to be<sup>389</sup>. Liberal democracy and free markets represent the most effective ways of organizing human societies, fulfilling the fundamental desires of humans, and consequently they are likely to be more widespread and enduring than any other political systems or organizational principles. The principles of freedom and equality, central to liberalism and rooted in the French and American revolutions, represent the culmination of a long process of ideological development. Therefore, the events of 1989 on the international stage were not the basis for Fukuyama's thesis, but rather a manifestation of

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<sup>384</sup> T. L. Knutsen, 'Answered Prayers: Fukuyama, Liberalism and the End-of-History Debate', *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, 1991, 22:1, pp. 77-85.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid.

<sup>387</sup> F. Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 1989, 16, pp. 3-18

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

<sup>389</sup> F. Fukuyama, 'Reflections on the End of History, Five Years Later', *History and Theory*, 1995, 34:2, pp. 27-43

a broader, coherent, and directional process in the history of humankind that will ultimately guide most of the humanity toward liberal democracy<sup>390</sup>.

Fukuyama acknowledged the Tiananmen crisis, but he did not see it as evidence against his theses. Rather than a challenge to his theory, Tiananmen can be seen as a temporary setback in China's political development within the larger, ongoing process of human societies gradually moving toward liberal democracy. Nevertheless, Fukuyama never clearly defined the key concept of liberal democracy. Instead, he merely described it as "liberal" in the sense that it recognises and protects universal human rights through a legal system, and "democratic" because it operates only with the consent of the governed<sup>391</sup>.

To fully grasp Fukuyama's claim that history inevitably progresses toward liberalism - both as a political ideology and an economic system<sup>392</sup>- it is necessary to examine the main intellectual influences that shaped his thinking, namely the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and the Russian-French philosopher Alexandre Kojève. In the developing of his theory Fukuyama argues that human history develops through two interconnected processes. The first one, called "the Mechanism," is driven by scientific progress, the pursuit of material wealth, military competition, and human reason. This process naturally leads to economic growth and it fosters the expansion of capitalism, as the centralized economic planning inhibits innovation and efficiency<sup>393</sup>. Hence, human progress over time seems to be moving toward global capitalism, reinforcing liberal economic principles. Historical evidence has shown the failure of Marxist-Leninist economic systems by the late 20th century. For instance, apart from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Deng Xiaoping's reforms in China led to the decollectivization of agriculture and an increase in the production of consumer goods. The success of these reforms provided Deng with a solid political foundation, allowing him to expand reforms into other sectors of the economy<sup>394</sup>. This shift brought the country closer to the pull of liberal economic ideas, as China became more open to the global market.

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

<sup>391</sup> T. L. Knutsen, 'Answered Prayers: Fukuyama, Liberalism and the End-of-History Debate', *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, 1991, 22:1, pp. 77-85.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

<sup>393</sup> P. Lemieux, 'The End of History and the Last man and Liberalism and its Discontents', *Regulation*, Fall 2022, <https://www.cato.org/regulation/fall-2022/fukuyama-interesting-books-some-baggage>

<sup>394</sup> F. Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 1989, 16, pp. 3-18.

Along this economic interpretation of history, there is another process essential to understand liberal democracy. This process is enacted by the human desire to be recognised<sup>395</sup>. According to Hegel the main motor of history is the struggle for recognition<sup>396</sup>. This struggle is a dialectic process, a conflict characterized by contradictions<sup>397</sup> and it is evident in the contemporary world, often expressed through movements advocating for liberal rights<sup>398</sup>. For Hegel, the most important desire for man is to be recognized in his dignity and as a human by other human beings. Thus, in his social nature, man builds his sense of self-worth and identity based on how he is regarded by others. In this quest for recognition, the most distinctive human characteristic is the willingness to risk one's own life<sup>399</sup>. Hence, in his social dimension man is led into a bloody battle with others, in the pursuing of prestige. The willingness to risk one's life is an expression of human freedom, an act that shows human dignity by transcending the basic animal instinct of self-preservation and ultimately make a moral choice seeking respect and recognition<sup>400</sup>

In line with Hegel, Kojève also viewed history as a struggle for recognition. The outcome of this 'fight for pure prestige'<sup>401</sup> was a master-slave contradictory dialectic, where the master gains recognition through asserting his dominance, while the slave's submission reinforces the master's sense of superiority, even though the slave, over time and labour, begins to develop self-awareness<sup>402</sup>. Following his predecessor, Fukuyama reiterates this concept, arguing that Plato's notion of *thymos*<sup>403</sup> closely resembles Hegel's idea of the desire for recognition. In the Plato's *Republic* appeared for the first time in the Western philosophical tradition the phenomenon of desire for recognition<sup>404</sup>. The central theme of this philosophical work was a conversation between the philosopher Socrates and two young Athenians, who were debating the nature of a just city. As affirmed by Socrates,

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<sup>395</sup> P. Lemieux, 'The End of History and the Last man and Liberalism and its Discontents', *Regulation*, Fall 2022, <https://www.cato.org/regulation/fall-2022/fukuyama-interesting-books-some-baggage>

<sup>396</sup> F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992- 2006.

<sup>397</sup> F. Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 1989, 16, pp. 3-18.

<sup>398</sup> F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992- 2006.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

<sup>401</sup> S. B. Drury, 'The End of History and the New World Order', *International Journal*, 1992/1993, 48:1, pp. 80-99

<sup>402</sup> F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992- 2006.

<sup>403</sup> S. B. Drury, 'The End of History and the New World Order', *International Journal*, 1992/1993, 48:1, pp. 80-99.

<sup>404</sup> F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992- 2006.

*thymos* was the distinctive characteristic of the city guardians, capable of great courage and fierce in justly fighting external threats in defence of their city <sup>405</sup>.

*Thymos* enables people to overcome fear in the name of justice, allowing them to recognize their own worth and feel indignation. It also helps them value others and feel anger and indignation on their behalf. This is particularly evident when someone belongs to a group that perceives itself as being treated unjustly, as personal indignation extends to the group, fostering solidarity. *Thymos* can also inspire anger for the injustices faced by groups to which one does not belong<sup>406</sup>.

With the reformist impulse of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in China, Deng had shown to the new generations of students and workers attractive and appetising new possibilities. The promises of economic liberalization represented a sharp contrast to the stagnation and hopelessness of the Maoist period, creating the illusion that, at last, the voices of young Chinese people mattered and were being recognized. Consequently, the authorities' failure to recognize the efforts of the student movement and their continued refusal to engage in dialogue, deeply wounded the protesters' dignity, fuelling their thymotic anger. A man who is willing to stand in front of a tank and face armed soldiers, ready to risk his own life for the recognition of his moral dignity and that of his fellow citizens, is the perfect representation of the thymotic man<sup>407</sup>.

However, *thymos* hides a dark side. It can be distinguished in *isothymia* and *megalothymia*<sup>408</sup>. In the process of evaluation of one's worth, the master and the slave evaluate each other very differently in their relation. *Megalothymia* is the *thymos* of great men<sup>409</sup>, the master's recognition of his own superiority against the slave. *Megalothymia* manifested in Napoleon and Caesar, both conquerors and enslavers of the people inferior to them<sup>410</sup>. On the opposite, *isothymia* is the slave's request for equal recognition<sup>411</sup>. It is not the desire for dominance or superiority, but rather the fundamental self-respect of

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<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid, pp. 179-180.

<sup>408</sup> S. B. Drury, 'The End of History and the New World Order', *International Journal*, 1992/1993, 48:1, pp. 80-99.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid.

<sup>410</sup> F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992- 2006.

<sup>411</sup> S. B. Drury, 'The End of History and the New World Order', *International Journal*, 1992/1993, 48:1, pp. 80-99.

ordinary people who resist being dehumanized. Therefore, history is shaped by the struggle between these two opposing forms of thymotic passion<sup>412</sup>.

Thus, following this framework, the Tiananmen crackdown was a manifestation of the thymotic clash between the *megalothymia* of the authoritarian government and the *isothymia* of the protesters, simply demanding equal mutual recognition. The crisis represented a step in the thymotic historic process which will eventually see the final victory of the slave *isothymia*, with economic liberalism harnessing the dark impulses of *thymos* into economic success<sup>413</sup>.

Humanity seeks a political system that would establish universal equal recognition, and this system is liberal democracy, defined by popular sovereignty and the equal distribution of political power, which satisfies every individual's thymotic desire for dignity and acknowledgment<sup>414</sup>.

