



[CONTENTS - Summer 1999](#)

[A Calendar of Anniversaries](#)

[Chinese Anniversaries in Intl. Perspective](#)

[May Fourth](#)

[China's Half Century](#)

[The PRC as History](#)

[China in Tibet](#)

[Democracy Wall Movement](#)

[Meaning of 1989 Democracy Movement](#)

[Labor Relations in Foreign Enterprises](#)

[Intellectual Property in China](#)

[Asian Studies at Harvard](#)

[Credits](#)

The Twentieth Anniversary of the Democracy Wall Movement

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Both Western and Chinese commentators, when listing the controversial anniversaries in 1999, ignore the Democracy Wall movement. True, the movement began in late 1978, but it reached its climax and ended in late 1979. While China's leaders refer to June 4th as "an unfortunate incident," none of them refer to the Democracy Wall movement, nor, for that matter, did the participants in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations of spring 1989. Though a number of the Democracy Wall activists, now in exile in the United States, commemorated the event in the summer and fall 1998 issues of *China Rights Forum*, its anniversary has come and gone without provoking much comment either in China or in the Western media and academic community.

China's leaders may choose to ignore the Democracy Wall movement for political reasons, but that does not explain why others should follow their lead. Perhaps the violent events of June 4, 1989 have superseded and focused attention on the later movement, but from the perspective of the end of the 20th century, the Democracy Wall movement, much more than the spring 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, was a transformative political event in the People's Republic. It precipitated unprecedented political debates, fresh political issues, unofficial magazines, and independent political organizations. As Wang Juntao, one of the participants in both events, has pointed out, the political activists who came to the fore in the Democracy Wall movement played a key role in China's "struggle for democratic change"¹ in the post-Mao era. This movement not only began the public critique of the Cultural Revolution and Mao's policies and demanded a reversal of the unjust verdicts of the Mao period (1949-76), it also - for the first time in the People's Republic - called publicly for political reform and human rights. Unlike the participants in the spring 1989 demonstrations, who begged the party to reform, the participants in Democracy Wall movement attempted to achieve their own political rights.

Equally unprecedented were the political practices used in the Democracy Wall movement. Most of the participants were ex-Red Guards and workers, who might have been students but for the suspension of their education from 1966 to 1976. They used the methods and strategies they had learned in the Cultural Revolution - forming unofficial groups, putting up large-character posters, writing and printing pamphlets, and setting up their own networks - to achieve their own political goals. In the Cultural Revolution, they had employed these practices initially to purge party officials and the intellectual establishment in response to Mao's summons to "rebel against authority." As their actions provoked increasing chaos and violence, decimated the party bureaucracy, and undermined the party's controls they had been able to establish in the later years of the Cultural Revolution their own study groups and engage in freer discourse than at any other time since the Hundred Flowers episode in the first half of 1957.

For some, the Cultural Revolution marked the beginning of an independent political consciousness and the means to express it, as seen, for example, in the controversial wall poster signed by Liyizhe, a pseudonym of its three authors, that appeared on November 7, 1974 in Guangzhou. It denounced the lawlessness, despotism, recklessness, and killings of the Cultural Revolution and called for democratic and individual rights. A larger-scale expression of increasing political independence occurred on April 5, 1976 with a demonstration in Tiananmen Square supposedly to honor Zhou Enlai, who had died in January 1976 without much official note. In actuality, the demonstration was an organized attack on the Cultural Revolution and the tyranny of the Gang of Four and implicitly of Mao. The April 5th demonstration was the first time since 1949 that ordinary Chinese had taken the initiative to launch their own movement and establish a public space where people could freely express their opinions. But it was suppressed after just a few days. Whereas purged party officials and skilled workers had planned the parades and the placards to be carried into the Square months before April 5, 1976, the Democracy

Wall movement appears to have begun somewhat spontaneously. Against the background of the party's official repudiation of the designation of the April 5th demonstration as a "counter-revolutionary" movement in the fall of 1978 and the official media's calls for "socialist democracy and rule of law," individuals and groups suddenly began to put up large-character posters and gathered together to discuss political issues at the Xidan wall on a busy street in the middle of Beijing in November 1978.

