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# Deng Xiaoping, Dazibao and Dissent: A Critical Analysis of the Xidan Democracy Wall Movement

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Deng Xiaoping, Dazibao and Dissent  
A Critical Analysis of the Xidan Democracy Wall Movement

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April 8 2013

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## Table of Contents

1. Introduction: The Xidan Democracy Wall.....	1
2. Deng Xiaoping: Political Strategist.....	10
3. Intellectualism and Activism in Historical Perspective.....	29
4. Pluralism in Perspective: The Democracy Wall Activists.....	43
5. Conclusion: A Critical Approach to Historical Analysis.....	61
6. Works Cited.....	66
7. Appendix: Interview Transcripts.....	71
I. Interview with Merle Goldman.....	71
II. Interview with Wei Jingsheng.....	75
III. Interview with Huang Xiang.....	85

## 1. Introduction: The Xidan Democracy Wall

“You walked here? This is not a very safe neighborhood,” said Huang Ciping. Ms. Huang, a dissident in her own right for speaking about against the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, is the director of the Washington D.C. based Wei Jingsheng Foundation. In my visit to interview the well-known Chinese dissident I had been expecting an office closer to the center of the capital, not a modest home in a neighborhood marked by chain link, and economic depression

“The foundation does not have a lot of money,” Ms. Huang said to me later, “The corporations do not like Wei Jingsheng. He fights for the rights of workers in China and in America and they do not like this.”

An enlarged photograph of Wei and George W. Bush hangs in the entranceway of his home. Another large photo of the former president and dissident in a roundtable discussion hangs over his couch framed on each side by decorative scrolls. Wei caught me looking at the photo and took it off the wall placing it on a nearby chair. Under it there was another poster sized photo of Wei shaking hands with Bill Clinton. “Maybe you’ll like this one better,” he said in Mandarin, “But they are both my friends.”<sup>1</sup>

The United States government had given Wei refugee status in 1997. From 1979 on, Wei had been imprisoned for almost two decades in China for publishing his ideas on democracy and criticizing the Communist system. His pro-democracy actions began in 1978 with his involvement in the Xidan Democracy Wall Movement, which he now sees as the spark which began post-Mao discussions of democracy in China and set the roots for democracy movements in the 1980s.

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<sup>1</sup> Wei, Jingsheng, and Ciping Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng." Personal interview. 15 Feb. 2013

The Democracy Wall Movement began in the fall of 1978. The movement was sparked by intellectuals Huang Xiang and his three friends Li Jiahua, Fang Jiahua and Mo Jiangang who all travelled to Beijing to publish Huang's poems in the streets on large character posters or dazibao. The movement started just before the December 1978 Third Plenum of the CPC Central Committee which resulted in a major political shift in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) away from Maoism and towards a more modern reformist agenda. Activists organized demonstrations and speakers at the wall drawing thousands of onlookers. Citizens posted their own discontents on the wall and activists published underground journals to hand out and post on the wall. While many intellectuals saw the movement as an act of rebellion, "the mainstream of the Democracy Wall Movement understood the movement as a manifestation of popular discontent and emerging political awareness against the leftist rule and Stalinist political system, but not the Party as a whole."<sup>2</sup> Like, any social movement, participation ranged between moderate and more radical action, and factions existed among groups of intellectuals.

In December, 1978 activists moved to a wall near a bustling bus stop in Xidan, a neighborhood in downtown Beijing, west of Tiananmen Square. Political and cultural activists began to paste up wall posters in the very public space. Every day the number of posters increased and the wall became a destination for tens of thousands of curious onlookers. Thousands of activists created a loose national network, paving the way for Democracy Wall prototypes in different cities throughout China. These activists used public debate and printed magazines as tools to spread awareness. The wall attracted intellectuals, students, workers and even disgruntled government officials. "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

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<sup>2</sup>Paltemaa, Lauri. "Individual and Collective Identities of the Beijing Democracy Wall Movement 1978-1981." *Sage Journals* XIX.3 (2005), 465.

reform the political system, were among the readers and discussants at the walls."<sup>3</sup> Wall posters began to appear both in other parts of Beijing and in other cities as the movement caught fire and spread through the nation.



A crowd of young men read posters on the Democracy Wall.<sup>4</sup>

The activities at the wall varied from day to day. Intellectuals handed out their publications and spontaneous demonstrations often occurred. On November 27, 1978, the people gathered at the wall, a crowd of almost four thousand people, began to march to Tiananmen Square shouting slogans of praise for Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai and Hua Guofeng.<sup>5</sup> ““This is the first time in the history of the People’s China that a spontaneous demonstration like this has been held,””<sup>6</sup> said a member of the crowd. Two days after the demonstration a crowd of ten

<sup>3</sup>Huang, Xiang, *Poet on Fire Inside of Communist China*. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: The Century Mountain Press, 2011. <<http://www.centurymountain.org>>. 11/13/2013.

<sup>4</sup> McCann, Daryl. "Democracy Wall, Beijing, 1979." *Quadrant* LVI.4 (2012) <<http://www.quadrant.org.au/>>.

<sup>5</sup> Huang, Mab, and James Seymour. "Introduction." *The Fifth Modernization: China's Human Rights Movement 1978-1979*. Ed. James Seymour. Stanfordville, New York: Human Rights Publishing Group, 1980, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Huang and Seymour, 12.

thousand people gathered at the wall to hear speakers calling for human rights and democracy.

“An excited young man in the crowd said to a foreigner, ‘You are witnessing the greatest thing to happen in China.’”<sup>7</sup> The Democracy Wall Movement, ignited and spread by intellectuals and activists, was a way for the people to both vent frustrations leftover from the Mao era and discuss history, and politics, and economic reform. In our interview Wei Jingsheng summarized the importance of the movement in Chinese society as well as its significance in the global democratic conversation.

Initially when the big posters went up on the wall in Xidan, most people were just expressing their own opinions and ideas. In Mao Zedong’s Four Big Democracies, writing big character posters was one of the democracies. People would put up the posters to voice their opinions. People started to call the movement the Democracy Wall after I put up my big character poster, the Fifth Modernization. The term Democracy Wall spread very fast and very far away. People understood it as a place where you could express your opinions. It spread very quickly, not only to other cities in China but to other countries like Taiwan where there was no democracy. I think that the spreading of the Democracy Wall to all those places in 1979 is why the Berlin Wall and dictatorship in other communist countries ended ten years late. I think it is all closely associated. The youth in China in those days invented something very important.<sup>8</sup>

The movement received its name from Mao’s Four Democracies and Wei Jingsheng’s poster “Fifth Modernization,” which called for democracy. The dazibao posted on the wall attracted thousands of onlookers every day. Some came to post up their own words; others merely to watch and read. Intellectuals formed groups to publish unofficial magazines, posting the pages on the wall. The movement grew until it was shut down by Deng Xiaoping in the spring of 1979, and many of its leaders were arrested. The government cracked down on the movement in March. Wei Jingsheng was arrested on March 29, 1979, and the wall was relocated to a monitored site far from the center of Beijing. Soon after, dazibao were banned entirely.

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<sup>7</sup> Huang and Seymour, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

The language in the Democracy Wall publications differs from the language of past Chinese intellectual movements because the Xidan activists had no choice but to, “expressed their views in Marxist terminology in which they had been educated.”<sup>9</sup> An example of this language can be found in Lu Min’s poster titled, “How to Run a Factory,” in which he writes, “Anyone with an elementary knowledge of Marxist-Leninism knows that a political party is a class concept. It is the child of class struggle and at the same time a tool of class struggle.”<sup>10</sup> This phrase is meaningless to those without a Maoist background. The activists defined their political parameters within the Maoist concepts of “socialism,” “Marxism,” and “class struggle.” Despite linguistic limitations, the posters on the Democracy Wall were bold and powerful and their political message represented a new era of self-awareness and expression.

This Maoist language was taught to all youth in the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution was a campaign by Mao and the CCP from 1965 to 1968 meant to purge China of traditionalism and promote new Maoist thought. The movement of government-sponsored terror, propaganda and coercion turned neighbor against neighbor in political class struggle. The CCP took new measures to control the media, the state, and the work of intellectuals by purging those in the government and academia who had published any “counter-revolutionary” work. Mao then closed all schools and called on students to form gangs of Red Guards to revolt against the bourgeois class which included authority figures such as professionals, teachers and principals. Chaos and violence came from Mao’s orders and his army of Red Guards. “Young people attacked their teachers, forcing them to kneel on glass and confess their errors. Children

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<sup>9</sup> Goldman, Merle. *From Comrade to Citizen: The Struggle for Political Rights in China*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005, 30.

<sup>10</sup> Min, Lu. “How to Run a Factory.” *The Fifth Modernization: China's Human Rights Movement, 1978-1979*. Ed. James Seymour. Stanfordville, New York: Human Rights Publishing Group, 1980, 163.



denounced their parents, and young cadres tortured and humiliated their leaders.”<sup>11</sup> High officials including President Liu Shaoqi were tortured and imprisoned. Citizens lived either in fear or were brainwashed by the “ideological straitjacket,”<sup>12</sup> of Maoist thought.

The Democracy Wall Movement marked the first test of a new post-Mao relationship between the people and the state. The movement is an example of a contemporary social movement and was the first substantial movement of the post Mao era. A social movement, as in the case of the Democracy Wall movement, is not necessarily a revolutionary action. Key characters of a social movement include the idea of collective action and the creation of a sense of “we” between activists and participants. In this case it is important to note that the movement itself was characterized by factionalism on both sides so there was no true collective identity. The sense of “we” was created on the idea of the wall as a shared space for free expression. In the Democracy Wall Movement, the majority of Chinese citizens were not working against the current government but were practicing mass free speech and self-expression to express their frustrations over past politics of the Mao era. The movement was generally about the ability to speak rather than about rebellion and upheaval. In this instance speaking freely and posting opinionated dazibao were a way for the people to reclaim political rights that had been taken away by Mao.

A social movement is a complex organism, and the rise and success of any movement is dependent upon both cultural and political factors. In “Toward an Integrated Perspective on Social Movements and Revolution,” a study of contentious politics and collective struggle, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly examine the historical evolution of the study of social movements. It is generally agreed that in the creation of a social movement the organizing

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<sup>11</sup>Kristof, Nicholas, and Sherry Wudunn. *China Wakes: The Struggle for the Soul of a Rising Power*. New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1994, 70.

<sup>12</sup>Shirk, Susan. *China, Fragile Superpower*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 15.

actors must have certain conditions and means in order to have agency. The authors argue that it is important to realize that examination of means and conditions is the most simplistic window to analyze a social movement. We must also note factors including political opportunities, timing, mobilizing institutional structures and framing processes.<sup>13</sup> As in the case of the Democracy Wall Movement, the timing of most social movements depends on a shift in the government or institutional structure or ideology of a country or region.<sup>14</sup> This structuralist shift will often leave vulnerabilities in a ruling power structure creating an ideal atmosphere in which to push for change and reform.

This political shift is an important factor in social movement theories but cannot be looked at as the singular cause motivating a movement. The rationalism perspective examines the background and actions of the main actors in the movement to determine how their actions compare with rational choice theory in order to analyze their goals and motivation. Cultural and historical factors must be studied by examining the movement through a culturalist perspective. In summary the three authors call for a theoretical model for social movements that synthesizes political and cultural approaches. A model through which to analyze social movements must examine the rationalist, structuralist and culturalist factors behind it. The combination of these three perspectives will give the clearest picture of the means, conditions and motives behind a social movement. To understand a social movement it is important to understand both the actors and circumstances in which the actors mobilized.

In researching the movement using these three theoretical approaches I was able to view the available literature through a more critical angle and found many overgeneralizations put

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<sup>13</sup> MacAdam, Doug, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly. "Toward an Integrated Perspective on Social Movement and Revolution." *Comparative Politics*. Eds. Mark Lichbach and Alan Zuckerman. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 144.