China has not yet reached this stage, as it is still caught in the historical process and has not yet entered the post-history. As according to Fukuyama, it will take time for the country to join the developed nations in the post-history<sup>415</sup>, considering also the possibility of other major setbacks.

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid.

<sup>414</sup> P. Lemieux, 'The End of History and the Last man and Liberalism and its Discontents', *Regulation*, Fall 2022, <https://www.cato.org/regulation/fall-2022/fukuyama-interesting-books-some-baggage>.

<sup>415</sup> F. Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 1989, 16, pp. 3-18.

### 3.5 The clash of civilizations and China's rising nationalism: Confucianism and the Asian Values discourse

In 1993 the American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington published the essay “The clash of civilizations?” in reaction to his former student’s -Francis Fukuyama- book *The end of History and the Last Man*<sup>416</sup>. Huntington challenged Fukuyama's theory as an illusion of harmony, asserting that with the end of the Cold War conflicts would persist worldwide, but would be driven primarily by cultural and religious factors. Three years later, in 1996, Huntington deeply elaborated his thesis in the book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

When he first wrote his essay the world had just experienced the end of Cold War and the collapse of Communism, so Huntington was intent on outlining a trajectory of future global policy. He argued that world politics was entering a new phase, where global conflicts would no longer be driven by ideological or economic factors, but by cultural divides<sup>417</sup>. In his view, although nation states would continue to be the primary actors in foreign policy, their decisions would still be influenced by national security interests of power and wealth, but also by their cultural preferences<sup>418</sup>. In the post-cold War scene, the divisions between the Western bloc, the Communist bloc and the non-aligned countries were decayed together with the rivalry among superpowers. Instead, conflicts would have been cultural and fought along cultural lines between civilizations<sup>419</sup>.

People shaped their identity through common ancestry, religion, language, history, values and identified within cultural groups like ethnicities, and nations. In this process, politics was not merely a tool for pursuing power interests, but it helped in defining these identities, allowing people to distinguish themselves from others<sup>420</sup>.

In his definition, Huntington distinguishes between a singular concept of civilization and a plural one. Namely, the concept of a civilization in its singular sense dates to the 18<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> ‘Fukuyama vs. Huntington’, *International Centre for Geopolitical Studies*, <https://www.icgs.ge/fukuyama-vs-huntington.html>

<sup>417</sup> S. P. Huntington, ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’, *Foreign Affairs*, 1993, 72.3.

<sup>418</sup> S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster, 1996, New York.

<sup>419</sup> S. P. Huntington, ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’, *Foreign Affairs*, 1993, 72.3.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid, S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster, 1996, New York, pg. 20.

century, when it was used to distinguish civilized and urban societies in opposition to the barbarians and illiterate ones. However, the concept acquired a further meaning, indicating civilizations in their plural connotation and thus rejecting the idea of a single, comprehensive standard of civilization, historically linked to a few privileged groups. Instead, the world is multicivilizational and encompasses different interpretations of what it means to be civilized<sup>421</sup>. Civilizations are comprehensive, meaning that each of their components can only be fully understood in the context of the broader civilization<sup>422</sup>.

A civilization is the highest cultural grouping of people, and the broadest level of cultural identity people have and that distinguish them from other groups<sup>423</sup>. People belonging to the same civilization share values, norms, institutions and patterns of thinking<sup>424</sup>.

In his framework for interpretation of global politics, Huntington distinguishes six major civilizations, namely Western, Orthodox, Islamic, Hindu, Sinic, and Japanese. Alongside them are then Latin American and African civilizations that he presents as “candidate civilizations”<sup>425</sup>. Each civilization is anchored around a core state which plays a dominant role, both as regards the member states of its civilization and in its relations with core states belonging to other civilizations. In his 1996 book, Huntington correlates a civilization with a big family in which states share a kinship and where core states -as older relatives- have the responsibility to guide the others<sup>426</sup>.

Civilizations are dynamic entities whose borders are not always clearly visible.

At the end of the 1980s global politics was changing and the balance of power shifting. The western civilization could declare itself victorious with the dissolution of the USSR, thus having eliminated the only obstacle to its cultural hegemony. However, this picture seems misleading. Indeed, this was not a real victory for the West since it was already facing a period of decline. The prolonged struggle in the Cold War had diverted attention from internal problems that plagued the Western civilization, especially economic ones<sup>427</sup>.

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<sup>421</sup> Ibid. pg. 40.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> S. P. Huntington, ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’, *Foreign Affairs*, 1993, 72.3.

<sup>424</sup> S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster, 1996, New York, pg. 41.

<sup>425</sup> M. Heiskanen, ‘Clash or Cooperation of Civilizations?’, *Institute of International Relations-Perspectives*, 1998, 10, pp. 39-46

<sup>426</sup> S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster, 1996, New York, pg. 156.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid, pg. 82.

According to Huntington, the decline of the West was not a sudden phenomenon, as the civilization would have remained dominant for a time. However, it was clear that a gradual and steady decline was underway. The power of the West, particularly that of its core state, the U.S., was set to slowly diminish, shifting more regionally, largely in the economic sphere. In an era of technological change and modernization, the relative decline of the West was offset by the rise of other civilizations, particularly those that had benefited most from these advancements and were becoming increasingly prosperous. As these civilizations grew wealthier, their cultures began to gain more influence, while Western culture appeared less attractive and less capable of imposing its values of liberalism and human rights<sup>428</sup>.

The economies of East Asia were the ones benefiting the most from these changes. In a process defined by Huntington as “indigenization”<sup>429</sup>, non-western societies started to become more culturally assertive thanks to their affluence levels obtained through modernization. Their remarkable economic success in the second half of the 20th century boosted their self-confidence and drove them to seek independence from their subordinate position toward the West<sup>430</sup>. For instance, China's economic annual growth rate during the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s amounted to 8%, a remarkable achievement, especially when contrasted with the economic slowdown in Europe and the United States<sup>431</sup>. Thus, Asian societies started to believe that their economic success was rooted in their cultural values and ultimately it was a sign of their superiority on the West<sup>432</sup>.

Huntington identified the Sinic civilization as one of the greatest challenges the West would have faced. The term Sinic refers to the shared cultural heritage of China and Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and beyond, as well as the related cultures of Vietnam and Korea<sup>433</sup>. Within this civilization, China, as the core state, serves as the main point of attraction or repulsion for other nations, whether culturally similar or dissimilar. According to the Chinese government, the Chinese diaspora remained linked to a Chinese

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid, pg. 92.

<sup>429</sup> S. Subramaniam, ‘The Asian Values Debate: Implications for the Spread of Liberal Democracy’, *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 2000, 27:1, pp. 19-35

<sup>430</sup> M. Heiskanen, ‘Clash or Cooperation of Civilizations?’, *Institute of International Relations-Perspectives*, 1998, 10, pp. 39-46.

<sup>431</sup> S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster, 1996, New York, pg. 103.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid, pg. 107.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid, pg. 45.



identity through race, blood and culture and thus still subjected to the authority of the Chinese government<sup>434</sup>.

In this context, the Tiananmen crisis can be seen as an early manifestation of the shifting balance of power in the post-Cold War era. With the Western civilization in decline and the Sinic —centred around its core state, China—on the rise, the events of June 1989 marked one of the first significant symptom of this shift. The crisis showed China's will, and overall Asian will, to resist and overcome the force of attraction wielded by an imperialist culture. Indeed, during periods of abrupt social and economic change like the historical conjunction of the 1980s and 1990s, fixed identities are more vulnerable and tend to crumble, pushing for the creation of new ones<sup>435</sup>. The student movement of 1989 had come dangerously close to the pull of western values, threatening the integrity of Sinic identity. Through a display of force, the Chinese authorities managed to reassert their power and restore the dominance of their cultural identity. This moment was seized as an opportunity to leverage their growing economic strength, using it to legitimize the superiority of their values and reaffirm their political and cultural independence.

Following Huntington's 1996 explanation, this clash can be classified as a global intercivilizational conflict which takes place between two core states, following a change in the global balance of power<sup>436</sup>. In this case under analysis, China reacted to the U.S. attempt to impose its values on Chinese people and, in a broader sense, on Sinic people. As a direct reaction, in the 1990s China experienced the resurgence of traditional nationalism. Driven by a sense of retribution after centuries of humiliation at the hands of the West, China was now finally ready to reclaim its rightful place in the international system, empowered by a newfound confidence<sup>437</sup>.