While most of the Democracy Wall participants continued the April 5th critique of the Cultural Revolution, sought redress for Cultural Revolution abuses, and urged economic reforms, a minority of them went beyond these issues to explore new avenues of political action and dialogue. In addition, various groups - some formed in the Cultural Revolution, others formed in its aftermath - printed their own pamphlets or brought their underground magazines out in the open to publicize their views to a wider audience. In Beijing alone, there were several dozen unofficial magazines, among the most prominent being *Beijing Spring*, *Fertile Soil*, *April 5 Forum*, *People's Reference News*, and *Exploration*. Almost all of them were mimeographed, with print runs of just a few hundred. One journal, seeking political reform within the system and with connections to reform party officials, *Beijing Spring*, printed one issue of 10,000 copies, which were all sold out quickly. But that was the exception. The sponsors of these magazines wrote, edited, mimeographed, and distributed or sold them at the Wall.

These groups also established networks among themselves to carry out agreed upon political goals. Although the magazines expressed different viewpoints and emphases, most shared the desire to reform the political structure. Several of their magazines called for "democracy." They may not have had a clear understanding of democracy, but they knew they wanted to reform the existing political system. They shared an antipathy to the Leninist political structure that had given unlimited power to one or a few leaders, resulting in the Cultural Revolution, and they desired more personal and political freedom. They held a weekly "joint conference" of the various groups, at which they discussed and argued about politics in an intense but civil manner. They not only gathered in front of Democracy Wall, they also met in their living quarters and at public parks to exchange ideas and debate on a diverse range of political and economic issues.

Since Marxism-Leninism was the only ideology most of the Democracy Wall activists knew, they tried to propose political reforms within that ideological context. Some referred to the Marxist revisionist thinkers and reforms underway in Eastern Europe.² A small number, who were able to obtain and read Western works on democracy, sharply criticized orthodox party views and provided important sources of alternative political visions. A graduate student in philosophy at Beijing University, Hu Ping, for example, published a famous article "On the Freedom of Expression" in *Fertile Soil*, in which asserted that genuine freedom of expression was not achieved by "Letting a Hundred Flowers Bloom," but by establishing laws and institutions to guarantee that freedom. Others offered, for the first time in public debate, topics suppressed by the party, such as human rights. Groups outside Beijing also contributed to this expanding political climate. Enlightenment, an organization in Guizhou, made six trips to Beijing in fall 1978, where they put up big-character posters and distributed their magazine under the same name. On one of their trips, they put up a poster "An Open Letter to President Carter," asking the United States and other Western countries to pay attention to the state of human rights in China.

One unofficial organization, Human Rights League, established by Ren Wanding, another former Red Guard, did not publish a journal, but issued a Chinese Human Rights Declaration, which called on President Jimmy Carter to criticize China on the issue of human rights in the same way he had criticized the Soviet Union. The League also organized mass demonstrations of people who came to Beijing seeking individual redress for abuses suffered in the Cultural Revolution. In Shanghai, the petitioners demanded the return of youth sent to the countryside in the Cultural Revolution. In Beijing, petitioners marched with placards calling for an end of oppression and demanding human rights. Among those prominently supporting the petitioners was the only major woman activist in this movement, Fu Yuehua.³

She was also the first Democracy Wall activist to be detained for her activities. When this happened in January 1979, her family contacted the Democracy Wall groups, which then sent a delegation to the police demanding to know what happened to her.⁴ Their journals pleaded for her release. This was another new phenomenon in the People's Republic. Before this movement, few family members, friends, or colleagues pleaded for anyone the party detained or attacked, for fear of endangering themselves and their associates. Though they may even disagree with the views or tactics of the one being attacked, the leaders of the Democracy Wall movement immediately came to the defense of their colleagues under attack.

The Democracy Wall movement quickly spread from the Xidan Wall in Beijing to other walls in the city

and to other cities - Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Huangzhou and Qingdao. While most focused on economic issues and Cultural Revolution grievances, a small number emphasized political issues. Participants coordinated their actions in each city and sometimes between cities. By mid-1979, activists were beginning to set up connections between regions, which developed into a loose network. Although the activists were small in number, several hundred to several thousand at any one time, their posters, debates and magazines attracted tens of thousands of readers and listeners. Officials as well as ordinary people, who shared their revulsion at Mao's use of terror and chaos for his own political purposes and also sought to reform the political system were among the readers and discussants at the walls.