<sup>14</sup> MacAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 152.

forth by studies of the movement. Aside from my interview with Wei Jingsheng I was fortunate to be able to speak to poet and Democracy Wall Movement leader Huang Xiang and Harvard Fairbanks Center China historian Merle Goldman. These three interviews expanded my perspective on the movement. Looking at the movement with a more critical eye, using the three approaches, I found cause to question three major assumptions that are often made concerning the movement. The three assumptions are:

1. Deng Xiaoping supported the Democracy Wall in the early stages
2. The Democracy Wall was a spontaneous movement
3. The Democracy Wall was a cohesive movement

Because of these generalizations, the analysis of both the movement itself and Chinese society in the late 1970s is often oversimplified. The first generalization is that Deng Xiaoping supported the Democracy Wall in its first months. In a more critical analysis of Deng's rise to power, I found much evidence that Deng never genuinely supported the movement and that the socially reformist agenda he championed was purely opportunistic. The second generalization is that the movement was spontaneous. The movement was actually deeply rooted in history and borrows much of its methodology from earlier historical movements. It only seemed spontaneous to some because the lack of historical awareness characterized by the Mao era. There are many striking parallelisms between the Democracy Wall Movement and the May Fourth Movement; both movements are an important part of the cycle of repression and relaxation that frames the modern relationship between the CCP and Chinese intellectuals. The third idea is based on theories that analyze the movement with the basis purporting the people as one singular actor and the state as a second singular actor when deep factions existed on both sides of the movement. This factionalism was both an important part of the movement's growth and consequently a

reason why the movement ultimately failed. The use of these three theoretical approaches in my analysis of the material on the Democracy Wall Movement and my own original research led me to question the overgeneralizations and misconceptions spread by the various studies of the post Mao era.

## 2. Deng Xiaoping: Political Strategist

“According to the laws of history, the new will not come about until the old is gone. Now that the old is gone, the people are rubbing their eyes in eager anticipation.”<sup>15</sup> Wei Jingsheng knew that the people of China were ready for change after the death of Mao Zedong. They looked to support a leader who would bring social and economic liberalization to the struggling nation. Deng Xiaoping was ready to play the part. Deng’s need to ally himself with the people created a short period of social liberalization in which a movement like the Democracy Wall Movement was briefly allowed to flourish. In examining political opportunity it is important to analyze Deng Xiaoping’s rise to power in relation to the Democracy Wall Movement as the two had a somewhat symbiotic relationship. Mao Zedong had taken his power from the people therefore to be his successor Deng also had to win the support of the people. The Democracy Wall represented the politically active people in Beijing and other cities throughout China. There is often the assumption that Deng genuinely supported the Democracy Wall Movement in its early stages because that is the story Deng himself told through Chinese media. This misconception stems from the positive image that Deng Xiaoping was able to cultivate amongst the masses. In order to survive politically, Deng needed to ally himself with the people and could not afford to upset them. Because of this, Deng developed an almost call and response relationship to the Democracy Wall by using the wall to better understand public opinion. To Deng, the Democracy Wall was a useful tool in his rise to power. His support of the Democracy Wall added to the more open and liberal atmosphere in China at the time, an atmosphere of hope which increased his popularity with the Chinese people. I see both his support of the Democracy Wall, public rivalry with Hua Guofeng and brief support of social liberalization as nothing but political strategy.

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<sup>15</sup> Wei, “Fifth Modernization,” 47.

Deng's rise was unstable. His position under Mao had been unstable as well. In basic historical summaries, Deng simply came to power in 1978. Anyone familiar with the Chinese Communist Party knows that firmly coming to power is not a simple feat. We know that factionalism exists within the Party, but it is impossible to fully grasp the power plays and backroom deals that occur in such a complicated and secretive authoritarian system. We just know the endgame and what the Party allows us to see. Taking this into account, it is generally accepted that Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng did have a political rivalry immediately after the death of Mao Zedong. The rivalry stemmed from their opposing viewpoints: Deng was a moderate conservative pragmatist and Hua as a Maoist and weak politician.

Deng Xiaoping and Huang Xiang were political rivals in the beginning of the post-Mao period. In 1976, a dying Mao was unable to conduct day to day CCP activity but still had power in major decisions. Multiple factions competed for political power and were each ready to take the power at Mao's inevitable demise. Deng Xiaoping represented the moderate conservative faction but was purged before Mao's death because Mao did not want Deng to succeed him in the power position. The Shanghai Group, later known as the "Gang of Four," were the ideologically radical faction. Hua Guofeng, endorsed by Mao himself, was a staunch Maoist. He believed that all of Mao's decisions should be carried through even after his death. The struggle between the different factions played out mostly on the highest political levels and the political and ideological struggles of this time showed a picture of CCP instability. The general public were manipulated through intense propaganda campaigns.

Hua Guofeng, a loyal Maoist and member of Politburo was relatively unknown until he received Mao's praise for a speech at the First National Conference of Learning from Dazhai in Agriculture in 1975 that helped launch a campaign to build more model communes based on

Dazhai. Mao choose Hua as the new paramount leader in 1976, after the death of Zhou Enlai, writing to him (he could not speak in the end because of neural degeneration), “With you in charge, I am at ease.” Hua had the difficult task of continuing the unpopular Mao line and cult of personality after Mao’s death but was successful in the purge of the Shanghai Group.

Unfortunately for Hua, Deng was only able to return to politics to return after the fall of the Gang of Four. In rehabilitating Deng, Hua had brought in more competition for himself within the CCP. As chairman, Hua faced many tough obstacles from the beginning including the death of the beloved Zhou Enlai, Mao’s illness and decline, the impact of the Cultural Revolution, bad weather and a bad harvest, the death of Marshal Zhu De; an important Maoist revolutionary figure and as well as an increase in crime.<sup>16</sup> Yet another obstacle that faced Hua as chairman is that his cohorts in the CCP were mostly Cultural Revolution beneficiaries. “Based on the lessons of the past decade, neither the Cultural Revolution beneficiaries nor the veteran cadres could be certain about the future intentions of the other.”<sup>17</sup> The Cultural Revolution, for politicians, was a time of self-preservation and self-protection. Those who were beneficiaries in the end were able to bend in accordance with Mao’s will.

Deng himself had a difficult history within the ranks of the CCP and his ultimate political survival and triumph proves his ability to play the political game. He was purged multiple times by Mao. The fact that his was able to climb back so many times and ultimately take the position of power proves that he is a shrewd political animal. He was also extremely intelligent. Even Mao who did not like Deng, admitted that he was a smart politician. Harvard historian Merle Goldman describe their relationship to me in a recent interview.

Mao had a certain affection for Deng. He said to a visiting leader, “You

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<sup>16</sup> Roger. *Coming Alive: China after Mao*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981, 137-8.

<sup>17</sup> Goldstein, Avery. *From Bandwagon to Balance of Power Politics: Structural Constraints and Politics in China 1949-1978*. Stanford, California: University of California Press, 1991, 218.

see that little guy there, he's as smart as mustard seed," and for Mao that was a big compliment. He had a lot of admiration for Deng, surprisingly. But Deng was not a flatterer of Mao, he didn't do what Mao told him, he wasn't like Zhou Enlai.<sup>18</sup>

On some level, Deng had to have strong values and real ideas in order to hold his ground against Mao. In the Mao regime, he refused to play the political game and seemed to be a constant thorn in Mao's side. In the era of the Great Leap Forward regime, Deng opposed Mao in the silencing of intellectuals and tried to protect youth education when Mao proposed shortened courses. Deng was first purged in 1966 as part of the Cultural Revolution. With the support of Zhou Enlai he was rehabilitated in 1973 and returned to his former posts after casual public appearance at a banquet. Interestingly, "the official account treated it as if it were a normal, everyday occurrence, as if indeed he had never been away."<sup>19</sup> In his time away from the CCP, Deng had worked in a cafeteria for party officials. Because he had experienced life as both an official and as a proletariat during the Mao regime, Deng claims to have had the ability to develop a clearer picture of the problems in Chinese society. Shortly after Deng's 1973 rehabilitation, an ill Mao continued his fight against Deng in the media starting in 1975. *The People's Daily* printed a remark by Mao about Deng saying that, "This person does not grasp class struggle... his theme of "white cat, black cat," making no distinction between Marxism and Imperialism."<sup>20</sup> Deng was attacked for his lack of understanding of Marxist and his proposals that China should begin to look to new technology from foreign countries. He was eventually purged, blamed for the 1976 April Fifth mass movement and placed under house arrest only able to return when the blame for the movement was placed on the Gang of Four in 1977.

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<sup>18</sup> Goldman, Merle. "Interview with Merle Goldman." Personal interview. 01 Feb. 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Garside, 99.

<sup>20</sup> Garside, 22.



Deng was not a political opportunist under Mao, joined the game under Hua when he saw that the Party leadership was extremely unstable. In the years leading up to Mao's death, this instability stemmed from the political struggles between Mao Zedong and Hua Guofeng, and the Shanghai Group. The Shanghai Group or the Gang of Four, attempted to take power in the face of Mao's demise. The Shanghai Group had come to political power in Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution. Lin Biao, known for having helped Mao create his cult of personality, was leader of the Shanghai Group and had been officially named Mao's successor in 1969. The Shanghai Group held a sphere of political influence in Shanghai. Lin and the rest of the Shanghai Group which included Mao's wife Jiang Qiang came under fire from Hua and the Maoist faction of the CCP in a 1971-3 campaign. The campaign first criticized Lin as an "ultra-leftist." It was later changed as Lin was marked a part of the "ultra-Right." He was later linked with Confucius, and then named an "ultra-leftist," again.<sup>21</sup>

Explaining all of this at the regular political discussion meetings in factories, universities, neighborhood associations and production teams taxed the ingenuity of the most loyal and intellectually nimble party activists.<sup>22</sup>

The changing campaigns, the power struggles, and Mao's illness all added to the feelings of instability within the Party. Lin Biao died in 1971 in a mysterious plane crash after an alleged attempt on Mao's life. In the same period 10 out of 21 Politburo members were also purged. This marked a major shift across the board in party leadership. The entire ordeal added to the sense of uncertainty surrounding the CCP, especially the fact that Lin Biao's death was allegedly kept secret for ten months.

Mao died in September 1976 but Deng was only able to return to power when the blame for the April Fifth Movement was placed on the Shanghai Group.<sup>23</sup> Deng had been purged for his

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<sup>21</sup> Gasster, Michael. *China's Struggle to Modernize*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972, 157.

<sup>22</sup> Gasster, 157.

alleged involvement in the movement and could not return to government until his name was cleared. The Shanghai Group was a convenient scapegoat. Immediately after Mao's death, Jiang Qiang and her remaining allies attempted to take power but were purged in an October campaign led by then chairman Hua Guofeng. The Shanghai Group were rebranded that same year as the villainous "Gang of Four," and fell hard from political power and grace. The Gang of Four was tried by the central government and found guilty for mass murder and the various other crimes of the Cultural Revolution. The four party activists "appeared to be the personal mouthpiece and supporter of Chairman Mao and his revolutionary policies, even if they were based in Shanghai."<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, at this time, "other criminal prosecutions were extremely rare, and at the local levels in China it was normal for people to literally get away with murder."<sup>25</sup> Instead everything, local and national, rural and urban, seemed to fall on the shoulders of the Jiang Qiang, Lin Biao and the Gang of Four. The purge of the Gang of Four and Mao's death showed a promise of the end of the government's blind acceptance of radicalism. The Gang of Four ordeal is a prime example of the CCP's use of backroom politics and the manipulation of public opinion through propaganda. As soon as Deng's name was cleared in 1976, his followers in the Party began to push for his return. The fact that Hua Guofeng was ultimately pressured to bring his old political rival back into the Party shows that Deng was well versed in the political games of the CCP.