Faced with the arrogant advance of Western civilization and the expansion of its influence, the Sinic civilization chose to react by following the path of reformism<sup>438</sup>, namely accepting the economic and technological benefits of modernization but refusing to deny its traditional values and local culture. The Chinese motto *Ti-Yongv* accurately

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<sup>434</sup> Ibid, pg. 169.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid, pg. 97.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid, pg. 208.

<sup>437</sup> G. Xu, 'Anti-Western nationalism in China, 1989-99', *World Affairs*, 2001, 163:4, pp. 151-162

<sup>438</sup> S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster, 1996, New York, pg. 74.

framed this choice, affirming “Chinese learning for the fundamental principles, Western learning for practical use”<sup>439</sup>.

This focus on the revival of Chinese traditional nationalism characterized the decade of the 1990s in the post-Tiananmen China. Only a decade before, during the 1980s, the main line of thought was very different among Chinese intellectuals. The notorious 1988 documentary *River Elegy* perfectly represented the relevance of anti-traditional instances and the consequent criticism of traditional Chinese values as the source of societal decay<sup>440</sup>. On the contrary, right after the crackdown the Chinese government pushed for a revalidation of nationalism while simultaneously fomented anti-Western sentiments. Therefore, the 1990s also represented the revival of Confucianism, now no longer seen as a despotic doctrine and a legacy of a feudal past<sup>441</sup>.

Confucianism validated China's progress and served as a unifying thread among Asian societies, establishing itself as a cultural foundation for the promotion of Asian Values. The resurgence of conservative Confucianism is part of a broader trend that defined the late 20th century, namely the global revival of religion. This phenomenon, known as *Revanche de Dieu*, provided societies with a renewed basis for legitimacy by drawing on traditional values. As a result, the cultural revival within secular Confucianism was shaped by what are often referred to as Asian values<sup>442</sup>.

When discussing Asian values, one is referring to an artificial concept<sup>443</sup>. After all, Asia is a culturally heterogeneous territory and its conceptualisation as such traces back to the West/East dichotomist thinking since Greco-Roman times, when it was used to indicate territories beyond the Greco-Roman world. This created an asymmetrical relationship that posed the *civilized* West against the *barbaric* East<sup>444</sup>. In this way the term Asian marks a clear separation between the *Self* -the barbarians- and the *Others* -the Roman European civilizations-<sup>445</sup>.

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<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

<sup>440</sup> G. Xu, ‘Anti-Western nationalism in China, 1989-99’, *World Affairs*, 2001, 163:4, pp. 151-162.

<sup>441</sup> Peter R. Moody, Jr., ‘Asian Values’, *Journal of International Affairs*, 1996, 50:1, pp. 166-192

<sup>442</sup> S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster, 1996, New York, pg. 95-100.

<sup>443</sup> Peter R. Moody, Jr., ‘Asian Values’, *Journal of International Affairs*, 1996, 50:1, pp. 166-192.

<sup>444</sup> E. Asciutti, *Identity in Crossroad Civilisations*, Chap. ‘Asia and the Global World: Identities, Values, Rights’, Amsterdam University Press, 2009

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

Asian societies accepted this idea imposed by a different civilization and subordinated their development and evolution to Western dominance until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Asian role in the modernization process gained new momentum<sup>446</sup>.

In 1994 the former Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kwan Yew, explicitly referred to Asian values declaring in an interview with *Foreign Affairs* that the individual's identity is rooted in its family and cultural background, which is defined by a set of core values, such as thrift, hard work, loyalty and filial piety<sup>447</sup>. According to Lee Kwan Yew, this set of values falls within a genetic<sup>448</sup> inheritance as the outcome of the interaction between specific groups of people and historical developments.

Therefore, the concept of Asian values has played a significant role in shaping the identity and collective interests of the Asia-Pacific region<sup>449</sup>. Among these values are identifiable some main guiding lines around which they are developed. The first one is familism<sup>450</sup>, which recognises the priority of the family above the individual. This sense of belonging to the familiar unity is particularly evident in the importance of *filial piety*, as a key Confucian value which emphasizes absolute respect, obedience, and care for parents. This idea also applies to government, where the ruler has absolute authority, similar to the parent in the family<sup>451</sup>.

Besides, in contrast to the individualism of the West, Asian values prioritise the community dimension, where the interests of the collective take priority over the individual, who is only truly realised in his social relations<sup>452</sup>. As such, the individual citizen has to show deference and loyal respect to the authority, since a strong and effective leader would have served the interests of the community preserving order and stability, indulging in a paternalistic tendency<sup>453</sup>. Lastly, Asian values hold in high esteem hard-work and self-discipline in the individual's conduct<sup>454</sup>.

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<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

<sup>447</sup> L. Jenco, 'Revisiting Asian Values', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 2013, 74:2, pp. 237-258

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

<sup>449</sup> E. Asciutti, *Identity in Crossroad Civilisations*, Chap. 'Asia and the Global World: Identities, Values, Rights', Amsterdam University Press, 2009.

<sup>450</sup> K. So Young, 'Do Asian Values Exist? Empirical Tests of the Four Dimensions of Asian Values', *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 2010, 10:2, pp. 315-344

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> E. Asciutti, *Identity in Crossroad Civilisations*, Chap. 'Asia and the Global World: Identities, Values, Rights', Amsterdam University Press, 2009.

These values share a connection with Confucianism. Indeed, Confucianism can be considered as the dominant political ideology responsible for shaping the Asian values discourse, providing an instrumental foundation for it. Consequently, the values are a moral philosophical expression of Confucianism<sup>455</sup>. In line with Confucian thought, the individual's relationship with others lies at the core of the discourse, with social interactions predominantly characterized by a hierarchical structure<sup>456</sup>. Unlike the Western human rights perspective, which focuses on individual entitlements, Confucian tradition emphasizes an individual's duties toward others. While people are inherently equal, this equality does not extend to social status<sup>457</sup>.

In this context, the concept of Asian values serves as a normative framework that governments use to legitimize their authority. It links the economic success of the Asia-Pacific region to a form of modernity alternative from the West, supporting economic growth by emphasizing political stability and state control<sup>458</sup>. Reflecting what was said by Mahathir Mohamad, former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Asian values are a challenge to the neo-imperialism of the West and a rejection of Western history<sup>459</sup>.

After the June 1989 crisis, China experienced the resurgence of a traditional nationalistic sentiment, inspired by these common values among Asian societies and fostered by a newfound self-confidence. Following Samuel P. Huntington's *clash of civilizations* theory, many Chinese intellectuals increasingly embraced the idea that the West was aiming to hinder China's rise, viewing it as a competitor for economic and global influence. This belief contributed to the growing spread of anti-Western sentiments<sup>460</sup>.

The Chinese government promoted patriotism, emphasizing love, loyalty and support for the nation, leveraging on national pride to unify the country on cultural common lines, thus reasserting its autonomous identity and overall the belonging to an Asian identity<sup>461</sup>.

In 1995, the then China's State Chairman Jiang Zemin, presented his speech to the UN, stating that state sovereignty is inviolable, and no country has the right to interfere in the internal affairs of another. Zemin explained that some powerful nations often use

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<sup>455</sup> Ibid.

<sup>456</sup> Peter R. Moody, Jr., 'Asian Values', *Journal of International Affairs*, 1996, 50:1, pp. 166-192.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid.

<sup>459</sup> T. N. Harper, 'Asian Values and Southeast Asian Histories', *The Historical Journal*, 1997, 40:2, pp. 507-517.

<sup>460</sup> G. Xu, 'Anti-Western nationalism in China, 1989-99', *World Affairs*, 2001, 163:4, pp. 151-162.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

freedom, democracy, or human rights as a pretext to interfere on other states' sovereignty, undermining their unity and solidarity, and it is precisely this interference one of the major factors contributing to global instability<sup>462</sup>.

Moreover, the importance of maintaining the country's unity is emphasized in Article 51 of China's 1982 Constitution, which states that preserving this unity is also a duty of the citizens. Their exercise of rights "must not infringe upon the interests of the state, society, or the collective"<sup>463</sup>.