The Democracy Wall movement not only broke new political ground, it also broke new literary and artistic ground in China. *Today*, a bimonthly literary magazine, was also distributed and its contents discussed at the Wall. It was started by a group of young writers who had educated themselves during the Cultural Revolution. In reaction to the politically-conformist socialist realist literature and art that had dominated China since 1949, they asserted that each writer should be able to express his or her own individual voice. Their magazine cultivated a unique literary and artistic flowering that spread to the artistic establishment as well. *Today* published a host of writers and poets who were to become prominent in China and abroad, such as Bei Dao, Mang Ke, Gu Cheng, Duo Duo, Shu Ting and made popular a new literary genre, called "misty poetry," (*menglong shi*), an apolitical form poetry.⁵ For two years, *Today* was able to produce nine issues and four books. In addition, it organized literary events and held regular monthly discussions on literary works that attracted large numbers of university students. Even though *Today* was closed down in December 1980, it influenced China's contemporary literary scene for years after.

Democracy Wall also provided a space for non-socialist realist art and for abstract artists who showed their works in front of the Wall. When a group of these artists tried to present their work in what was called the Star Star exhibit in the fall of 1979, the police banned the exhibit. A few of the sculptures ridiculed Mao. As with suppression of other colleagues, Democracy Wall activists organized demonstrations to protest the closure. Despite the ban on the Star Star exhibit and later criticism of "misty" poetry as incomprehensible, these artistic innovations, associated with the Democracy Wall movement, brought new vitality and originality to Chinese literature and art and have had a lasting impact.

The End of Democracy Wall

Unlike the April 5th demonstration and the later spring 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstration which lasted about six weeks, the Democracy Wall demonstration continued erratically for over a year. The reason it was allowed to continue for so long was because it was used in a political power struggle.

Deng Xiaoping took advantage of the pressure of the Democracy Wall activists for political and economic reform in order to help him oust the Maoists. Deng also sought to counter the restorationists, who sought to return to pre-Cultural Revolution policies rather than move to a market economy and open to the outside world. Like Mao in the Cultural Revolution, Deng first used these spontaneous demonstrations in the streets as leverage against his opponents and as means of consolidating his own position.

In early 1979, however, when a small number of the activists began to attack Deng personally, this informal coalition fell apart. Wei Jingsheng, an electrician at the Beijing Zoo and the editor of the magazine *Exploration* and author of a famous wall poster calling for a "Fifth modernization - Democracy" to accompany the party's four economic modernizations, was one of the few not to sing Deng's praises. In addition to denouncing China's February 1979 invasion of Vietnam, he wrote the article "Do We Want Democracy or a New Dictatorship?" in the March 1979 issue of *Exploration*, in which he warned the Chinese people that Deng could turn into a new dictator if the present political system continued. Wei's boldness infuriated Deng, who ordered Wei's arrest on March 29. Six months later at a show trial from which his family and friends were excluded, he was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment and placed in solitary confinement as an example to others. A transcript of the trial, in which Wei rejected the charges against him, came into hands of editors of April 5th Forum, who printed it in their magazine. They too were arrested.

Even without Wei's personal attack on Deng, it is likely that the movement would have been suppressed once Deng had ousted his opponents and became China's paramount leader, which he did soon after the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in late December 1978. With the Maoists on the decline, Deng no longer needed the support of the Democracy Wall activists. Moreover, their demands

for political reforms went much further than Deng intended to go. Limited terms of political office, more regularized party procedures, an increase in younger party members, and the introduction of some rule of law were in accord with Deng's political goals, but not freedom of the press or human rights. While Deng was seeking reform within the Leninist political structure, a small number of the Democracy Wall activists such as Wei Jingsheng sought to dispense with Leninism altogether. Whereas the critiques of Mao were in accord with Deng's policies, challenges to the Leninist one party-state, a basic tenet of Deng's thinking, definitely were not. When the Democracy Wall movement did not disappear once Deng achieved dominant power, the party began arresting other radical activists, specifically those of non-intellectual backgrounds, such as Xu Wenli and Qin Yongmin. In December 1979, Democracy Wall at Xidan was formally closed down.⁶

Although some of the more moderate leaders of the movement attempted to continue publication of the nonofficial journals, they also were arrested in a nationwide crackdown in the spring of 1981. The Democracy Wall movement activists were silenced, and the rights to publish, speak, associate, and assemble freely guaranteed in the constitution were treated as criminal acts. Some efforts were made to continue the movement through network connections, but all nonofficial wall posters, publications, demonstrations, organizations, and public gatherings were banned.


The Significance of the Democracy Wall Movement

Although the Democracy Wall activists employed the same methods of wall posters, pamphlets, open debates and establishing their own networks, that they had used when Mao summoned them to rebel against authority in the Cultural Revolution, their goals were different. A substantial minority was looking not so much for new leaders as for new political institutions and new ideas. Most continued to spout the conventional Marxist terminology in which they had been indoctrinated, but because of the suffering they, their families, friends, and colleagues had experienced in the Cultural Revolution, some called for institutional and legal procedures to guarantee freedom of speech, human rights and civil liberties to prevent such repression and arbitrary treatment in the future.