With the Gang of Four executed for the crimes of Mao, Deng's followers push hard for his reinstatement and he was soon returned to power at the 11<sup>th</sup> National Congress in August, 1977. Soon after Deng was reinstated to his previous positions in the Party began a successful

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<sup>23</sup> Vogel, Ezra. *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011, 196.

<sup>24</sup> Cheng, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Kristof and Wudunn, 75.

ideological campaign to defeat Hua and his followers. “Deng, exploiting the campaign against the gang, initiated a challenge to the cult of Mao that had encouraged uncritical deference to the late Chairman’s expressed preferences.”<sup>26</sup> With the arrest of the Gang of Four, the people began to stop blindly following Mao Zedong Thought. Deng looked to push this questioning of Maoism further in order to take down Chairman Hua. This was not about liberalization, but about defeating Deng’s political enemies. In the campaign, Deng called for a more “malleable,”<sup>27</sup> interpretation of Mao’s teachings in order to move into a new era. Deng reinforced these ideas in his tour of the northeast in the fall of 1978. His speeches criticized Hua and the “Two Whatever’s,” Hua’s call to follow all Mao Zedong’s order posthumously. The people at this time were frustrated with Maoism and ready to support someone who promised change. In going against Hua, Deng was able to ally himself with the people and represent the promise of a better future. This misconception led the people to believe that Deng’s genuinely supported the Democracy Wall in the movement’s early days.

The people supported Deng and spoke against his “rival” Hua through the Democracy Wall in the fall of 1978 and winter of 1979. The Xidan Wall, up until the Third Plenum, “allowed people to give vent to their objections to the errors of Chairman Mao, thus providing Deng more political room to follow a new path without having to take part in the attacks himself.”<sup>28</sup> Hua stood for Maoism, and in attacking Mao, the wall seemed to support Deng. The strange thing is that Deng was securely in power by November of 1978. He may have taken over officially in December 1978, but he had been firmly in the power position before then. One does not simply take spontaneous control of the CCP. To the people, the “rivalry,” between the two politicians was not over at this time and they used the Democracy Wall as a forum to support

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<sup>26</sup> Goldstein, 221.

<sup>27</sup> Goldstein, 221.

<sup>28</sup> Vogel, 256.

Deng Xiaoping and criticize Hua Guofeng. In this way, Deng was able to build an alliance with the people. In reality the power struggle between Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng had all but ended before the Democracy Wall Movement began but Hua represented Maoism and many saw him as a threat. Deng was able to gather support by opposing Hua. The battle between the two political figures was exaggerated by Deng and his followers so that he could gain the support of the people and legitimacy before officially taking over the CCP. Merle Goldman explained their relationship in our interview.

Deng controlled him, he controlled Hua Guofeng. He had no voice whatsoever. Not Hua Guofeng, no way. Other officials, maybe Peng Dehuai, but no, it was just Deng.<sup>29</sup>

Merle Goldman is one of the most renowned experts in the study of Chinese intellectual and political history and the fact that she denies Hua Guofeng's political importance cannot be ignored. Goldman believes that Deng was controlled by Hua which goes along with the theory that the rivalry was exaggerated in order for Deng to gain the support of the people. In the first few months of the Democracy Wall Movement, "there was a sort of symbiosis between Deng and the democrats. But in the long run their interests would necessarily diverge, for Deng was primarily interested in enhancing his political power and promoting economic development."<sup>30</sup>

The wall was beneficial to Deng for a short period and he cracked down on the movement and its activists when they stopped serving his interests.

Supporting the Democracy Wall Movement was a way for Deng to appear more socially liberal than his predecessors. Deng used the Democracy Wall in his ascent to power in order to appear in line with the people. Deng needed to ally himself with the people because he needed their support in order to legitimize his power. The Democracy Wall Movement became an

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<sup>29</sup> Goldman, "Interview with Merle Goldman."

<sup>30</sup> Huang and Seymour, "Introduction," 13.

important tool for Deng to test his relationship with the people and gauge public support. It not only helped him gain public favor as the wall supported him in his “struggles,” against Hua Guofeng but provided a space in which Deng could read examples of general public opinion. Wei Jingsheng, as an intellectual outside of the Party, saw the wall as supporting Deng in his fight against Hua.

There was a very strong internal fight within the Communist Party. The people would generally post big posters on the wall to express disagreement with Hua Guofeng’s policies and the continuation of the two whatevers. The police would come to the wall and tear down the posters. They would also summarize the contents of the posters and report back to Deng Xiaoping. Because of those summaries of the opinions of the people, Deng Xiaoping was able to use it to go against Hua Guofeng in the 11<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party.<sup>31</sup>

It is important to remember that one of the CCP’s greatest historical weapons is the control of information and the spreading propaganda. Despite a few cracks here and there, the Party is mainly able to carefully control the image that it wants to be put out. The Democracy Wall was an important tool for Deng Xiaoping in his rise to power. The movement was an open public forum that Deng could use as an informational source in order to appear to remain allied with the people and get feedback on CCP policy.

In order to solidify his appearance as an agent of change and distance himself from the policies of Mao, Deng began to rehabilitate bureaucrats and intellectuals who had been purged under Mao’s regime. This was also a way for Deng to gain support from intellectuals and distance himself from Mao. Deng and the moderate party faction famously pardoned and released the three young men who had written under the pseudonym Li Yi Zhe. Li Yi Zhe had publicly condemned the Chinese government and legal system as dictatorial and their works

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<sup>31</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

were later republished with Deng's approval in 1979.<sup>32</sup> Peng Zhen, the former mayor of Beijing, was rehabilitated as well to become part of Deng's conservative bureaucrat and was responsible for the creation of a new legal code written in 1978-79. In the spirit of reform, Peng used the slogan, "Everyone is equal under the law," in his new writings, a slogan which he had promoted before the Mao era.<sup>33</sup> This slogan sounds like a call for human rights, and filled activists with hope.

In what seemed to be a new era for intellectuals, dissidents were not always silenced as they were in the Mao era and their families were not in danger when they spoke out.<sup>34</sup> Deng and his rehabilitated moderate bureaucrats printed the writings of intellectuals who had once been silenced or purged because of their criticism of Mao's unreasonable development methods. Essays from zawen writers including Deng Tuo, Wu Han and Liao Mosha were also reprinted under Deng's command. Zawen is a form of Chinese short story characterized by deliberate and shape critiques of society. The most famous historical example of a zawen piece is Lu Xun's *Madman's Diary* which critiques Confucianism and traditional thought by vividly comparing them to cannibalism. Modern zawen writers had been silenced under Mao's regime. Deng Tuo, for example, wrote that Chinese leaders must "seek advice from all sides," and always need "a wide range of knowledge,"<sup>35</sup> when making decisions. Mao, of course, did not agree with Deng Tuo. As Merle Goldman noted, "[Deng Xiaoping] was open to all alternative views, [but] any real threat he thought to the Party, he was totally against."<sup>36</sup> Deng was only open to other points

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<sup>32</sup>Goldman, Merle. *China's Intellectuals: Advice and Dissent*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981, 234.

<sup>33</sup> Goldman, *China's Intellectuals: Advice and Dissent*, 235.

<sup>34</sup>Goldman, Merle. The Reassertion of Political Citizenship in the Post-Mao Era: The Democracy Wall Movement." *Changing Meanings of Citizenship in Modern China*. Eds. Goldman Merle and Elizabeth Perry. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002, Harvard Contemporary China Series, 161.

<sup>35</sup> Goldman, *China's Intellectuals: Advice and Dissent*, 232.

<sup>36</sup> Goldman, "Interview with Merle Goldman."

of view if they did not challenge his power but wanted to promote a reformist image. By rehabilitating Deng Tuo, Deng could distance himself from Mao Zedong by showing that he was willing to take advice from intellectuals.

Deng publicly supported the wall in the first few months of the movement. On November 26, 1978, he discussed the Xidan Wall with a Japanese diplomat, saying, “In the beginning, we made an attempt to stop the campaign. We thought the masses would oppose attempts to use Mao’s name. The leaders were opposed to it and I am not supporting it. But we should not check the demands of the masses to speak.”<sup>37</sup> Deng was careful to align himself with the masses at that point in time through public opinion. Notably, he purposefully added disclaimers to his public support of the movement; these disclaimers are evidence that his support of the wall was purely opportunistic. American reporter John Fraser recorded important observations while in Beijing about the shifting dynamics between the government and the people during the months of the Democracy Wall movement. Fraser observed these dynamics and at the same time acted as a link between the people and the Chinese government by relaying information only available in English. He was present at one of the first rallies at the Democracy Wall held on November 27, 1978.

All the foreign press were there. There were diplomatic observers,’ said Fraser. ‘Next thing I knew they decided the crowd needed to see me. And they picked me up, physically, and put me on the shoulders of a PLA man, the People’s Liberation Army. So I was standing up piggy-backed. And they had three or four people who were translators. And I would say something like, Deng Xiaoping says, and they say, “Deng Xiaoping shuo.” So I said when he was asked of what he thought of the “Xidan Wall, “he said it was good. So this went up, ‘Deng Xiaoping shuo, “Xidan hao!” And the crowd erupted. You would have thought it was May Day. And then I had to continue the quote, ‘But. ‘Keshi.’—suddenly, dead silence, because they knew better than I did that every word was important—but Deng Xiaoping said, ‘Some people were writing something that are wrong on the wall, are antiparty.’ So it was like, Xidan’s good, but watch it.’<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Garside, 223.

<sup>38</sup> Zhu, Helena. "The Legendary Journal of John Fraser." The Epoch Times. 2009.

<<http://www.theepochtimes.com>>.

He continued this line, saying that the wall was generally good but warned the people against pushing too hard against the Party. Later that year in December 1978 during the Third Plenum of the 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee Deng said in his speech that,

The masses should be permitted to put forward opinions. Even if there are some harboring grievances who want to use democracy to stir up trouble that is still nothing to be afraid of – we should deal with it appropriately in the belief that the great majority of the masses can judge right from wrong.<sup>39</sup>

In his speech Deng publicly stated that he was on the same side as the masses but gives a warning that those who push radical ideas too far are nothing but troublemakers. He could not oppose to wall and needed to seem supportive in order to maintain his reformist public image however his indirect warnings to the Democracy Wall activists show that his support was not genuine.

As it grew, the Democracy Wall Movement became a test of this alliance. Deng's relationship with the movement changed as his power position was legitimized by three things, the 1979 Third Plenum, normalization of Sino-U.S. relations and the Chinese involvement in the Vietnam War. When he was firmly in power, he saw the Democracy Wall activists, those who had helped him to power in the first place, as a serious threat. Deng took control of the Party unofficially in November 1978 at the Central Party Work Conference and more officially at the Third Plenum of the 11<sup>th</sup> CPC Central Committee in December 1978. The Third Plenum was marked by large gains by Deng and his cohorts including major changes to the Politburo, the highest ring of the CCP and major losses of power by Cultural Revolution beneficiaries. Deng

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<sup>39</sup> Jiwei, Hu. "Hu Yaobang and the Xidan Democracy Wall," *People's Daily* May 2004. <[www.standofattiananmen.com](http://www.standofattiananmen.com)>.



was able to take power because the majority people still believed in socialism and that the CCP system itself was generally good.

Most of the Chinese people thought that the communist system was good but Mao Zedong ruined it. Deng Xiaoping was able to take power because of these thoughts. Now over thirty years have passed and many have realized that it is the system that has problems. Thirty years ago, Deng Xiaoping said that the system was good but Mao Zedong was not good, so everyone believed him and gave him a chance.<sup>40</sup>

Deng was seen as a symbol of change while Mao was seen as having made mistakes but the system itself was never questioned. Deng was able to take power because he represented open and modern thought. This was how he legitimized his political power: the people wanted change so Deng became the symbol of change. To the public, the politician symbolized a public shift towards moderate politics and away from the politics of the Mao era. Susan Shirk author of *China, Fragile Superpower*, wrote politician was notably “comparatively free of the ideological blinders that had warped policymaking in the Mao era.”<sup>41</sup> At the time, the people of China wanted a change from Mao. Deng was not an extremist, and this itself was promising. However, the public image that Deng put forth in order to quickly gain power was far more socially liberal than his reality. In the 1970s, many people truly believed that Deng meant social change in the form of human rights and democracy. Student activists in Beijing took Deng's political ascendancy as a sign of lessening restrictions in their relations with China and a chance create a new relationship between the government and the people.