In China, Confucian values strongly influence the government's approach to rights. The state prioritizes economic and social welfare over political freedoms. Individual rights are not seen as universal but are instead tied to class status. The government emphasizes people's responsibilities to society rather than their personal rights. It believes that individual rights should not conflict with the interests of the state or community. This view contrasts with Western concepts of inalienable individual rights and reflects China's focus on collective well-being over personal freedoms<sup>464</sup>. The state plays a decisive role in establishing the moral and ethical standards that shape society<sup>465</sup>.

After the crackdown in Tiananmen, a tacit social contract<sup>466</sup> developed between the government and the public. Citizens agreed not to question the authorities' governance methods, while the government limited its interference in people's private affairs.

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<sup>462</sup> Peter R. Moody, Jr., 'Asian Values', *Journal of International Affairs*, 1996, 50:1, pp. 166-192.

<sup>463</sup> Paul J. Magnarella, 'Communist Chinese and Asian Values critiques of universal human rights', *Journal of Third World Studies*, 2004, 21:2, pp. 179-192

<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

<sup>465</sup> S. Subramaniam, 'The Asian Values Debate: Implications for the Spread of Liberal Democracy', *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 2000, 27:1, pp. 19-35.

<sup>466</sup> Peter R. Moody, Jr., 'Asian Values', *Journal of International Affairs*, 1996, 50:1, pp. 166-192.

### **3.6 Tiananmen and World-System dynamics: tensions in the transition from periphery to semi-periphery**

In the late 1980s, China was going through a complex period of transition. The events leading to the Tiananmen crisis reflected this unique time in Chinese history, highlighting the internal contradictions and tensions of a rapidly changing society. At the same time, they represented a local manifestation of larger global processes at play. Using Wallerstein's World-System Theory from the 1970s as an analytical framework of analysis, we can examine China's transformation and its dynamism as a state actor within the evolving hierarchies of the broader global system.

During the 1970s the American sociologist and historian, Immanuel Wallerstein, proposed the World-System Theory (WST) as a macro sociological perspective aiming to explain the dynamics of the capitalist world economy, giving relevance to its economic historical evolution<sup>467</sup>. In this sense, the WST is a theoretical perspective employed to understand the historical developments and transformations that contributed to the emergence of the modern capitalist world-economy<sup>468</sup>.

The WST was influenced by earlier theoretical frameworks, namely the Modernization Theory, the Dependency Theory, and the Annales School.

Until the 1970s, in the post-war period, global capitalism experienced a phase of growth and development. This moment gave rise to two key sociological and political theories that sought to explain the development process and the disparities between wealthy and indigent countries, albeit from opposing viewpoints. The Modernization Theory argued that countries in the Global South were progressing from backwardness to modernity, while the Dependency Theory claimed that the development of wealthier nations occurred at the expense of poorer ones, leading to exploitation and inequality. Despite these differences, the two theories shared common grounds. Both emphasized the state as the central actor in the development process, defining development as economic growth, and industrialisation, with the goal of achieving a society similar to those in the most advanced industrialised nations<sup>469</sup>.

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<sup>467</sup> C. Sorinel, 'Immanuel Wallerstein's World System Theory', *Ovidius Universitaty Constata*, 2010.

<sup>468</sup> Li, Xing, 'The rise of China and its impact on world economic stratification and re-stratification', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2021, 34:4, 530-550.

<sup>469</sup> H. Radice, 'Halfway to Paradise? Making Sense of the Semi periphery', *Centre for the Critical Study of Global Power and Politics*, 2009.

Building on these foundations, Wallerstein later developed a political approach to economic development, focusing on the disparity between Western prosperity and non-Western poverty. He emphasized how the global context influences local changes differently, depending on a region's position in the world-system, while systemic patterns integrate local economies into global capitalism, perpetuating and adapting existing inequalities<sup>470</sup>. At the time of the Cold War, the world was dominated by a sharp polarization between the U.S.-led capitalist bloc and the USSR-led socialist bloc. Most countries had limited options for organizing their political and economic systems, often aligning with one of these two models. They could either follow the American example, advocating for a global open economy where goods and capital moved freely across borders according to market forces, or they could align with Soviet socialism. Wallerstein's goal was to go beyond this binary dynamic. He argued that the contemporary attempts to build socialism were flawed because they were occurring within the context of a capitalist world system<sup>471</sup>. In his analysis, Wallerstein focused on the dynamics of social structural changes in the modern world system<sup>472</sup>, originated in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Europe as a single economy structured around specialized labour divisions and encompassing a variety of cultures<sup>473</sup>. Namely, the modern world system is characterized by a single capitalist world economy -which has been continuously remodelling itself since its establishment after the crisis of the feudal system<sup>474</sup>- which coexist with different state jurisdictions and political cultures<sup>475</sup>. The capitalist world economy has expanded since the 16<sup>th</sup>, arriving to incorporate the whole globe<sup>476</sup>. Its capitalist mode of production aims to the endless accumulation of capital, always restructuring itself<sup>477</sup>. The modern world-system is the central unit of analysis in

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<sup>470</sup> J. Abu-Lughod, 'Restructuring the Premodern World-System', *Fernand Braudel Centre*, 1990, 13:2, pp. 273-286.

<sup>471</sup> F. Block, 'Capitalism versus Socialism in World-Systems Theory', *Fernand Braudel Centre*, 1990, 13:2, pp. 265-271.

<sup>472</sup> R. S. DuPlessis, 'Wallerstein, World Systems Analysis, and Early Modern European History', *The History Teacher*, 1988, 21:2, pp. 221-232.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>475</sup> Z. Gorin, 'Socialist Societies and World System Theory: A Critical Survey', *Science & Society*, 1985, 49: 3, pp. 332-366.

<sup>476</sup> T. K. Hopkins, I. Wallerstein, R. Kasaba, W. G. Martin and P. D. Phillips, 'Incorporation into the World-Economy: How the World-System Expands', *Review Fernand Braudel Centre*, 1987, 10:5/6, pp. 761-902.

<sup>477</sup> W. A. Dunaway and I. Wallerstein, 'Crisis, Transition, and Resistance Movements: A Conversation with Immanuel

Wallerstein', *Appalachian Journal*, 1999, 26:3, pp. 284-305.

Wallerstein's theory. Differently from the of Modernization Theory and Dependency Theory, who considered nation-states as the primary units of analysis, Wallerstein argued that the world-system itself was the key unit of analysis, being it a global, integrated entity structured through a hierarchical division of labour.<sup>478</sup> However, within this system, individual states and regions are not static. They can shift within the hierarchy, and these movements are analysed in relation to their interactions with the global system.

Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein defined the world-system by its spatiotemporal<sup>479</sup> dimensions. Social actions and changes do not take place in an abstract or undefined society, but within a clearly defined world. Spatially, this world is organized through a division of labour between different regions. Temporally, it endures as long as the system of labour division continues to reproduce itself, in accordance to cycles of expansion, contraction, or remaining stable. Thus, influenced by the Annales School and its main representative, Fernand Braudel, Wallerstein adopted a historical approach that emphasized long-term global structures and processes. He applied this perspective to the WST, viewing countries as interconnected components of a global system. In doing so he also embraced the Annales' focus on long-term economic and social changes, incorporating various disciplines such as geography and sociology into his analysis<sup>480</sup>.

In this context, the socialist societies emerging within the world system are not genuinely socialist; they are simply parts of a unified global economy. Socialism, as a feature of the system, can only be realized through a transformation of the entire structure<sup>481</sup>. Since the world system is capitalist, its components must inherently follow capitalist principles. According to Wallerstein, socialist transformations are vital for the world system, serving both stabilizing and destabilizing roles. While the system is held together by forces that maintain it, contradictions -such as inequality, economic expansion, and power struggles- create tensions that drive change. These contradictions make the system's stability fragile, and socialist societies both help stabilize and depolarize the system, while also acting as forces that challenge and undermine it<sup>482</sup>.

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<sup>478</sup> Z. Gorin, 'Socialist Societies and World System Theory: A Critical Survey', *Science & Society*, 1985, 49: 3, pp. 332-366.

<sup>479</sup> T. K. Hopkins and I. Wallerstein, 'Patterns of Development of the Modern World-System', *Review Fernand Braudel Centre*, 1977, 1:2, pp. 111-145.

<sup>480</sup> C. Sorinel, 'Immanuel Wallerstein's World System Theory', *Ovidius Universitaty Constata*, 2010.

