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Type:Hero  
Title: Sparks of Defiance: The Path to the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests & Massacre  
Lede:A chronological exploration of political, social, and economic tensions leading to the crackdown on June 4, 1989.

Date:2025-05-17  
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This timeline guides you through the years, months, days, and hours before the Tiananmen Square Massacre, and its aftermath.  
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Type:Section

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Title:Exhibit Introduction

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This exhibit will take you through the student protests that transformed Beijing in the spring of 1989, and their violent ending on June 4th.

We start by looking at how China was changing in the late 70s and 80s. The government was opening the economy under Deng Xiaoping, but also keeping a tight control over politics. This mix created a generation of students who saw a notable disconnect—they were being exposed to new ideas while still facing old restrictions. The 1978 "Democracy Wall" movement, discussed below, shows the ways in which people were starting to push political and social boundaries.

When reform-minded leader Hu Yaobang died in April 1989, students gathered to mourn him—this quickly grew into something much larger. The exhibit shows how within weeks, thousands of people—not just students, but workers and regular citizens too—packed the square demanding free press, a crackdown on corruption, and more influence over their government’s actions.

Through photos and descriptions of important events leading up to the massacre, we'll see how the peaceful protests evolved, including the dramatic hunger strikes that captured global attention. We break down the tense final days of May when the government declared martial law, and then the night of June 3-4, when the military moved in with tanks and weapons against unarmed protesters.

The last section looks at what happened after: How China doubled down on economic growth, while tightening political control even more, and how images like the famous "Tank Man" became powerful symbols worldwide.

The exhibit closes with thoughts on how the Tiananmen protests changed China forever. That summer of 1989 became a fork in the road—the government doubled down on opening markets while tightening its grip on political expression. This strange balancing act, what officials call "socialism with Chinese characteristics," has guided China's path ever since. The China that emerged looks nothing like what came before. The economic boom that followed created vast wealth alongside new social tensions, while the political climate stabilized in ways that continue to effect Chinese society today.

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Transition: Initial sparks of dissent in the late 1970s set in motion a decade of reform and resistance, leading to the Tiananmen uprising.

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Title:Years Before the Incident (1978–1988)  
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1978–1979 — Democracy Wall Movement: In the wake of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, a pro-democracy group publicly emerged. Dissident Wei Jingsheng posted his “Fifth Modernization” essay on Beijing’s “Democracy Wall” in 1978, arguing that without democracy China’s Four Modernizations would fail. Wei’s arrest and 15-year imprisonment in 1979 are indicative of the Communist Party’s zero-tolerance for political dissent, yet his ideas inspired a new generation of activists calling for reform.

1986–1987 — Student Protests and Hu Yaobang’s Ouster: Student demonstrations begun in late 1986 alongside rising inflation and anger at prevalent governmental corruption. Reformist CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang was seen as too lenient toward the protests; Deng Xiaoping deemed him “overly liberal.” In January 1987, Hu was forced to resign. This removal of a popular reformer had lasting consequences — students later hailed Hu as a symbol of political openness, and many 1986 protesters became leaders in 1989. Hu’s dismissal deepened a rift between reformists and hardliners in the Party.

Late 1980s — Economic Reform and Rising Discontent: Throughout the 1980s, China’s economic “Reform and Opening” brought rapid growth but also social strain. By 1988, rising inflation and even more blatant official corruption continued to fuel public resentment. Many urban Chinese — especially intellectuals and students — felt that economic change had outpaced political reform. Calls for “socialist democracy” grew louder in elite circles, and even within the Party some leaders acknowledged the need for political modernization. Yet conservative elders warned that liberalization threatened one-party rule. This tension set the stage for the confrontations to come.