Deng seemed to represent social liberalization when what he actually represented was economic liberalization and political normalization. In 1978, Deng introduced market reforms that widely ended central planning and created a market economy. At this time he also opened

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<sup>40</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

<sup>41</sup> Shirk, 18.

China to foreign trade and created special economic zones for foreign investment. The collective farms created under Mao were de-collectivized commencing an era of market competition and profit incentive. This de-collectivization of agriculture created a quick boom of productivity and economic growth. In this new economic era, factories and farms were able to sell surplus good and agriculture (above their planned quota) on the market and keep the profits. The fact that managers now had decision-making power, employees were able to receive bonuses for surplus and other new incentives all added to the large boom in agriculture productivity China experienced in the early Deng era.<sup>42</sup>

Under Deng's leadership, the Party passed reforms to change economy from a centralized socialist economy to a market economy and new policies facilitated rapid economic development.<sup>43</sup> On paper, the people of China began to experience rapid and visible change. For workers in China, wages had stagnated from 1963 to 1976 under the Mao regime. Starting in 1977, as, "propaganda shifted from class struggle to the struggle for production,"<sup>44</sup> incentive pay was brought back and the government vowed to improve the standard of living of its citizens. Wages were readjusted and raised for much of the work force three times between 1977 and 1984.<sup>45</sup> Rising pay and the start of an incentive system did not automatically raise the national standard of living because the price of goods increased with the various wage adjustments. Wei Jingsheng argued in his article "The Fifth Modernization," that "people's living conditions remain and the same and the 'increased wages' are far behind the soaring commodity prices."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Shirk, 18.

<sup>43</sup> Shi, 146.

<sup>44</sup> Walder, Andrew. *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1984, 222.

<sup>45</sup> Walder, 225.

<sup>46</sup> Wei, 47.

In 1976, economic normalization did not mean an instant raise in the standard of living but the start of an incentive system represented a promise that some form of change had come.

The people accepted economic normalization in the form of a capitalist incentive system even though there was not much visible change for the masses. They accepted these new economic terms because they believed in the government system and only understood basic economics through a socialist mindset. The people were excited about economic modernization and the idea of China becoming rich because they believed that if China became rich than all of the people in China would also become rich. This was not exactly the case. As Wei Jingsheng said,

When I was in jail, lots of prison guards would treat me nicely and respectfully but they questioned me, saying that Deng Xiaoping wanted to make China rich, why did I go against him? It's a very natural question they had. At the time, people were sitting on the coattails of the Mao Zedong era. They thought that everything was very equal. Deng Xiaoping wants to make everyone rich, so why not? Average Chinese people were still in the socialist mindset of equally divided property: if we get rich, then we all get rich. That is the basic thought of all the people that supported Deng Xiaoping.<sup>47</sup>

The time of economic modernization was actually marked by wide disparity between those who few who became wealthy and those who did not. Workers, who make up the majority of Chinese society, did not benefit much from Deng's economic reforms. Before Deng's economic reforms and open door policies in 1978, the Chinese economic landscape, although quite bleak, was extremely egalitarian: the Gini coefficient for urban and rural inequality was only 0.16 (with zero being perfectly egalitarian and one as most inequality.)<sup>48</sup> After 1978, the gap between urban and rural incomes began to increase because a select few became wealthy under Deng. The pattern

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<sup>47</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

<sup>48</sup> Jiang, Shixue. "Emerging Income Inequalities in China." September 29 2009. <<http://www.adbi.org/>>.

continued and by 1999, 20% of Chinese households held almost 50% of the wealth while the poorest 20% held less than ten percent.<sup>49</sup> As an economist, Deng had to have predicted this. He told the people a different story in a public interview on November 26, 1979 titled, "We Can Develop a Market Economy under Socialism." In the interview Deng stated that, "Developing a market economy does not mean practising capitalism."<sup>50</sup> At the time the people were blindsided by the reality that economic liberalization and integrating incentives into the market would compromise China's socialist goals of economic equality. Because of the general deep-set socialist mindset, the people could not anticipate the extreme inequalities that would emerge the economic liberalization championed by Deng and Zhao Ziyang, who would eventually rise to General Secretary of Deng's Party because of his views and successes in economic liberalization. The people thought this economic change would create a better form of socialism and that their ideals of economic equality would not be compromised. Two generations shaped by a Maoist mindset could not understand how market economics with individual incentives and price determined by supply and demand inherently created economic inequalities. In reality Deng's economic liberalization ended up unleashing the inequalities that are inherent characteristics of a market based economy. Even if much of the market forces of production and distribution under Deng were still controlled or manipulated by the state it would not be enough to moderate inequality. Knowing this, Deng still led the people to believe that a socialist market economy would not compromise egalitarianism.

Deng's ultimate crackdown on the Democracy Wall immediately after the war is further evidence that his original support of the wall was purely opportunistic. After months of free speech activity in Xidan and various cities around China, the wall was relocated to a monitored

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<sup>49</sup> Jiang, "Emerging Income Inequalities in China."

<sup>50</sup> Xiaoping, Deng. "Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping Vo.2." 1984. <<http://archive.org/>>.

site in March, 1978 on the outskirts of Beijing on the orders of the CCP and thirty activists were arrested for their involvement in the movement. This essentially stopped all poster activities and talks of democracy and a voice for the people. The new wall was surrounded by officials who took down the name and work unit of anyone who attempted to post on the wall.<sup>51</sup> That same year, the Beijing city government announced that, “all slogans, posters, books, magazines, photographs, and other material which oppose socialism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the leadership of the Communist Party, Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought are formally prohibited.”<sup>52</sup> The tone of this announcement was similar to orders given in the Mao era during the Cultural Revolution and the use of the work unit system as a means of control is also a tool leftover from the Mao regime. Wei Jingsheng spoke in our interview about the political significance of the crackdown and his arrest.

The people thought that because Deng Xiaoping was different than Mao Zedong than he would have least have some form of democracy. Moreover, they thought that since Deng Xiaoping had gotten his power from the support of the people, how could he be trying to suppress them? That's why I said that Deng Xiaoping was really stupid because if he wanted to continue to deceive the people, he shouldn't have arrested me. He arrested me and proved that I was right. And now everyone believes me.<sup>53</sup>

The government had given back the rights of political citizenship to the masses, but realized that access to these rights had given the masses too much power. Deng Xiaoping depended on the people in his rise to power but decided that he did not need to support activism and free expression during his term as paramount leader. His original open attitude towards social liberation was nothing but deception.

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<sup>51</sup> Vogel, 256.

<sup>52</sup> Vogel, 256.

<sup>53</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

Deng rose to power on promises of social change. The brief period of social liberalization following Deng's rise to power was short-lived because it was mainly a tool for Deng to gain support and legitimacy from the people. His seemingly open ideologies created an open environment in which people felt safe enough to post and read critical wall posters in public in downtown Beijing. Deng's reform thought and policy and the general CCP shift in ideology marking the final death of the Mao regime created an environment that stirred the first few to hang posters on the Xidan Democracy Wall and helped the intellectuals test their rights in Deng's new era. This promise of change and the beginnings of economic reform were inviting to the Chinese people who were still in the socialist mindset of economic equality. The people took this newfound openness and began to run with it, further than Deng or the CCP originally imagined, beginning to ask for human rights and democracy. In his ascent to power, Deng went to great measures to ensure the people's support but did not actually believe in the need for large social change apart from undoing the damages inflicted by Mao. The freedom and hope the people felt at the Democracy Wall was a false freedom manufactured by Deng for political purposes.

### 3. Intellectualism and Activism in Historical Perspective

The Democracy Wall Movement is often incorrectly labeled as a spontaneous occurrence. Historian Merle Goldman noted in my interview with her that the movement was, “purely spontaneous, it wasn’t organized, it just happened. With Deng Xiaoping coming into power and relaxing controls the students just gathered.”<sup>54</sup> The initial gathering of activists may have seemed like an out of the blue occurrence, but social movements are rarely purely spontaneous. The activists were inspired by Deng’s rise to power but this was not the only factor driving the movement. It cannot truly be called a spontaneous action. The ideas of spontaneity surrounding

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<sup>54</sup> Goldman, "Interview with Merle Goldman."

the movement most likely came from the lack of access to history characterized by the Mao regime. Even though the first few posters were put up by individuals, all of the important publications of the movement were planned by activist organizations. More importantly, looking at the movement through the culturalist approach, one can trace the key historical factors that led the Democracy Wall activists to choose to participate in this movement the way they did. The Democracy Wall activists were all greatly affected by two events, the Cultural Revolution and the 1976 April Fifth Movement. Both the methodology the Democracy Wall activists used and the demands they called for were similar to those in previous historical Chinese social movements. The young activists over the years called for the same ideas in their movements because of the cyclical nature of repression and freedom by the state apparent in the years leading up to the Democracy Wall Movement. The Democracy Wall intellectuals, because of this, called for the same four rights as activists did in the 1919 May Fourth Movement. The Democracy Wall then, cannot be seen as a purely spontaneous act as it owes much to historical events and circumstance.

The Democracy Wall Movement cannot be defined as spontaneous because it was not the first of its kind in modern Chinese history. Before the Democracy Wall Movement there was the student activist based 1919 May Fourth Movement. The May Fourth Movement is a precursor to the Democracy Wall Movement because it was controlled by those outside the political system and its ideology was spread through literature, debate and other intellectual publications. The May Fourth Movement was an anti-imperialist movement primarily led by students and intellectuals. Like the Democracy Wall Movement, the movement was rooted in intellectual populism rather than with intellectuals within the state. The movement took place in the years of the centrally weak Beiyang military government which was overshadowed by various powerful



regional warlords. The May Fourth Movement, like the Democracy Wall Movement, was a test of a new government and a new political era. Students organized and protested, calling for both a boycott of imperialist Japanese goods and a protest against China's unfair treatment in the Treaty of Versailles. The movement encouraged Marxist thought and eventually influenced the rise of the Communist Party. The May Fourth Movement, like the Democracy Wall Movement was both a social and intellectual movement. The movement inspired a generation of literature that was extremely critical of traditionalism. The legacy left by the May Fourth Movement "is a continuing belief on the part of Chinese students and intellectuals that nationalist resistance to a corrupt and weak government is a right and a duty,"<sup>55</sup> a call taken up sixty years later by Democracy Wall activists. Both movements were a way to reclaim the right of expression and to experiment with the ability to speak and even criticize publicly in a repressive era.

The Democracy Wall Movement can be placed in the cycle of repression and relaxation which characterizes the relationship between the Communist Party and populist intellectuals. The modern cycle began with the May Fourth Movement. In the PRC intellectuals had reached a modern era of their own and began to see themselves as responsible to society as a whole rather than just to the state.<sup>56</sup> The CCP's eventual rejection of May Fourth Movement literature initiated the cyclical nature of the changing relationship between the state and intellectuals that affected society and social movements throughout the modern century. The movement itself was a student movement aimed against both imperialism and government corruption. This marked the start of two decades characterized by intellectual criticism against traditional Confucianism and a call for democracy and human rights.

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<sup>55</sup> Shirk, 65.

<sup>56</sup> Goldman, *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994, 23.