<sup>481</sup> Z. Gorin, 'Socialist Societies and World System Theory: A Critical Survey', *Science & Society*, 1985, 49: 3, pp. 332-366.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid.



In the capitalist world economy, the division of labour stratifies a tripartite system, distinguishing core, periphery and semi-periphery regions<sup>483</sup>. As development becomes more uneven, it amplifies disparities in productive capacity, further deepening the division between the two main production zones of the world-economy, the core and the periphery.<sup>484</sup> The world-economy developed a core region with developed countries and advanced manufacturing, modern agriculture, skilled labour, and significant investment. However, the core's growth relied on extracting surplus resources from peripheral regions. In contrast, the peripheries focused on producing essential raw materials, while their countries declined, labour became increasingly coerced, technology stagnated, and skills remained underdeveloped. Instead of accumulating capital, these regions saw it flow back to the core. At first, the differences between the core and periphery were minor, but over time, the core exploited these disparities by trading cheap raw materials for expensive manufactured goods, thus widening the gap<sup>485</sup>. In this context, the innovation of the concept of semi-periphery is crucial. Situated between the core and periphery in terms of economic power, it is structurally distinct from both and exhibited a combination of both core and peripheral activities<sup>486</sup>. Some semi-peripheral societies may eventually fall back to the periphery, while others may advance to the core. These regions play a crucial role in absorbing the discontent and revolutionary movements from the peripheries, while also attracting capitalist investment, especially when labour costs in core economies increase too quickly due to the presence of skilled workers<sup>487</sup>. The semi-periphery is the most dynamic and strongest part of the world system, being crossed by fierce tensions, while providing many opportunities<sup>488</sup>.

In the dynamism of world economy, nations can improve their position within the global hierarchy by leveraging capital mobility and shifting production to their advantage<sup>489</sup>.

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<sup>483</sup> Li, Xing, 'The rise of China and its impact on world economic stratification and re-stratification', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2021, 34:4, 530-550.

<sup>484</sup> T. K. Hopkins and I. Wallerstein, 'Structural Transformations of the World-Economy', *Review Fernand Braudel Centre*, 2016, 39:1/4, pp. 171-194

<sup>485</sup> D. Chirot and T. D. Hall, 'World-System Theory', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1982, pp. 81-106.

<sup>486</sup> T. K. Hopkins and I. Wallerstein, 'Patterns of Development of the Modern World-System', *Review Fernand Braudel Centre*, 1977, 1:2, pp. 111-145

<sup>487</sup> D. Chirot and T. D. Hall, 'World-System Theory', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1982, pp. 81-106.

<sup>488</sup> K. Terlouw, 'The Semiperipheral Space in the World-System', *Review Fernand Braudel Centre*, 2002, 25:1, pp. 1-22

<sup>489</sup> Li, Xing, 'The rise of China and its impact on world economic stratification and re-stratification', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2021, 34:4, 530-550.

During the 1989 Tiananmen Square events, China was undergoing a transitional phase within the world system, moving from the periphery to the semi-periphery. This period was crucial for its economic, political, and social transformation. Starting in 1978, under Deng Xiaoping's "reform and openness" policy, China attracted substantial foreign investment, leading to the relocation of many labour-intensive, capital-intensive, and technology-intensive industries to the country<sup>490</sup>. The government exploited globalization for economic growth while maintaining political control. As proof of the country's final success, in 2001 joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, marking China's full integration into the global economy<sup>491</sup>.

China's economic rise and its shifting position within the world economy have disrupted the existing global structure of the world system<sup>492</sup>.

Thus, in 1989, while China was in the process of transitioning from the periphery to the semi-periphery, it had not yet fully completed this shift. Economic reforms and global integration were improving its position, but internal tensions highlighted the challenges of transformation. The Tiananmen crackdown was the government attempt to preserve order, ensuring that the country could continue its progress toward establishing a more prominent position within the global system.

Wallerstein outlined various strategies through which a state can improve its position in the world system. In the case of China, it can be said that the country primarily pursued a combination of two strategies: *promotion by invitation* and *seizing the chance*<sup>493</sup>.

The *seizing the chance* strategy involves the ability to seize opportunities presented by global changes, such as crises or economic restructurings. With the end of the Cold War and the decline of other semi-peripheral countries, like some economies in the Soviet bloc, China took the opportunity to integrate itself into the global market. It capitalized on the growing globalization of the 1980s and 1990s, positioning itself as a manufacturing hub due to its low-cost labour and rapid industrialization. By doing so, China was able to

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<sup>490</sup> Li, Xing, 'The rise of China and its impact on world economic stratification and re-stratification', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2021, 34:4, 530-550.

<sup>491</sup> M. E. Gallagher, 'Reform and Openness: Why China's Economic Reforms Have Delayed Democracy', *World Politics*, 2002, 54:3, pp. 338-372.

<sup>492</sup> Li, Xing, 'The rise of China and its impact on world economic stratification and re-stratification', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2021, 34:4, 530-550.

<sup>493</sup> I. Wallerstein, 'Dependence in an Interdependent World: The Limited Possibilities of Transformation within the Capitalist World Economy', *African Studies Review*, 1974, 17:1, pp. 1-26.

leverage global shifts in trade and production to accelerate its economic growth and solidify its place in the world economy.<sup>494</sup>

At the same time, China's upward mobility was partly driven by an external actor, namely the U. S.<sup>495</sup>.

Pursuing a *promotion by invitation* strategy, China attracted foreign investment and technology<sup>496</sup> by establishing Special Economic Zones which encouraged multinational corporations to invest. These initiatives facilitated the influx of capital and advanced technology in exchange for access to China's cheap labour and growing market<sup>497</sup>. The United States played a key role in China's economic rise by fostering trade and investment ties. By granting China Most Favoured Nation status, the U.S. lowered trade barriers, allowing Chinese exports to expand into American markets. Washington further supported China's accession to the WTO, solidifying its position in the global economy. These policies helped accelerate China's transition from a peripheral to a semi-peripheral power and laid the basis for its growing influence within the world system.

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<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

<sup>495</sup> Li, Xing, 'The rise of China and its impact on world economic stratification and re-stratification', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2021, 34:4, 530-550.

<sup>496</sup> I. Wallerstein, 'Dependence in an Interdependent World: The Limited Possibilities of Transformation within the Capitalist World Economy', *African Studies Review*, 1974, 17:1, pp. 1-26.

<sup>497</sup> Ibid.

### 3.7 Constructivism and the Tiananmen crisis: understanding identity, perception, and state behaviour

As inferred from this dissertation, the 1989 Tiananmen Square crisis is a complex phenomenon that requires an analysis through multiple perspectives. Its dynamics were shaped by systemic factors, material security concerns, individual leadership decisions, misperceptions, ideologies and flawed narratives. By the late 1980s, the academic debate began to embrace new analytical frameworks to better understand such multifaceted events. Reality started to be seen as a socially constructed rather than as something fixed by nature.<sup>498</sup> This shift aimed to adjust the schemes for the interpretation of the world in response to post-Cold War era characterized by the rise of nationalism and ethnic conflicts<sup>499</sup>. The role of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping global politics began to take on increasing relevance. Social actors were no longer seen as simply driven by material interests but influenced by reciprocal social interactions. Consequently, international politics was seen as socially constructed through relations among states, organizations and individuals. This perspective is particularly useful in understanding the Tiananmen protests. Rather than viewing the Chinese government's response solely through the lenses of power and security, it highlights the significance of political identities, historical narratives, and evolving norms surrounding human rights. The Chinese Communist Party's reaction was not just about maintaining control but also about preserving a specific ideological identity and resisting external pressures that could reshape its domestic legitimacy. Similarly, the international reaction was shaped by different perceptions of democracy, sovereignty, and human rights norms, demonstrating how global politics is deeply influenced by socially constructed meanings rather than just material interests.

This further conceptual shift was made possible thanks to the spread of Constructivism in International Relations. Stephanie Lawson, in her book *Theories of International Relations: contending approaches to world politics*<sup>500</sup>, identifies Constructivism as a metatheoretical approach that focuses on analysing how theories are developed rather

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<sup>498</sup> S. Lawson, *Theories of International Relations: contending approaches to world politics*, Wiley, 2015.

<sup>499</sup> R. Das, 'Critical social constructivism: culturing identity, insecurity, and the state in the international relations theory', *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 2009, 70:4, pp. 961-982.