Those Democracy Wall activists who had not been imprisoned persisted in using the political techniques they had learned in the Cultural Revolution. A number of them exerted a profound influence on China's political scene in the 1980s. Members of the Beijing Spring group, for example, remained a unified group and in 1986 set up the Beijing Social and Economic Research Institute, the first independent political think tank in China. The Institute, their journal the *Economic Weekly*, its publishing house, and their sponsorship of seminars, to which they invited the newly-rich entrepreneurs as well as intellectuals and students, became a new base for promoting political reform and influencing the next generation of political activists like Wang Dan, the co-leader of the spring 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstration. After June 4th, however, when their leaders were charged with being the "black hands" behind the spring 1989 demonstrations and were imprisoned for thirteen years, their Institute was demolished and their publications closed down.

Until June 4th, some of the political ideas of the more moderate groups in the Democracy Wall movement, such as the need to revise Marxism and carry out institutional and legal reforms, continued to be echoed in the official media by intellectual networks connected to reform party leaders Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. A small number of these establishment intellectuals had gone to observe the activities at the Democracy Wall and a few, such as the political scientist Yan Jiaqi, had published in their nonofficial magazines under pseudonyms. Most, however, stayed away, fearing that any connection to the Democracy Wall movement would deprive them of the status and public forum they had just recently received in the post-Mao era. A few protested the end of the Democracy Wall, such as Guo Luoji, a professor of Philosophy at Beijing University, who spoke out against the arrest of Wei Jingsheng. He was sent to Nanjing University where he was no longer allowed to teach. Most, however, chose not to become involved with the fate of the Democracy Wall activists. Nevertheless, some of the demands of the Democracy Wall activists - democratic elections, human rights, and freedom of speech guaranteed by law - were heard in the 1986 revival of discussion on political reform and in the 1989 demonstrations.

But it was not so much what the Democracy Wall activists said, as what they did, that set a new pattern in the People's Republic. They fought for political rights without seeking permission from the party and sought to establish their own groups and publications without party auspices. The leaders of the Beijing Spring group and some of the other participants in the Democracy Wall movement organized elections in the university areas of Beijing and in Shanghai on their own initiative in 1980. Candidates nominated themselves, ran their own election campaigns, set up election committees, wrote their own platforms and organized the debates among the candidates without party supervision. Several of the participants



in the Democracy Wall movement joined the 1986 movement for political rights, which started at the University of Science and Technology in Anhui and moved up the coast until it was suppressed when it sought to enter Tiananmen Square, the symbolic center of political authority in China. And finally, dozens of the Democracy Wall activists, some who had been released from prison, others such as the Beijing Spring group who had continued to function, participated in the 1989 demonstrations. But with the June 4, 1989 military crackdown virtually all were arrested and sentenced to much longer prison terms than the student participants. A few of the Democracy Wall activists - Xu Wenli and Qin Yongmin - who had been released after June 4, and some of the survivors of the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstration tried once again to achieve their political rights by setting up an opposition political party, the China Democratic Party, in June 1998 at the time of President Clinton's trip to China. But by late 1998, virtually all of the leaders of the party were imprisoned once again and sentenced to long jail terms.

It would appear that the influence of the Democracy Wall movement had played itself out by the late 1990s, but when a new generation of party leaders comes to the fore, accompanied by pressure from below for political change, a democratic movement may again reappear in the People's Republic. If and when that time arrives, it will be the actions and methods of the Democracy Wall movement, more than any of the other democratic movements of the post-Mao era, that will inspire it.

1 Wang Juntao, "Democracy Wall-The Roots of a Movement," *China Rights Forum*, Summer 1998, p. 28.

2 Merle Goldman, *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China*, (Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 41-47.

3 Huang Xiang, "Awakening," *China Rights Forum*, Fall 1998, p.43.

4 Isabella Stasi Castriota Scanderbeg, "Forgotten Champion of the Outcasts," *China Rights Forum*, Fall 1998, p. 44.

5 Bei Dao, "The Birth of *Today*, a Literary Magazine," *Civil Rights Forum*, Fall 1998, p. 41.

6 Merle Goldman, "The Emergence of Political Independent Intellectuals," in *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, edited by Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar, (Harvard University Press, 1990), p.295-298.