The spread of intellectual ideas was possible in the early twentieth century because intellectuals and activists were able to trade and discuss ideas in cafes and put them to print through publishing houses, bookstores and newspapers. Intellectual activism stemming from the ideas of the May Fourth Movement was active for two decades until it was stifled increasingly starting in the 1940s. The Communist Party under Mao feared the power of free intellectual discourse and attempted to stifle and control the language of the intellectuals. In 1949, the CCP began to move to indoctrinate the older and younger intellectuals in Maoist and Marxist-Leninist thought. In doing this the CCP attempted to force the intellectuals to follow the party line but still encouraged them to write, think and publish. As the CCP tried to motivate intellectuals to work and publish but stifle free thought at the same time, it created a cyclical relationship between the state and intellectuals, “which oscillated between periods of repression and briefer periods of relative relaxation.”<sup>57</sup> The next phase to come, the Mao regime, marked a partial relaxation period with the Hundred Flowers movement and a period of repression during the Cultural Revolution. The Hundred Flowers movement, which was followed quickly by the Anti-Rightist campaign, was a campaign in which Mao Zedong encouraged intellectuals to speak out assuming their voices would fall within the Party line. The cycle continued with the Democracy Wall Movement relaxation and its later repression as well as the repression of the Tiananmen Square protests. Two instances of this cyclical intellectual repression that inspired Democracy Wall activists to speak out were the Cultural Revolution and the April Fifth Movement.

The Cultural Revolution and the April Fifth Movement deeply affected Democracy Wall activists. The two historical events were important in leading the activists to the Xidan Wall Movement. The Democracy Wall intellectuals were most directly affected by issues surrounding

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<sup>57</sup> Goldman, *China's Intellectuals: Advice and Dissent*, 9.

the Cultural Revolution era. Some of the methodology used by the activists came from their activities in the Cultural Revolution. More importantly, the individual experiences of the Democracy Wall activists in the Cultural Revolution left them frustrated with the general Chinese government system and wanting change.

The Cultural Revolution was a way to counter any form of intellectual and ideological challenge to Mao's government.<sup>58</sup> Numerous intellectuals and politicians fell from grace and were tortured and imprisoned during Mao's political campaign. With the help of student groups, military support and the Shanghai Group, Mao launched a campaign against his political enemies calling for a, "purge of 'anti-socialist' and 'right opportunist' elements in the party."<sup>59</sup> The CCP used this movement to create a specific campaign against May Fourth intellectuals including Wu Han and Deng Tuo. Deng Tuo had risen in the Communist Party and was the founder and editor in chief of the *People's Daily* and committed suicide after being purged in 1966. It is clear why Mao viewed Deng as a threat,

From his earliest writings in the Nanjing Decade to his last essays in the 1960s, Deng Tuo used Marxist theory to organize a detailed search to uncover the underlying problems in Chinese society and their solutions. In his analysis he consistently expressed his disgust for the ignorant politician- be it complacent Qing mandarin or the flighty activist of the Great Leap Forward.<sup>60</sup>

He was officially charged with parodying Mao in one of his writings. Wu Han was a historian who was attacked for his play, "*Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*." The play tells the story of a Ming official who is imprisoned after criticizing the emperor. One of the Gang of Four accused Deng as using the character of the Ming emperor as a metaphor in order to critique Mao. Mao and his followers used any possible aspect to attack these men because their intellect and

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<sup>58</sup> Goldman, *China's Intellectuals: Advice and Dissent*, 117.

<sup>59</sup> Gasster, 136.

<sup>60</sup> Cheek, Timothy. "Deng Tuo: Leninism and Alternative Marxism in the Chinese Communist Party." *The China Quarterly* 87 (1981): 493.

education posed a potential challenge to his power. Guo Moruo (who often exchanged poems and discussed poetry with Mao himself) was saved from the purge after publishing a self-criticism saying that he should have studied the works of Mao better and worked with peasants in the countryside. Guo famously wrote in his self-criticism that, “writers should work with plough as well as pen.”<sup>61</sup> Guo in this self-criticism acted as the CCP wished all intellectuals would respond to the pressures of the Cultural Revolution, however few did and many continued dissent. The fact that he was saved from the purge shows the politicized nature of Maoist labels; only those deemed a threat to Mao and his government were seriously targeted.

Many of the activists in the Democracy Wall Movement suffered in the Cultural Revolution as sent down youth. As waves of violence and havoc spread throughout China, Mao turned on his own Red Guard and the young urban youth were sent down into the countryside to experience nontraditional socialist education. Urban Chinese students were sent to rural areas to work with the peasants and learn about agriculture and the way of the proletariat. The students were trained in basic medical care to become barefoot doctors in impoverished areas or sent to peasant farms to learn to labor the land. These sent down youth are often referred to as the lost generation because they missed years of regular education while working in the countryside. These experiences in the countryside greatly affected Democracy Wall activists. The students had learned in school that Mao’s socialism was a wonderful thing, but experienced a different reality when living in the countryside. Wei Jingsheng spoke to me about his own experience in the Chinese countryside.

Amongst the youth we had a slogan that we wanted to get to know the true China. We would be the peasants, we would be the workers, we would go to the army, we would get to know rural China and go to the bottom of society in order to do it. Going to the bottom of society

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<sup>61</sup> Goldman, *China’s Intellectuals: Advice and Dissent*, 133.

had a tremendous impact on us as youth because when we went to the countryside, factory and army we saw that the realities were far worse than what our teachers had taught us. From 1976 to 1979 these youth participated in all the political movements including the April 5<sup>th</sup> 1976 movement in Tiananmen as well as the 1979 Democracy Wall Movement.<sup>62</sup>

The students saw poverty and hardship in the countryside and began to question the perfection of socialism and the policies of Mao. The Democracy Wall Movement, a symbol of free speech, later became a place where these students turned activists could share their experiences under Mao, their questions about socialism and their ideas concerning the future of China. The students needed this kind of outlet after their experience in the Cultural Revolution because of its effect on both their futures and their way of thinking.

The second event that directly affected Democracy Wall activists and the people of Beijing in general was the April Fifth Movement of 1976, also known as the 1976 Tiananmen Incident. 1976 marked the first mass demonstration of the era. The demonstration was very political and became the first test of the new post-Mao CCP by the people. It occurred at the memorial for Zhou Enlai at Tiananmen Square. The death of Zhou, a savvy politician and trusted advisor to Mao who was both beloved by the people brought hundreds of mourners to Tiananmen Square. The people hung wreaths in Zhou's honor but there was anger in the air because the people felt that the Party was attempting to undo Zhou's legacy after his death. A poem passed around mourners was titled, "Cherish the Memory of Premier Zhou at Qing Ming," with the message that Zhou's soul cannot rest because the Gang of Four was trying to undo his work.<sup>63</sup> The mourning was not just about loss, it was about politics.

The anger of the mourners was fueled further when they woke up the next morning on April 5 and found that Peking Municipality trucks had driven through the square and removed

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<sup>62</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Garside, 126.

the wreaths left for Zhou Enlai. Protesters who had stayed through the night had tried to stop the trucks had been jailed. As the sun rose, the news spread through the city and people came back to the square. They found the wreaths tossed aside, the poems scrubbed away and guards surrounding Zhou's monument.<sup>64</sup> By early that morning, nearly ten thousand people had gathered and they were frustrated and hurt by the actions of the Party. The square became a place of demonstration instead of peaceful mourning.

One poem circulating during the movement spoke against Mao and echoed the general frustration of the masses. "China is no longer the China of yore, and the people are no longer wrapped in sheer ignorance; gone for good is Chin Shih Huang [China's first emperor, epithet for Mao Zedong]'s feudal society."<sup>65</sup> In a few hours a few young men began to try to burn down a security building. They were blocked but not attacked; the CCP was not fighting back. Night fell, and the military descended on the square. "They blocked the exits to prevent escape. Staves rose and fell. Bodies slumped to the ground. Men screamed in agony. Blood stained the paving stones."<sup>66</sup> Hundreds were sent to prison. The reaction of the government to the movement only further angered intellectuals and activists and encouraged them to continue to speak out. Huang Xiang preserved this anger in the poem, "No You Have Not Died."

"The whole world has seen the anger on your face.  
 Confronted by bayonets and rifle butts,  
 You did not shrink away.  
 Abused and tramped on by wild beasts  
 Without a weapon in your hand  
 You held fast, you would not give in.  
 In a pool of blood, you lay like a hero.  
 No, You are not dead, Tiananmen.  
 And you must not die."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Garside, 129.

<sup>65</sup> Liu, Alan. *Mass Politics in the People's Republic of China*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996, 1.

<sup>66</sup> Garside, 132.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Garside, 134.

The vivid poem was later posted on the Democracy Wall. After the April Fifth Movement, the people needed a place to express their doubts and anger with Mao's government and the current Party's reaction to the April Fifth Movement. The incident in Tiananmen Square was also mentioned in Wei Jingsheng's famous wall poster "The Fifth Modernization," as a starting point for democracy movements in the post Mao era. He wrote, "Baptized by the great and powerful April Fifth Movement, the Chinese people will, with an indomitable fighting spirit, welcome Beijing spring's hundred flowers."<sup>68</sup> The Tiananmen Square incident had been a hit against the people, but also added to the general frustration and anger felt by many in this time. The people of China, for the first time since the Communists rose to power, came together and questioned the past and the present of their nation. The movement became a starting point for the Democracy Wall and the movements that followed it.

The methodology used in the Democracy Wall Movement was also directly taken from historical Chinese social movements. The main methods used by Democracy Wall activists were the use of dazibao and the self-publication of political journals. The use of dazibao as a method of communication was borrowed from the activist's past experiences as Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution from Red Guard youth groups. Though such posters were used for many reasons throughout Chinese history, their prominent use in the Democracy Wall Movement was a sign that the Xidan activists were repeating tactics first learned in the Cultural Revolution. Mao encouraged the people to uphold the so-called "Four Big Freedoms," in 1975. These freedoms included the rights to speak freely, hold debates and the right to write and display dazibao or large character posters. Of course, in 1975, and the "freedoms," were tightly controlled by Mao and the Party and the people could only use dazibao to transmit Mao's own messages. The Red

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<sup>68</sup> Wei, Jingsheng. "The Fifth Modernization." *The Fifth Modernization: China's Human Rights Movement, 1978-1979*. Ed. James Seymour. Stanfordville, New York: Human Rights Publishing Group, 1980, 48.

Guard use of dazibao, public demonstration and ideological propaganda through literature, labeling, and indirect political references are similar to those seen in posters on the Xidan Wall.

The Democracy Wall activists published independent journals as a method to spread their ideas. The use of publication, rhetoric, and the encouragement of an intellectual community are taken from historical movements including the May Fourth Movement. The Democracy Wall movement used these intellectual journals to spread their ideas throughout China. These publications were an important in spreading the voices of the Democracy Wall Movement activists.

The movement's collective identity was therefore closely tied to the activities it was engaged in, namely, editing and publishing journals and organizing rallies. It was also seen in the way the activists did not want to establish a tightly organized and closely led broad-based mass movement, although some letters insisted they do so.<sup>69</sup>

The numerous activist publications published as posters on the Democracy Wall included *Exploration*, the Chinese Human Rights League, *Beijing Spring*, *April Fifth Forum*, the Enlightenment Society, The Thaw Society, *Today*, [and] *Masses' Reference News*. The paper and ink the activists needed to print posters and journals was controlled by the government. The activists had to use connections and the black market in order to get these illegal tools. Wei Jingsheng and his group of followers used these means to publish their magazine *Exploration*.

In those days in China it was not easy to form a magazine. We had to hand carve the original copies of our articles and then use ink to print the magazines by hand one by one. Even in those days, printing machines were strictly controlled by the government. There were only printing machines in government offices and schools. Both paper and ink were controlled by the government, individuals could not buy it themselves. Fortunately, in those days we had our back doors, so we were able to purchase the paper and the ink that we weren't supposed to have. We would secretly smuggle the printing machine out of the school and we were able to print our magazines. It just so happened that two of four people in our group had a lot of connections. Mr.