Early 1989 — Intellectuals Petition for Reforms: In January 1989, renowned Chinese physicist Fang Lizhi wrote an open letter to Deng Xiaoping urging the release of political prisoners such as Wei Jingsheng. Fang’s bold appeal — unprecedented for a CCP member — emboldened many intellectuals, who followed with their own open letters pressing for human rights and democratic reforms. Though unofficial, this intellectual outcry signaled growing frustration with the Party’s hard line. When Hu Yaobang died suddenly in April 1989, years of pent-up demands for change would finally coalesce into a mass movement.  
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Type:Image  
url: images/Xidan-Democracy-Wall.jpg  
alt: Students reading big-character posters on the Democracy Wall, 1978  
caption: Democracy Wall Movement, Beijing, 1978. Photo: Xidan Archives.  
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Type:Image  
url: images/fang-tiananmen.jpg  
alt: Fang Lizhi at a student-led demonstration in Tiananmen Square, 1989  
caption: Fang Lizhi at the student-led demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, 1989. Photo: IAS.  
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Type:Image  
url: images/Hu-YaoBang.jpg  
alt: Portrait of Hu Yaobang  
caption: Hu Yaobang. Photo: Sohu News.  
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Transition: The early stirrings of dissent evolve into a full-blown student movement by the spring of 1989.  
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Title:Months Before the Incident (April–May 1989)  
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April 15, 1989 — Death of Hu Yaobang: Ousted reformer Hu Yaobang’s sudden death caused an outpouring of grief among students. That night, university students in Beijing gathered in Tiananmen Square to mourn him, laying wreaths and big-character posters eulogizing Hu’s honesty and calling for his ideals of political liberalization. Over the following week, spontaneous memorials spread to campuses nationwide. Hu’s funeral on April 22 saw tens of thousands of students march to Tiananmen Square, where they petitioned for democratic reforms during the official memorial ceremony. The government’s failure to invite student representatives or seriously address their petitions left many young mourners frustrated.

{.Blockquote}  
Attribution:People’s Daily, April 26, 1989 (http://www.standoffattiananmen.com/2009/04/document-of-1989-peoples-daily.html)  
Text:“These facts prove that what this extremely small number of people did was not to join in the activities to mourn Comrade Hu Yaobang or to advance the course of socialist democracy in China. Neither were they out to give vent to their grievances. Flaunting the banner of democracy, they undermined democracy and the legal system. Their purpose was to sow dissension among the people, plunge the whole country into chaos and sabotage the political situation of stability and unity.”  
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April 27, 1989 — Following the April 26 editorial, more than 150,000 students broke through police lines, marching back into Tiananmen Square and chanting for a retraction of the editorial.

Mid-May 1989 — Hunger Strikes and Nationwide Support: On May 13, over a thousand students began a hunger strike in Tiananmen Square, vowing to fast until their reform demands were addressed. This dramatic protest coincided with a state visit by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (May 15–18), bringing foreign media attention. By May 17–18, over one million Beijing residents poured into the streets in solidarity; workers, professionals, and even off-duty soldiers joined demonstrations that spread to as many as 400 other cities.

May 19–20, 1989 — Martial Law Declared: On May 19, reformist General Secretary Zhao Ziyang asks students to end their hunger strike “for the sake of the nation.” The next day, Premier Li Peng, with Deng Xiaoping’s backing, declared martial law in Beijing, mobilizing up to 300,000 PLA troops toward the capital. Citizens built barricades and blocked convoys, creating a tense stalemate that prevented the immediate crackdown that Deng Xiaoping hoped for.  
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Transition: With public mourning intensifying, Beijing braces for mass mobilization.  
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Title:Days Before the Incident (June 1–3, 1989)  
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June 1, 1989 — Internal Justification: Beijing Party authorities circulated a report titled “On the True Nature of the Turmoil,” framing the student movement as a counterrevolutionary rebellion organized by foreign hostile forces, laying the groundwork for military action.

June 2, 1989 — Politburo Resolution: Deng Xiaoping convened the Politburo Standing Committee, giving a green light to clear Tiananmen Square by force while insisting on continued economic reforms to prevent such unrest in the future.