<sup>500</sup> S. Lawson, *Theories of International Relations: contending approaches to world politics*, Wiley, 2015.

than providing a new specific theory of international politics. Constructivism offers a distinctive framework for understanding reality, challenging materialist views and influencing the way actors are perceived in international politics, with their identities and interests.

Alexander Wendt, an American political scientist and one of the leading constructivists, stated that “constructivism is not a theory of international politics”<sup>501</sup>, but rather can be described as a family of like-minded people <sup>502</sup> who believe that ideas, identities, and social interactions structure international politics. The term "constructivism" appeared explicitly in the field of International Relations thanks to Nicholas Onuf's pioneering work *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, first published in 1989. According to Onuf, international relations are a political form of social interaction. He stated that all social relations, including those between nations, are governed by rules which create structures of power, even in the absence of a central governing authority.<sup>503</sup> This approach highlights the role of rules and social construction in international relations, showing how states and other international actors create and maintain order through their interactions and shared understandings. In the social construction of international politics, anarchy does not directly determine interstate relations, as state behavior is shaped not only by material factors but also by intangible elements such as ideas, narratives, and norms. Hence, the anarchic nature of the world is largely a product of how states perceive and interpret each other<sup>504</sup>. Alexander Wendt delved into the concept of anarchy, delineating three different cultures of it in his leading works: *Social Theory of International Politics*<sup>505</sup>, and *Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics*<sup>506</sup>. The Tiananmen crisis marked a pivotal moment in how the culture of anarchy was perceived within the international system and redefined the relationship between China and the United States. The crisis is understood as an identity tension, where China's self-perception as a sovereign, centralized state

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<sup>501</sup> D. A. Baldwin, *Power and International Relations: a conceptual approach*, Princeton University Press, 2016.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

<sup>504</sup> C. Wei, *The Social Construction of State Power: applying Realist Constructivism*, Bristol University Press, 2020.

<sup>505</sup> A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>506</sup> A. Wendt, 'Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, 1992, 46: 2, pp. 391-425.

clashed with Western liberal-democratic expectations, leading to a significant breakdown in Sino-U.S. mutual understanding.

Among various constructivist approaches<sup>507</sup>, Wendt's theory is considered one of the most abstract<sup>508</sup>. Along with Nicholas Onuf, Alexander Wendt is classified as a structural constructivist, positing that national interests are socially constructed through interactions, with states defining their interests under the influence of norms, identities, and cultures both within their domestic environments and in the global context<sup>509</sup>. Wendt provides a methodology for understanding how the structures of human associations are primarily shaped by collective ideas, and how the identities and interests of global actors are constructed through socialization<sup>510</sup>. While abstract, this framework can effectively be applied to the analysis of concrete historical events like the Tiananmen crisis.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of an ideology that had been embraced by an entire bloc of states led by a moral leader, constructivism anticipated that socialist countries would be socialized into international norms as they increased their interactions with the West<sup>511</sup>. However, Chinese authorities ultimately proved resilient to socialization, demonstrating the complex interplay between domestic political identities and international pressures in shaping state behaviour.

The sociologist Craig Calhoun stated that Constructivism challenges both the idea that identity is inherently fixed and the notion that it is purely shaped by individual will, recognizing the social factors involved in shaping our thoughts and identities. It questions the assumption that certain concepts can be universally applied across all contexts.<sup>512</sup>

In his 1992 essay *Anarchy is what Staes makes of it: the social construction of political power*, Wendt delineated the correlation between identities, interests, norms and anarchy. Anarchy provides the structural context for state interactions, but its meaning is shaped by the norms and identities that emerge through social activity. States' identities influence

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<sup>507</sup> H. Peltonen, 'Constructivism, Cognition, and Duality', *European Review of International Studies*, 2016, 3:3, pp. 76-86

<sup>508</sup> S. Guzzini and A. Leander, *Constructivism and International Relations: Alexander Wendt and his critics*, Routledge, 2006.

<sup>509</sup> R. Das, 'Critical social constructivism: culturing identity, insecurity, and the state in the international relations theory', *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 2009, 70:4, pp. 961-982.

<sup>510</sup> A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>511</sup> D. W. Larson and A. Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy*, Yale University Press, 2019.

<sup>512</sup> P. Roberts-Miller, 'Post-Contemporary Composition: Social Constructivism and Its Alternatives', *Composition Studies*, 2002, 30:1, pp. 97-116.

how they perceive and respond to anarchy. The norms they adopt then shape their identities and behaviour. This dynamic interplay helps construct the social reality of international relations. Hence, interests and identities are endogenous<sup>513</sup> to the interaction process. Social actors interact differently depending on the meanings they assign to one another, changing their posture toward perceived friends and perceived enemies. In this net of shared interpretations and collective meanings, actors acquire their identities, which are the ultimate basis in determining their interests upon the social contest<sup>514</sup>.

Actors, and specifically state actors in international politics, may have multiple identities<sup>515</sup> which guide them in determining “who they are” in given social situations and global schemes. Some state identities and interests are framed in the domestic society, while others are defined by their position within the international system.<sup>516</sup>

For the 1989 PRC the conflict unfolded as a clash between different identities. China's two voices aimed to uphold different norms, each setting its own standards of appropriate behaviour<sup>517</sup>. These competing identities struggled to assert their respective political visions, ultimately shaping policymaking decisions<sup>518</sup>. As Craig Calhoun argues, the 1989 student movement's identity was a product of social and political action, a collective consciousness and solidarity<sup>519</sup> bounded to a crusade for the defence of their own honour as a social class and as a national collective. On the other hand, in a bitter irony, the Chinese government was also engaged in a defence of national honour, but with a different understanding of what that honour entailed.

In the 1980s, China focused on technological and economic advancement, learning in the socialization with other global actors. However, this process of modernization did not significantly impact the frame of China's national identity. The Chinese government had already formulated its answer to the "who am I" question in the post-Cold War system, opting for modernization without democratization. China's socialist identity shaped its

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<sup>513</sup> A. Wendt, 'Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, 1992, 46: 2, pp. 391-425

<sup>514</sup> Ibid.

<sup>515</sup> A. Wendt, 'Collective Identity Formation and the International State', *The American Political Science Review*, 1994, 88: 2, pp. 384-396.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid.

<sup>517</sup> M. Finnemore and K. Sikkink, 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change', *International Organization*, 1998, 52: 4, pp. 887-917.

<sup>518</sup> A. P. Cortell and J. W. Davis, 'When norms clash: international norms, domestic practices, and Japan internalisation of the GATT/WTO', *Review of International Studies*, 2005, 31:1, pp. 3-25.

<sup>519</sup> R. Brubaker and F. Cooper, 'Beyond "Identity"', *Theory and Society*, 2000, 29:1, pp. 1-47.

policy interests, prioritizing national unity and stability while preserving its authoritarian control.

The Tiananmen crackdown ultimately represented a confrontation between opposing sets of norms, reflecting a deep struggle between competing visions of governance, national identity, and political order. The students were calling for greater civil and political rights inspired by Western norms, such as freedom of expression and press, freedom of associations, legal reforms, and democratic participation. Even though they sought political reforms and individual freedoms that could be adapted to the Chinese context and still bounded to the Chinese national pride, the Chinese authorities viewed the movement as a threat to Chinese identity, assaulted by Western rule. This perception led to a hardline response, as the government sought to uphold its vision of national identity and political order on which its legitimacy rested, against the perceived threat of foreign ideological influence.

Therefore, identity and its changing understanding has an important role in defining interstate relations in the international system<sup>520</sup>. Wendt views identity as a subjective characteristic of intentional actors that shapes their motivations and behaviours, and it is deeply tied to their self-understandings<sup>521</sup>. During the Cold War and the 1980s, the social structure of the international system was inherently different from the one in the aftermath of Tiananmen crackdown.

Balance of power considerations had brought China and the U.S. closer together, marking the beginning of their tacit alliance<sup>522</sup> in the early 1970s with Henry Kissinger's initial visit to China, followed later by President Richard Nixon's historic trip. This strategic partnership endured until the late 1980s, with the Tiananmen incident marking a turning point in its decline.