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<sup>69</sup> Paltemaa, 467.



Yang Guo was a teacher in a school so he was able to smuggle the machine for our use. Mr. Liu Ding had lots of social connections in society so he was able to contact the right people to buy ink and paper.<sup>70</sup>

The self-publishing of journals at the time of the Democracy Wall had to be highly organized. Publishing these journals was extremely difficult. Activists worked to publish these journals out of historical necessity rather than practicality. These kind of journals have been used in historical Chinese social movements. The spreading of ideas through publication was important in the May Fourth Movement as well but a weak central government in 1919 allowed activists, students and intellectuals to openly organize a movement and form literary societies. The backbone of the May Fourth Movement was the New Culture Movement, a literary movement led by figures such as Lu Xun and Mao Dun. The literature from the movement called for women's liberation, democratic values, a reevaluation of China's place in the world as a nation and a reanalysis of Confucian values. Activists and intellectuals published literary and political works in journals and magazines including a magazine called, "The Communist Party." The Democracy Wall Movement was similar in its dependency on publication to expand the influence of the original activists.

The activists in the Democracy Wall movement generally called for the same four demands as intellectuals and activists in earlier Chinese social movements. The fact that the Democracy Wall takes many themes from historical movements is further proof that it was not a purely spontaneous event. In *Mass Politics in the People's Republic*, Alan Liu theorizes that student and youth mass movements in China over four decades each called for a variation on the same four themes. Over the generations since the May Fourth Movement students have called for the same four demands from the Chinese government. The first value, according to Liu is

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<sup>70</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

“liberal values of constitutionalism, civil liberties, representation and mass participation,”<sup>71</sup> based on students’ wishes to be incorporated into a new political system. In the early 1950s, students saw the promise of this liberalism in the Communist Party. Decades later, the 1974 Li Yi Zhe (written by three young men who were subsequently imprisoned) poster, a precursor to the Democracy Wall Movement, “Concerning Socialist Democracy and the Legal System,” called for liberal values among educated youth. The second value is the achievement of, “an egalitarian and just society.” Liu sees this value as a natural part of the, “universal tension between the young and the established order.”<sup>72</sup> Students called for these values in the May Fourth Movement, and again in the Cultural Revolution by speaking out against a bureaucratic class they perceived as unjust. The third values that students call for is free expression. This has been an important part of almost every youth protest movement since the mid-1950s. Since the Mao era students have used the Party’s tight controls on speech as a rallying point for social movements and activism. Students continuously call for rights to display dazibao, publish unofficial journals and organize groups. Liu cites the Red Guard student movement, followed by the Li Yi Zhe group and post-Democracy Wall activist movements as examples of this.<sup>73</sup> The fourth value that students call for is modernism marked by, “professionalism, meritocracy and achievement-orientation.”<sup>74</sup> In the Democracy Wall Movement, this demand came the Party’s inability to fit intellectuals and students into class categories from the Party during the Cultural Revolution.

The Democracy Wall intellectuals, despite the existence of factions, called for similar values once seen in historical mass movements in China. The first historical value is liberal

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<sup>71</sup> Liu, 143.

<sup>72</sup> Liu, 144.

<sup>73</sup> Liu, 145.

<sup>74</sup> Liu, 145.

values including a voice in the system and constitutionalism. In “The Fifth Modernization,” Wei Jingsheng wrote that,

People should have democracy. When they ask for democracy, they are only demanding what is rightfully theirs. Anyone refusing to give it to them is a shameless bandit no better than a capitalist who robs their workers of their money earned with their sweat and blood.<sup>75</sup>

Wei’s call for democracy was echoed in numerous wall posters and publications. Han Zhixiong calls for democracy in a similar fashion in the poster, “Democracy in Economic Management.” “Ours is a socialist country, and the state belongs to the people. But to really have it this way, we must have democracy.”<sup>76</sup> The second value is justice in society and anti-bureaucracy. Wei Jingsheng also mentions this value in “Fifth Modernization.”

Well, today’s privileged class get to see foreign movies and live like gods. Such a life-style is quite inaccessible to ordinary folk. All want prosperity, the kind of prosperity which is universal and which can only result from increased social productive forces.<sup>77</sup>

A Xidan wall poster titled, “The People Lack Housing,” touches on a similar theme. “While the people in Beijing have a housing shortage/Mansions are being built [for officials] on Zhong-nan-hai!”<sup>78</sup> The third historical value is free expression. The “Human Rights League” intellectual group published a poster calling for the decriminalization of free speech and thought.<sup>79</sup> The fourth historical value is modernization through education and achievement based social mobility. This mainly took the form of the denunciation of the Mao era emphasis on class status. *Beijing Spring* published the story of a man, who attempted to kill himself because of bad class

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<sup>75</sup> Wei, “The Fifth Modernization,” 47.

<sup>76</sup> Zhixiong, Han. “Democracy in Economic Management.” *The Fifth Modernization: China's Human Rights Movement, 1978-1979*. Ed. James Seymour. Stanfordville, New York: Human Rights Publishing Group, 1980, 162.

<sup>77</sup> Wei, “The Fifth Modernization,” 51.

<sup>78</sup> “The People Lack Housing”, *The Fifth Modernization: China's Human Rights Movement, 1978-1979*. Ed. James Seymour. Stanfordville, New York: Human Rights Publishing Group, 1980. Print, 147.

<sup>79</sup> “Nineteen Points: Human Rights League,” *The Fifth Modernization: China's Human Rights Movement, 1978-1979*. Ed. James Seymour. Stanfordville, New York: Human Rights Publishing Group, 1980, 83.

status. “Because of the wrong classification of his family, he sought an audience with the authorities many times but got nowhere, and he was even detained. Desperate, he tried to commit suicide by setting fire to himself.”<sup>80</sup> These four historical values are echoed in numerous wall posters by both leading activists and anonymous posters showing that the Democracy Wall movement leaders owed much to history.

The Democracy Wall Movement itself, the methodology of the movement and the circumstances of the activists was deeply and clearly influenced by historical Chinese events. Because of this, it cannot be defined as spontaneous. The Democracy Wall Movement borrows much from the May Fourth Movement. The many parallelisms between the two movements show that the Democracy Wall is an important part of the Chinese cycle of repression and relaxation that defines the modern relationship between intellectuals and the state. The movement borrowed four important themes from historical social movements, showing the heavy influence of history on the Democracy Wall Movement. Even the methodology used in the Democracy Wall Movement was taken from Chinese historical social movements including the May Fourth Movement and the Cultural Revolution and the May Fourth Movement. The methods were not the easiest to pull off at the time, because self-publishing, paper and ink were all illegal and difficult to obtain therefore activists only used these methods because of historical necessity.

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<sup>80</sup> “Document 33: Family Background, Beijing Spring.” *The Fifth Modernization: China's Human Rights Movement, 1978-1979*. Ed. James Seymour. Stanfordville, New York: Human Rights Publishing Group, 1980, 149.

#### 4. Pluralism in Practice: The Democracy Wall Activists

The third assumption found in studies of the Democracy Wall Movement is that the intellectuals of the movement shared the same goals and viewed the movement through a common lens. This misconception stems partially from the fact that different activists were arrested for the same crime. It is important to note that different factions of activists viewed the movement differently and there was no common front among activists. The rationalist side of the Democracy Wall Movement examines the ideas of rational choice theory and collective action. To study this, one must look at the organizers of the Democracy Wall and determine their role as rational actors by looking into historical factors and the players own backgrounds. The rationalist side of the analysis must determine why these particular actors and organizers decided to participate in the Democracy Wall Movement in the different ways that they did. Despite a similar shared history in the Cultural Revolution, the activists of the movement did not share the same mindset. Hardship does not affect everyone in the same way and activism itself has many definitions. Much of the literature of the Democracy Wall does not examine factionalism apparent in the movement and why it was important. Some note that this incohesiveness ultimately weakened the movement because a lack of a strong singular voice. I think that the plurality of the movement is what made it notable in the first place: the Democracy Wall was a

place where everyone could be heard, not just the elite. Every voice in Xidan influenced the movement in a different way.

The Cultural Revolution affected Democracy Wall activists in different ways. In order to better understand the movement itself it is important to examine the different intellectual factions composing the movement. To examine the influence of factionalism in shaping the movement I will examine the role and importance of five of the many Democracy Wall Movement factions. The first is the political dissenters, led by democracy fighter and founder of *Exploration*, Wei Jingsheng. Wei and his small group of followers saw the wall as an act of political rebellion and were willing to die for their radical posters. Their impact on the movement was great and was one of the reasons why many were arrested after Deng's crackdown on the wall. The second is the activist artist faction led by Huang Xiang, the founder of *Enlightenment*. Huang and many of his fellow artists saw that movement as one of pure expression, spiritualism and humanism. These ideals inspired many to post on the wall as an act of expression, helping the movement grow. The middle line was represented by *Beijing Spring*. The organizers of the journal added an important, moderate voice to the movement which was relatable to both the masses and Party officials. Yet another faction comes from the older generation of intellectuals within the Party who were rehabilitated by Deng. These bureaucrats feared a new dictatorship and fought Deng on the subject of the Democracy Wall crackdown. The last group I will examine is the general public who used the wall for practical means rather than intellectual activity.

Generally speaking, in the post-Mao era there were three generations of intellectuals. The intellectuals of the older generation, composed of intellectuals over the age of fifty, were among those persecuted in the Cultural Revolution. As Deng took power, he pardoned intellectuals

purged by Mao and asked them for advice at the start of the reform era.<sup>81</sup> The intellectuals were eager to respond with guidance, criticism and ideas. These intellectuals took advantage of their newly attained status to promote reform from the top down using “ideological revisions, political discourse, [and] high-level patronage.”<sup>82</sup> Hu Yaobang is an example of a member of this generation. Hu had experienced hardship in the Cultural Revolution as he was purged multiple times alongside Deng and then rose to power in the Party as Deng was rehabilitated, working from the inside to promote reform. The youngest generation of intellectuals, in comparison, was in their late teens and early twenties. The younger intellectuals were too young to have been affected strongly by the events of the Cultural Revolution but were important in later democracy movements.

The middle generation of intellectuals was most responsible for the Democracy Wall Movement. The smallest section of intellectuals, this was the generation of the Cultural Revolution. The middle generation was unique in their independent political activities and experience during Cultural Revolution. The intellectuals in this generation were often Red Guards, sent-down youth and barefoot doctors (sent down youth trained in basic first aid), or prisoners detained in reform labor camps. In the Cultural Revolution, “Intellectuals and students suffered exile to physical labor in remote places, while the closing of schools created what has come to be called a ‘lost generation.’”<sup>83</sup> Many of these intellectuals were rejected from think tanks and government organizations because of their Cultural Revolution pasts. Because of their either Maoist or deviant backgrounds, most were essentially banned from official positions in the post Mao era and had to attempt political reform from the grassroots level. The Democracy Wall

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<sup>81</sup> Goldman, Merle. “The Emergence of Politically Independent Intellectuals.” *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*. Eds. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999. 283-307, 291.

<sup>82</sup> Goldman, “The Emergence of Politically Independent Intellectuals,” 291.

<sup>83</sup> Gasster, 148.

became a place for middle intellectuals to form their own institutions that were not responsible to the state.