June 2–3, 1989 — Troops Encircle the City: PLA units with tanks and armored personnel carriers moved from the outskirts into Beijing, intending to reach Tiananmen Square. As columns approached on June 3, crowds build barricades, and in some areas stoned military vehicles. The stage was set for a bloody conflict.  
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Transition: Troops press forward into Beijing’s streets, bringing the standoff to a fiery climax.

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Title:The Massacre (Night of June 3–4, 1989)  
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June 3, 1989 (Late Evening) — Assault on Central Beijing: Shortly after 10:00 PM on June 3, PLA troops opened fire with live ammunition, fighting through barricades on Beijing’s main avenues. Multiple units converged toward Tiananmen Square, shooting individuals who refused to disperse. In western Beijing, particularly around Muxidi, citizens had barricaded a major, heavily traveled road; dozens of burning buses and armored vehicles lit up the night as a result. Casualties rose rapidly, with hundreds of unarmed civilians and students killed or wounded by midnight.

June 4, 1989 (Pre-dawn) — Clearing of Tiananmen Square: In the early hours of June 4, PLA forces reached Tiananmen Square, where several thousand student demonstrators stood around the Goddess of Democracy statue. Surrounded by troops with bayonets, protesters were given an ultimatum to leave. Around 4:00 AM, student leaders negotiated a peaceful exit; protesters linked hands and withdrew, singing the Internationale, the socialist anthem, and ending their occupation. By morning, soldiers had toppled the statue, although sporadic gunfire persisted as troops searched for remaining protesters and cleared barricades across the city.  
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Transition: The world grapples with the aftermath.  
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Title:Repercussions (Aftermath and Long-Term Consequences)  
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Human Toll and Suppression — The military crackdown in Beijing resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths—though official Chinese figures admitted only several hundred bodies, other estimates range into the thousands—and thousands more injured. Authorities conducted mass arrests: over 1,600 people were tried and punished for participating in the “riot,” and dozens were executed in the months following. The regime branded the protests a counterrevolutionary rebellion and launched a nationwide purge, banning public mourning or discussion of June 4th for decades.

Leadership Changes and Political Freeze — General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, sympathetic to the demonstrators, was purged and spent the rest of his life under house arrest; his successor, Jiang Zemin, was elevated as a hardliner who quelled protests in Shanghai without significant loss of life. Under Jiang’s leadership, the Party reasserted control and launched “patriotic education” campaigns, freezing political reform and deterring future dissent.

International Outrage and Isolation — News of the massacre sparked global outrage, with Western media labeling it a “massacre,” and the iconic “Tank Man” image becoming a symbol of courage despite repression. The United States suspended military sales and froze high-level exchanges, while the European Community imposed an arms embargo still in effect today. China faced diplomatic and economic isolation—though by the early 1990s most countries gradually resumed engagement driven by strategic and economic interests.

Long-Term Impact on China’s Trajectory — June 1989 marked a shift toward “authoritarian capitalism”: economic liberalization continued under Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 “Southern Tour,” but without political loosening. The Communist Party learned to maintain power through material progress in exchange for political acquiescence—a model that has defined China’s modern development and shaped its global rise.  
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Title:Conclusion  
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This exhibit examines how China’s path to modernization has navigated rapid economic expansion and an unmet demand for political freedoms. The students and intellectuals who rallied in 1989 embodied the hope that economic liberalization would lead to democratic reform—a hope brutally extinguished by force. Yet their courage endures as a reminder that meaningful modernization requires not just material progress but also a respect for human rights and a willingness to engage in open dialogue. As China continues to expand its global economic and political influence, recalling the events of 1989 reminds us that sustainable progress cannot ignore the fundamental rights and aspirations of its people.

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Title:References  
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• Xidan Archives, Democracy Wall images, 1978.

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Type:Section  
Title:Created By  
[+.texts]  
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Spring 2025 – Final Project  
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