The June 4 events altered the nature of the relationship between the U.S. and China, shifting it from 'friend' to 'enemy.' In the U.S., views of China's leadership changed following the brutality of the crackdown, while Chinese leaders, feeling antagonized by U.S. reactions, became more hostile toward the U.S. These shifts in perception led to adjustments in foreign policy on both sides, transforming their relationship from

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<sup>520</sup> M. Behraves, 'The Thrust of Wendtian Constructivism', *E-International Relations*, 2011.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid.

<sup>522</sup> G. J. Moore, 'The difference a day makes: understanding the end of the Sino-American tacit alliance', *International Studies Review*, 2014, 16:4, pp. 540-574.



cooperation to one of hostility, almost overnight. According to Wendt's theoretical framework, this shift marked a change from a Kantian relational culture of anarchy to a Hobbesian relational culture of anarchy. Since anarchy as the outcome of social context is 'what states make of it'<sup>523</sup> depending on shared beliefs and interactions, its meaning changed after 1989. As stated by Kissinger, China and the U.S. had been de facto allies for several years and were now growing apart after June 4<sup>524</sup>. Before the massacre, Americans generally viewed China positively, believing that economic reforms and pragmatism were pushing the country toward more democratic openness. However, it didn't take long for China in the mainstream Western narrative to no longer be considered as a 'troubled modernizer', but to become a 'Red Menace'<sup>525</sup>.

The study conducted by the political scientist Gregory Moore in the U.S. in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, revealed that Americans' reactions to Tiananmen were primarily shaped by non-material factors. These included a strong emphasis on human rights, anticommunism, disappointment over the government's brutal repression, and moral outrage at the destruction of the Goddess of Democracy'.<sup>526</sup>

On the other hand, many Chinese leaders thought that the United States was directly backing the Tiananmen Square protesters and trying to destabilize the CCP, leading to a deep sense of betrayal.<sup>527</sup>

While sustaining the Kantian culture of anarchy, the U.S. and China had a friendship bond and were acting according to the 'rule of non-violence', which advocates resolving conflicts without resorting to war or even the threat of it; and second, the principle of 'mutual aid', which requires collective action to protect a team member from external threats to their security<sup>528</sup>. On the other side, falling back into the Hobbesian culture meant to relive the dichotomy between rivals, with the constant perception of threat and hostility. Consequently, American policy toward China shifted due to changes in how both countries perceived each other and the resulting shifts in domestic political

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<sup>523</sup> A. Wendt, 'Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, 1992, 46: 2, pp. 391-425.

<sup>524</sup> G. J. Moore, 'The difference a day makes: understanding the end of the Sino-American tacit alliance', *International Studies Review*, 2014, 16:4, pp. 540-574.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

<sup>528</sup> M. Behraves, 'The Thrust of Wendtian Constructivism', *E-International Relations*, 2011.

dynamics. In turn, China also adjusted its policy toward the U.S., transforming the relationship from one of cooperation to hostility, at least for a period.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The Tiananmen crisis emerged as a complex event that reverberated far beyond the clashes in the summer of 1989 between government authorities and demonstrators, fitting into a constantly evolving global context shaped by ideological and identity shifts. While stemming from diverse theoretical perspectives, all the schools of thought analysed in this thesis emphasize the necessity of a multidisciplinary approach to fully comprehend the complexity of the crisis. International politics, in fact, cannot be understood only through the analysis of economic or political forces, but must be interpreted as the outcome of intertwined and constantly changing social, identitarian, and ideological dynamics. Seen from this perspective, the Tiananmen crisis appears not only as a battle for modernisation and sovereignty, but as a broader conflict involving the tension between domestic aspirations for political autonomy and foreign pressure for the adoption of universal democratic values. Through a comparison between these different perspectives is possible to reach a deeper and more coherent understanding of a crisis that is at the same time local and global, historical and ideological, and represents a breaking point in global geopolitical dynamics.

In their significance the Tiananmen developments had a significant impact on the theories of international relations and, in some cases, influenced a critical reflection on some pre-existing ideas. The interpretations of said events can vary significantly depending on the theoretical perspective adopted to analyse them.

Henry Kissinger offers a strategic perspective that examines the importance of pragmatism in bilateral relations. His view of geopolitical realism is the theoretical paradigm necessary to understand how the United States, while condemning the Tiananmen violence, continued to maintain a strategic interest in China. For Kissinger, the global balance of power and the containment of the Soviet threat were priorities that justified a degree of cooperation with the Chinese rival, despite the ideological differences. In this sense, Tiananmen represented a challenge to US foreign policy, which saw a decay of the special relation with China, although geopolitical reasons continued to prevail in the following years.

The principles of Realism found in the crackdown further confirmation. The repression showed that states are willing to resort to force to maintain internal stability and that security and sovereignty issues prevail over international normative pressures. The two sub-branches of the paradigm, namely the defensive and offensive conjugation of Realism interpreted the crisis in slightly different ways<sup>529</sup>.

The main interpreter of defensive Realism, Kenneth Waltz<sup>530</sup>, argued that the Chinese government's reaction to the pro-democracy demonstrations was not driven by ideological considerations but by the necessity to maintain state stability and security. For Waltz, in an anarchic international order, states main objective was their survival and it was possible to achieve only through the maintenance of control over domestic stability. On his side, John Mearsheimer view, advocating for an offensive line,<sup>531</sup> gained more relevance. According to his theorizing, China was starting to emerge in the international system, asserting its position as a rising great power, challenging the unipolar order at the sunset of the Cold War.

While Kissinger's strategy focused on geopolitical realism, the Tiananmen case showed China's struggle in projecting an effective soft power that could generate significant change in its political system in the long run.

As the US continued to pursue its strategic interests with China despite the repression, the Chinese government aimed to consolidate its domestic legitimacy through political control. However, the June 4 repression had damaged China's international image. The

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<sup>529</sup> A. H. Pashakhanlou, The Past, Present and Future of Realism, *E-International Relations*, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/01/15/the-past-present-and-future-of-realism/>

<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid.

Tiananmen crisis showed the limits of Chinese soft power. While Chinese economic growth had improved its international attractiveness, the country's commitment to an authoritarian model of governance conflicted with the global norms of democracy and human rights. This gap between China's economic influence and its political repression stressed the limits of Chinese soft power in persuading the global public of its ideological appeal. Despite this, China managed to reassert its central role in global relations, thanks to its economic strength and strategic value in an interdependent world.

Considering Nye's interpretative framework of power, the Tiananmen crisis showed how the contribution of soft power in the foreign policy of countries can be highly effective and decisive, becoming a weapon to hurt or to be hurt, contributing to bringing the concept of soft power to the centre of academic debates. Although China had become an economic power, its soft power was limited by its image as an authoritarian state. This reflection led to an increased awareness of the challenges authoritarian countries face in building cultural and diplomatic influence on a global scale.

Considering the political and symbolic impact of the Tiananmen events, it is possible to study them in light of Fukuyama and Huntington theorisations, which display contrasting but complementary perspectives on China's fate in the global context.

According to Francis Fukuyama and his 'End of History' thesis, in the post-Cold War era authoritarian ideologies would have gradually disappeared, in favour of the diffusion of liberal democracy as a universal model. However, the Chinese government's repression of protesters revealed how far China was from the democratic transition Fukuyama and the West had hoped for. Indeed, the crisis showed that despite economic reforms and growing trade with the West, Chinese authorities were not planning of embarking on a path towards democracy. Rather, the Tiananmen crisis underlined the persistence of an authoritarian model that has emerged as a major challenge to the global liberal vision. Yet, for Fukuyama, this merely represented a temporary setback in China's long-term advance toward liberalization, and not a definitive rejection of democratic ideals.

On his part, Samuel Huntington interpreted the crisis as a Chinese rejection of Western liberal ideas through the clash of civilisations theory. For him, Tiananmen not only proved China's resistance to liberal democracy, but also reflected a conflict between civilisations, with China reasserting its cultural and political identity against Western influence.

The complementarity between Fukuyama and Huntington is clear in their evaluation of the Tiananmen crisis: Fukuyama thought that China would inevitably evolve towards a liberal democracy, but the event proved that this was not the case. Differently, for Huntington China rejected Western influence and reaffirmed its cultural and political identity. The Tiananmen response challenged Western expectations of liberalisation, showing that civilizations are not easily shaped by externally imposed models. Ultimately, the crisis revealed China's awareness that it was following a different trajectory, maintaining its authoritarian regime despite global pressure.

Fukuyama and Huntington's analyses explain how, after Tiananmen, China rejected Western soft power, embarking on its own path of development, without submitting to demands for political change.