These middle intellectuals and the Chinese people in general during the post Mao era were excited at the promise of reform and angered by over the horrors of the past decades. The Mao regime affected different Chinese citizens in different ways. Many experienced hardships including persecution, loss of job, social standing, privacy, face, property and loss of loved ones. A massive scar left from the Mao regime was the Great Leap Forward of 1961. Millions died in the famine, which was blamed on flooding, not on irresponsible economic planning. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, four years, later, intellectuals were sent to the countryside to do physical labor, neighborhoods were ravaged by Red Guards and many lost everything. The citizens of China suffered as political rights were nonexistent under Mao and the Party controlled the everyday lives of the people forcing a routine of “compliance rather than citizenship.”<sup>84</sup> The intellectuals and the majority of people were angry. “In the post-Mao era, intellectuals once again attempted to assert the right to participate in political decision-making and express political views.”<sup>85</sup> The Democracy Wall was a manifestation of the people’s need for both an outlet and a way to express their political citizenship in order to reclaim it from Mao’s CCP.<sup>86</sup>

The anti-authority ideals instilled in Mao-era youth lived on into the next political era through these middle generation activists. Mao’s work to create groups of Red Guard followers created dissidents used to fighting direct authority. The activists of the Democracy Wall Movement were young and intelligent youth who had suffered under Mao’s regime. Young, bright and angry, these intellectuals found the Democracy Wall Movement a way to share ideas in a changing political climate and to test the new post-Mao establishment. The movement

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<sup>84</sup> Goldman, *The Reassertion of Political Citizenship in the Post-Mao Era: The Democracy Wall Movement*,” 160.

<sup>85</sup> Goldman, *The Reassertion of Political Citizenship in the Post-Mao Era: The Democracy Wall Movement*.” 160.

<sup>86</sup> Goldman, *The Reassertion of Political Citizenship in the Post-Mao Era: The Democracy Wall Movement*.” 160.



represents the rising tension between the people and the state as the nation entered a new era. For the majority of the people, the Xidan Wall represented an outlet to express frustration with the past, but for a select group of activists the wall was an act of open rebellion.

Stopping here and accepting the Democracy Wall Movement activists as part of the uniform middle generation of intellectuals is a problematic viewpoint. We must also examine the actual factions in order to better understand the movement. The most daring political faction of the movement was led by Wei Jingsheng. Wei has been described by journalist Nicolas Kristof as the “boldest and most farsighted of the young dissidents in the Democracy Wall movement.”<sup>87</sup> Interestingly, Wei was not involved in the start of the movement. After the Cultural Revolution he worked as an electrician in the Beijing Zoo and did not want to become involved with politics. He was not driven to post his first and most famous wall poster, “The Fifth Modernization,” until December 1978, about three months into the movement. The event that inspired Wei to post “The Fifth Modernization,” was a meeting that Deng Xiaoping had with American journalist Robert Novak at the end of November in 1978. In the meeting Deng told Novak that the activists at the Democracy Wall should stop posting and focus on their own work and the Party would deal with the politics. Some of the activists, after the interview, agreed and decided to go back to work, abandoning the Democracy Wall.<sup>88</sup> This was an important turning point for Wei Jingsheng. He said that,

This made all the people in Beijing, including myself, very angry. My co-workers in my work unit would say things like, look, we the Chinese are so useless, only after a few days, as soon as the top leader says to shut up, we are ready to be silent. They said things like the Chinese are hopeless, the Chinese have a soft backbone and they do not dare to speak up. That stimulated me. I wanted to show that not all Chinese had soft backbones. So, one night I wrote

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<sup>87</sup> Kristof and Wudunn, 107.

<sup>88</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

“Fifth Modernization,” and posted it early in the morning on the Democracy Wall.<sup>89</sup>

Wei is most known for writing, “The Fifth Modernization.” It became a significant turning point in the movement. Most intellectuals stayed within the lines, praising the current government, criticizing the past, and calling for minor reform while Wei directly criticized the Communist political system his wall poster which:

After the arrest of the Gang of Four, people eagerly hoped that Vice-Chairman Deng, the so-called “restorer of capitalism,” would once again appear as a great towering banner. Now, Vice-Chairman Deng did return to his post on the Central Committee. The people were indeed excited, inspired and... [sic]. However, to the people’s regret, the hated old political system has not changed, and even any talk about the much hoped for democracy and freedom is forbidden.<sup>90</sup>

The title of the post was a play on Zhou Enlai’s Four Modernizations program currently being carried out by Deng and the CCP. The four modernizations referred to reforms in agriculture, industry, science and military. In Wei’s “Fifth Modernization,” he adds another reform to the list: democracy. “What is true democracy? It means the right of the people to choose their own representatives to work according to their will and in their interests. Only this can be called democracy.”<sup>91</sup> Wei refers to the current state as the enemy of democracy and of the people. “Would the enemies be willing to let us practice democracy? Certainly not. They will stop at nothing to hinder the progress of democracy, to deceive and hoodwink the people.”<sup>92</sup> The poster became an important turning point in the movement because it allowed Wei to gather followers. The group of activists led by Wei were then able to influence the movement with the publication of the magazine *Exploration*.

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<sup>89</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

<sup>90</sup> Wei, 47.

<sup>91</sup> Wei, 52.

<sup>92</sup> Wei, 54-55.

Wei and his group of activists were extremely bold. They believed that the nation needed major changes in the political system and were willing to die for their essays and ideas. When Wei first posted “The Fifth Modernization,” he included his name and phone number on the poster. He received many calls and organized a meeting of over a dozen people interested in forming an organization. Wei told me the story of how he found the first members of *Exploration*.

I told the dozen people who came that I would give them three days to consider and that if they really wanted to do this, they must be prepared to lose their head. In the end, only three people decided to follow me. These were the earliest members of the *Exploration* magazine. Because we had this readiness to be killed we were the boldest, we were not reserved and that’s exactly why we spoke our mind. Our magazine became the most popular magazine in the Democracy Wall Movement.<sup>93</sup>

This willingness to die for their political views is an important factor that set Wei’s faction apart from other activists and intellectuals involved in the Democracy Wall Movement. Because *Exploration* was the most daring publication, it became one of the most popular publications. Wei explained to me in our interview that as soon as they had a new issue out a huge crowd would gather and it would be sold out in seconds. People would then hand copy the magazine to spread it further.<sup>94</sup> “It is very interesting,” he said, “because in those days, every day there were lots of big posters so people often disputed what should be kept up. One of the members of *Exploration* was eventually chosen to decide which articles must be kept and which could be covered.”<sup>95</sup> If this is true, Wei’s group had considerable control over the content of the wall. They also had plans to push the movement further and join other activist organizations together to begin to create a more cohesive movement. He said,

I think that at the time what Deng Xiaoping and the Communist Party

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<sup>93</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

<sup>94</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

<sup>95</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

were most scared of was the existence of a little center of authority in civil society which is not under the control of the Communist Party. We had decided that we would have an organization to unite all of the people and the different organizations. We already had a name: The Coalition. That is exactly what the communists feared the most.<sup>96</sup>

Deng Xiaoping shut the wall down before this cohesiveness could happen. Wei was correct in his claim that a coalition of activists is what Deng feared the most. His bold followers saw the movement as extremely politically and were not afraid to rise up against the current system. For them, the movement was an act of open political rebellion.

Wei Jingsheng was arrested and imprisoned for his essay, “Deng Xiaoping: Democracy or Dictatorship.” The article was posted on the wall in March 1979, three days before the wall was shut down and Wei was sent to prison along with other leading activists.

In the third issue, we had a special extra: an article which I wrote titled “Deng Xiaoping: Democracy or Dictatorship?” In the article I wrote that Deng Xiaoping wanted to be a dictator. On the third day after the publication of article I was arrested. People often have the impression that I was arrested on the third day after the Fifth Modernization but it was actually the third day after the other famous article, Deng Xiaoping: Democracy or Dictatorship?<sup>97</sup>

It is interesting that many put forth the image that Wei was arrested for, “The Fifth Modernization,” which was a direct call for democracy. Contrary to how the story is often told, Wei was arrested in March shortly after he published the essay, “Deng Xiaoping: Democracy or Dictatorship?” in which he surmised that Deng Xiaoping wanted to be the new dictator of China. This distinction is important because the story is often twisted, especially in America, to make it seem like Wei’s call for democracy is what led to his imprisonment. An example of this misleading rhetoric can be found on a brief biography of Wei on the George W. Bush Freedom Institute.

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<sup>96</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

<sup>97</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

In 1978, he wrote an essay called “The Fifth Modernization: Democracy” and posted it in a place that had come to be called Democracy Wall. Unlike most pro-freedom authors in China during that time, Wei signed his name to “The Fifth Modernization,” which was a direct challenge to the Beijing government’s strategy of instituting economic reforms while continuing to suppress political dissent. Wei was soon arrested on the charge of being “counter-revolutionary” and served more than 18 years in prison, including several years in forced labor camps and eight years on death row.<sup>98</sup>

This story has been spread in America, most likely for propaganda reasons. At the 1999 Population Research Institute’s conference titled Human Rights in China: 50 Years Later author Steve Mosher said in a speech that, “History will decide who in China has committed criminal acts. Democratic activist Wei Jingsheng, whose only offense was calling for democracy, or those who unlawfully imprisoned him for 20 years.”<sup>99</sup> Despite the Population Research Institute’s extreme stance on China, Steve Mosher has earned credibility as a China expert. In this case however, he continues to spread a false narrative. Wei was not arrested for asking for democracy and human rights but for his direct criticism of Deng and the Party system. I am not defending the Party’s imprisonment of Wei but the clarification is important to understand the tone of the movement and its crackdown. “Deng Xiaoping: Democracy or Dictatorship?” pushed the movement to a more extreme angle in criticizing Deng and his government. Wei’s writings represented the more political faction of Democracy Wall activists whose influence shaped the movement into a daring and radical critique of the Communist system. In the end, he was imprisoned for almost eighteen years for his political publications and involvement in the movement.

Huang Xiang represented a different faction of intellectuals. Huang was a poet and to him the Democracy Wall Movement was about artistic expression and humanism. He saw the

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<sup>98</sup> "Why I Became a Dissident- Wei Jingsheng: Biography." July 2010. <<http://www.freedomcollection.org>>.

<sup>99</sup> "PRI's International Conference: Human Rights in China: 50 Years Later." *PR Review*. 1999. Population Research Institute. <<http://www.pop.org>>.

Democracy Wall Movement as a renaissance for Chinese art and culture, not as a platform for politics. He summarized his viewpoint in my recent interview with him outlining about his original hope for the movement to become an aesthetic and humanistic one.

My democracy involvement was different than many others at the time. Many of the others were more politically aggressive. I wanted to be a model for the renaissance of oriental art and use this model to push forward democracy. Democracy for me is not always a medium for words but for calligraphy, for painting and for art. The media saw the Democracy Wall for its political meaning but I think there is more value in looking at the art in the Democracy Wall... I think the Democracy Wall movement is only about self-expression, but the government thought regarded it as a subversive movement, so it became suppressed. It is misunderstood.<sup>100</sup>

Huang wrote poetry continuously during the Cultural Revolution. Left without a place to publish his work, he journeyed to Beijing to self-publish his collection. His posters inspired others and started the Democracy Wall Movement: the movement was originally born out of poetry rather than out of politics.

Huang had suffered during the Cultural Revolution. His father had been a general in the KMT army and his grandparents had been landlords, giving Huang a black class status. His class status marked him as an enemy of the revolution and was denied education as a youth. He wrote poetry in secret from a young age, occasionally getting in trouble because poetry had been declared rightest by Mao. Huang was wrongly imprisoned as a youth when villagers accused him of putting poison in a local well. He was merely a curious youth and who had seen a dead fish in the well and wanted to examine it. The villagers locked him in a local temple until the water was tested and forced him to wear the kind of dunce cap common in the Cultural Revolution with, “Anti-Revolutionary Poisoner,” written on it.<sup>101</sup> In this story Huang wanted to explore the world

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<sup>100</sup> Huang, Xiang, and Jiajing Lily Sun. "Interview with Huang Xiang." Personal interview. 23 Feb. 2013.

<sup>101</sup> Huang and Sun. "Interview with Huang Xiang."

around him and he was wrongly imprisoned. When speaking with him, I realized that the story about his curiosity over the dead fish in the well serves as a striking metaphor for his later imprisonment for his actions in the Democracy Wall Movement.