As regard Huntington's Clash of Civilisations theory, even though it was not directly revised following the events in Tiananmen, the crackdown provided a further example of how China, being the core state of the Sinic civilisation, was directly conflicting with Western democratic values, nurturing a growing feeling of suspicion and hostility towards the core state of Western civilisation, namely the U.S. The Tiananmen massacre fuelled the vision of a world divided between countries promoting liberal democracy and countries endorsing authoritarian values, and reinforced the idea of a conflict between civilisations, in particular between Western and Sinic civilisations. It anticipated the rise of the Sinic illiberal model as the main rival to the West and liberal democracy.

Despite not having immediate implications for Fukuyama's thesis, nonetheless the 1989 Tiananmen Square events laid the foundation for the rise of authoritarianism in China in the following decades, including the current era under Xi Jinping, phenomena that Fukuyama had not predicted.

This firm authoritarian trajectory led Fukuyama to reassess his theories, however without entirely abandoning his original conceptualization. Despite being accused of being a naive believer of the certainty of a Western-centric notion of progress and someone who overlooked the shortcomings of liberal democracy<sup>532</sup>, Fukuyama proved to be a critical thinker toward his own theorising and evolved toward a less optimistic analysis regarding the growing challenges of liberal democracy. Recognizing the resurgence of

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<sup>532</sup> A. Anthony, Liberalism and Its Discontents by Francis Fukuyama- review, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/mar/08/liberalism-and-its-discontents-by-francis-fukuyama-review-a-defence-of-liberalism-from-a-former-neocon>

authoritarianism, particularly in leaders like Xi Jinping, Fukuyama acknowledged that political rights and civil liberties have been declining globally starting from the late 2000s<sup>533</sup>, undermining security in a gradual yet uneven advancement of the democratic trend.

Finalizing this examination, it is important to underscore the lasting influence of the 1989 Chinese pro-democracy demonstrations on one of the most recent theories in International Relations, namely Constructivism, particularly in Wendt's variant. Alexander Wendt's constructivist approach provides new insights into the Chinese response to the Tiananmen protests and their broader implications for national identity and international relations. Wendt argues that international relations are not simply shaped by material factors but are constructed through social interactions and identities. In the case of China, the suppression of the protesters can be seen as an effort to defend its identity as a sovereign and independent nation. By rejecting the pull of democratic values and resisting external pressure for political liberalisation, China sought to preserve its political order and resist the imposition of foreign ideologies. This response highlights how national sovereignty and cultural identity continue to play a decisive role in international dynamics, even in an increasingly interconnected world. The crisis has revealed the continuing fragility of a global system in which national identities define and protect themselves from perceived external threats, including the liberal ideals promoted by the West.

While some scholars saw the Tiananmen developments as an early warning of a growing threat in the years to come, Wallerstein interpreted the 1989 crisis as a confirmation of the postulates of the WST, hence simply a recognition of the shifting balance of power and the inherent exploitative dynamics within the world system. With his WST, Wallerstein provides a further interpretive tool to understand how China, in the aftermath of Tiananmen, fits into the larger global system. According to Wallerstein, the world is structured by a global economic system that divides countries into central, peripheral and semi-peripheral regions, defined by a scheme of exploitation.

Under the momentum of Deng Xiaoping's reforms and the increasing economic globalisation, China advanced from the periphery of the world toward the semi periphery, drawn by the forces of the core and strategically leveraging a critical juncture in history. However, as states within the world-system are not static entities, China's progression is

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<sup>533</sup> Ibid.

not going to be tied to the semi periphery. With its continued economic growth in the capitalistic economic system, in the last decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the country has increasingly felt the pull of the core, finding itself in an ambiguous status often referred to as the 'quasi-core'<sup>534</sup>.

A comparative analysis of the different theoretical approaches applied to the Tiananmen analysis highlights both their points of convergence and their tensions in interpreting the crisis. While Realism, Constructivism, and Nye's soft power concept each provide relevant reflections, their capacity to fully capture the implications of the event varies significantly.

Realism, due to its emphasis on state survival and power, can easily account for why the Chinese authorities reacted with violence. Following Waltz's Defensive Realist perspective, military intervention was a reasonable choice aimed at preserving internal stability and state security within an anarchy system. However, this explanation risks to reduce the crackdown into the outcome of a simple strategic calculation, downplaying its deeper ideological and identity-based dimensions. Offensive Realism expands its horizons by placing Tiananmen within the Chinese long-term trajectory of rising power. In this case the crackdown was not just a reaction to domestic opposition but also a sign of China's unwillingness to surrender to outside pressure. While this argument emphasizes China's long term vision, it overestimates how much the crackdown was shaped by long-term geopolitics rather than short-term concerns about internal political legitimacy.

In contrast, Constructivism emphasises the role of identity and ideological self-perception in shaping the Chinese government response. Wendt's argument that state behaviour is influenced by social interaction and constructed identities is useful in explaining why the Chinese leadership saw the protests as more than just a challenge to political authority: they were perceived as a fundamental threat to the ideological foundations of the state. Unlike Realism, which assumes a state agenda of fixed national interests, Constructivism recognises that these interests evolve in response to changing social and historical contexts. However, its main limitation lies in the difficulty of making precise predictions. While it explains the authorities' reaction, it provides little indication of how such identity

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<sup>534</sup> C. Zhai, "China as a Quasi-Centre in the World Economic System: Developing a New Centre–Quasi-centre–Semi-periphery–Periphery Theory", *World Review Political Economy*, 2021.

dynamics might develop in the future and influence the relationship between the government and its citizens.

The concept of Soft Power developed by Nye is another valuable tool in this analysis task, adding a new perspective by focusing on the long-term reputational consequences the crisis. In fact, the armed suppression of the protests severely damaged China's international image, showing the difficulties authoritarian states face in projecting a legitimate global posture. While China's subsequent economic rise has restored much of the country's international influence, its political model keeps struggling with global democratic norms and thus limiting its ability to fully leverage soft power.

The ideological debate between Fukuyama and Huntington further illustrates the complexities of Tiananmen's implications. Fukuyama's *End of History* thesis, which predicted a globally steady advance toward liberalism, was directly challenged by the Chinese government's ability to suppress the dissenters while maintaining long-term stability. Huntington, in contrast, understood Tiananmen as an expression of a deeper civilizational divide, in which China's rejection of Western democratic values was not simply a political decision but an assertion of its distinct cultural and ideological identity. This perspective provides a captivating explanation for China's resistance to foreign pressure for democratization, but it risks portraying the crisis as an inevitable and almost deterministic clash between civilizations, neglecting the strategic and pragmatic factors that also influenced Beijing's response.

Finally, Wallerstein theorization of the World-Systems Theory (WST) is useful for understanding Tiananmen within a broader global economic and historical context rather than as an isolated event. It effectively explains how China's path has been shaped by global capitalist structures and why economic reforms were prioritised over political liberalization. However, its main limitation is its strong focus on economic factors, which overlooks the role of political and ideological dynamics. The WST emphasizes economic structures and global hierarchies but does not fully address the internal ideological debates and identity struggles that influenced China's response to Tiananmen. Additionally, while the WST explains China's changing position in the global system, it does not properly account for the state's ability to shape its own political and social trajectory beyond economic pressures.



Whereas no single theory can fully explain the complexity of the Tiananmen crisis, a multidisciplinary approach provides the most complete perspective.

Realism focuses on the Chinese government's strategic response, emphasizing how it prioritized stability and control. Constructivism explains the ideological stakes of the crisis, stressing how different political identities and narratives shaped the outcome of the 1989 summer developments. Nye's Soft Power analysis accounts for the international reputational consequences, showing how China's handling of the crisis generated a reputational backlash. Fukuyama and Huntington's theses place Tiananmen in the context of a broader ideological struggle between authoritarianism and democracy. Wallerstein's WST in this context adds valuable explanation of the Chinese state as a dynamic unit within a greater world system but, with mainly focusing on economic structures, it provides an incomplete explanation of domestic political and ideological struggles as determinants of China's reaction.

Ultimately, Tiananmen represented more than just a moment of domestic repression, it marked a turning point in China's global standing. The crisis showed how authoritarian resilience, strategic pragmatism, and national cultural reassertion can coexist, shaping the trajectory of a rising power that resists to external normative pressures while redefining its role in the international order.

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