Huang struggled to publish his poems in the 1950s. During the Great Leap Forward, Huang traveled to the western plains of China and wrote poetry.<sup>102</sup> He was arrested for writing poetry and imprisoned in a labor camp when he was seventeen years old. After his release, he was sent to back to labor camps multiple times for his poetry. An example of his poetry written before 1970 and published on the Democracy Wall is “Wild Beasts”:

I am a wild beast hunted down  
I am a captured wild beast  
I am a wild beast trampled by wild beasts  
I am a wild beast trampling wild beasts

Even though barely a bone is left  
I want this detestable age to choke on me<sup>103</sup>

The language and imagery in “Wild Beasts,” is powerful, evoking feelings of capture, violence and helplessness. This kind of writing is what sent Huang to Chinese prison five different times and to death row twice. Huang, as an artist, did not mean for his poems to be exclusively political. He admitted to me that politics was one factor in his writing, but it was only a small factor and that he was “trying to pursue freedom in every aspect of life, some of my activities were political, but that is only one aspect of my personality.”<sup>104</sup> He was much more interested in examining the ideas of shared human nature and how Daoist philosophies emphasize both the connection of all things and the sanctity of individual expression. In my interview Huang explained his poetry in contrast to the more political posters on the Democracy Wall,

<sup>102</sup> "Huang Xiang, a brief biography." International Cities of Refuge Network. April 2007. <<http://www.icorn.org>>.

<sup>103</sup> Li, Dian. "A Bilingual Edition of Poetry out of Communist China." Ohio State University: MCLC Resources Center Publication. 2005. <<http://mclc.osu.edu>>.

<sup>104</sup> Huang and Sun. "Interview with Huang Xiang."

My poems were very different than others at the time, the others were acting collectively but my work was about individuality. Because I was writing poems about individuality, officials thought it was subversive and about being different from the other working class people, but my true meaning is basically saying that I feel very lonely in this natural environment and I wanted to integrate myself into nature, it is not a political implication.<sup>105</sup>

Huang's poems were misinterpreted as political and inspired an entire movement. His own interpretation of his work is further proof that the Democracy Wall Movement meant different things to different individuals or groups of activists. He did not see his actions as subversive because poetry for Huang was a form of pure self-expression and nothing else. The political component of his poetry was small compared to his musings on Daoism and individuality but was emphasized due to the politicized nature of the Democracy Wall Movement.

After failed attempts to publish his poetry and multiple imprisonments in the 1970s, Huang decided to travel to Beijing in order to self-publish his poems. Huang said that,

I always dreamed about very expansive grasslands. I dreamed of freedom. I dreamed about natural landscapes but it contrasted with the reality of my imprisonment. Then, the government prohibited me from officially publishing my poems so I went to Beijing to publish them myself. This is how the Democracy Wall came up. I needed a space for my poems and artwork.<sup>106</sup>

On October 11, 1978 Huang and his friends put posters up in the middle of downtown Beijing on Wangfujing Avenue. Huang later wrote that he and his friends had "'set fire,' on Wangfujing Avenue in Beijing,"<sup>107</sup> that night. One of the poems Huang and his friends posted up was Huang's poem, "The Fire God Symphony." A line from the poem read,

Ah, God of Fire, God of Fire  
You have come, come, come.

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<sup>105</sup> Huang and Sun, "Interview with Huang Xiang."

<sup>106</sup> Huang and Sun, "Interview with Huang Xiang."

<sup>107</sup> Huang, Xiang, *Poet on Fire Inside of Communist China*.



You have ignited throughout the sky to save the world<sup>108</sup>

The line is appropriate as Huang's poetry became the spark that started the movement. The people were curious about Huang's dazibao. A crowd soon gathered, causing traffic to stop. Ignited by the support and energy, Huang read his six hundred line poem out loud to the large crowd.<sup>109</sup> Huang wrote that, "This first batch of posters lit a spark for seeking enlightenment and freedom in Communist China. We founded and published the first independent periodical, called *Enlightenment*, and staged a poetic campaign to advocate human rights and freedom of expression."<sup>110</sup> Huang did not say anything about Deng or the Communist system as he was more interested in the spread of personal and aesthetic values.

Huang and his friends returned this time to a site near Tiananmen Square and Mao Zedong's mausoleum. Huang brushed up two dazibao onto a fence, the first reading, "The Cultural Revolution Must Be Reevaluated," and the second reading, "Mao Zedong was thirty percent right and seventy percent wrong!"<sup>111</sup> Crowds of people lined up to visit the mausoleum that same day saw these posters that were at the time, extreme. I asked Huang whether or not this moment was an act of political rebellion:

I was against the authoritarian system at the time, but it is not merely about politics. The French Enlightenment, French Revolution, May Fourth Movement are not essentially political movements but about the expression of human beings in terms of art and writing. The basic meaning is not politics.<sup>112</sup>

Huang Xiang and his likeminded followers saw themselves as part of an artistic renaissance instead of a political movement. He said that at the time he felt that he could express

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<sup>108</sup> Huang, Xiang. "The God of Fire." Ed. James Seymour. Stanfordville, New York: Human Rights Publishing Group, 1980, 276.

<sup>109</sup> Huang, *Poet on Fire Inside of Communist China*.

<sup>110</sup> Huang, *Poet on Fire Inside of Communist China*.

<sup>111</sup> Huang, *Poet on Fire Inside of Communist China*.

<sup>112</sup> Huang and Sun, "Interview with Huang Xiang."

himself because he believed in Buddhist philosophies that teach that everyone is equal and therefore people should not fear each other.<sup>113</sup> The wall was soon moved to Chang'an Road in the Xidan neighborhood of Beijing, and factions of activists began to organize themselves into groups and publish journals. Huang and his followers published the magazine *Enlightenment* and formed the Enlightenment Society in November, 1978. The Enlightenment Society, as written in their first announcement in *Enlightenment* "resolutely supports the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist system," but pled for "socialist democracy and human rights."<sup>114</sup> This marks a wide divide between Wei Jingsheng and Huang Xiang. Wei Jingsheng and *Exploration* were militantly against the Communist system while Huang Xiang searched for space for expression within the system. Huang's poetry was twisted into political statements, and he was subsequently sent to prison because of the politicized nature of the Democracy Wall movement. Huang Xiang spent a total of twelve years in jail for political dissent and continued to write poetry despite the threat of death row. His work is now banned in China and he resides in the United States as a political refugee. Huang first moved to Philadelphia with the help of the United States government and a literature refugee program. In his first home in the United States, Huang painted the outside of his house with calligraphic poetry in a celebration of self-expression and freedom.

The middle line is best represented by *Beijing Spring*. *Beijing Spring* was an influential mouthpiece of the middle generational intellectuals in the Post-Mao era, however it is known as the least 'dissident' of the Democracy Wall underground journals.<sup>115</sup> The magazine was influential because it was able to print almost ten thousand copies per issues because of aid from

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<sup>113</sup> Huang and Sun, "Interview with Huang Xiang."

<sup>114</sup> Huang, Xiang, et al. "Document 9: Enlightenment Society." Ed. James Seymour. Stanfordville, New York: Human Rights Publishing Group, 1980, 39.

<sup>115</sup> Huang, Mab, and Seymour, 17.

the government's Foreign Press League and was rumored to be supported by Deng Xiaoping.<sup>116</sup>

A document from the journal posted on the Democracy Wall reads, "We must break down modern feudalism and modern superstition and gradually acquire socialist democracy and modern science."<sup>117</sup> This idea comes almost directly from Deng Xiaoping Thought and is less radical than a call for human rights and direct democracy. *Beijing Spring* "supports the Chinese Communist Party, adheres to the socialist path, and follows Comrade Mao Zedong's policy of 'a hundred flowers blossoming and a hundred schools of thought contending.'"<sup>118</sup> If *Beijing Spring* was in fact directly supported by Deng Xiaoping, then the party had a heavier hand in the movement than one would originally expect.

If *Beijing Spring* was indeed a faction partially supported by the Party, they needed political dissidents as the face of the publication in order to gain legitimacy with the people. The stories of *Beijing Spring* founders Chen Ziming and Wang Juntao are familiar among the middle post-Mao intellectual generation. The two men were both arrested at political movements before the Democracy Wall, giving them credibility as dissidents. Chen Ziming's resume as a dissident is impressive. In the Cultural Revolution Chen Ziming was sent down as a barefoot doctor to Mongolia. Chen became the head of the youth brigade among the young people sent down to the region in 1970 and would hold discussions that criticized the political system.<sup>119</sup> He returned to Beijing in 1974 but was quickly sent to prison the next year for criticizing the Gang of Four in writing to a friend. In 1976, Chen was able to stop at home en route to a reform labor camp where he joined the April Fifth Movement against the Cultural Revolution and the Gang of Four. At the Tiananmen Square demonstration, Chen stood out in this protest as an activist, a role he

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<sup>116</sup> Huang and Seymour, 17.

<sup>117</sup> "Document 8: Beijing Spring." Ed. James Seymour. Stanfordville, New York: Human Rights Publishing Group, 1980, 38."

<sup>118</sup> "Document 8: Beijing Spring, 38."

<sup>119</sup> Goldman, "The Emergence of Politically Independent Intellectuals," 293.

was to assume once again two years later at the Xidan Wall. Wang Juntao was also present at the demonstration. The son of an official of the Military and Political Academy, Wang marched his high school class into the demonstration reading a poem he had written. After the demonstration, Wang was imprisoned and Chen was sent back to labor camp. Both were only released after Mao's death in 1976.

Chen and Wang joined the Democracy Wall Movement in 1978 and founded *Beijing Spring*. The journal was written and published by Wang, Chen along with a group of ex-Red Guards and intellectuals from Cultural Revolution prison and labor camps. It is only rumored that *Beijing Spring* was supported directly by the Party, but either way, its organizers made up an important middle ground in the Democracy Wall Movement. Interestingly, Chen and Wang were not arrested in the crackdown of the Democracy Wall Movement. Merle Goldman wrote that in 1980, "both Chen and Wang could have easily become part of the Party establishment," but instead become an influential faction of the democratic elite.<sup>120</sup> In 1989, the two men were imprisoned for over thirteen years for their alleged involvement of the Tiananmen Square protests when in reality two men had only written politically moderate articles urging peaceful cooperation and encouraging the students to leave the square.<sup>121</sup> At their trial, both men denied the charges and whether they were dissidents or political puppets who took a hard fall is still a mystery.

Another faction of intellectuals within the movement came from within the Party. Even when Deng was firmly in power, he faced many challenges maintaining firm political control. One challenge came from government officials who had been purged under Mao and rehabilitated under Deng. Many of these rehabilitated bureaucrats had their own ideas when it

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<sup>120</sup> Goldman, "Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China," 340.

<sup>121</sup> Goldman, "Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China," 345.

came to the Democracy Wall and therefore became an important faction of intellectuals to note when examining the movement. Wei Jingsheng believes that these bureaucrats opposed Deng's original call for harsh punishment for the Democracy Wall activists. They provided a check on Deng's power because they feared that he was becoming a dictator. Wei explained that,

The reason I survived has a lot to do with the fact that I warned that Deng Xiaoping wanted to be a dictator. Many Communist leaders had been recently released from prison. They had been put in prison by Mao Zedong. They did not need another dictator so they strongly opposed executing me.<sup>122</sup>

Wei said that many bureaucrats would visit him in secret to request copies of his magazine *Exploration* which criticized the socialism system and called for human rights and democracy. What many people feared most at that time was a new Mao-esque dictator and Deng had to be careful in his actions on order to appear as moderate as possible. The factionalism which Deng allowed within the Party ended up providing a check on his own power.

The last faction that I will briefly examine is the general public who saw that wall as a tool for general communication rather than politics. This large faction of Democracy Wall participants must be noted as they made up the majority of those who posted notes on the wall. The masses used the wall as a place to post notices, to tell personal stories and to enquire about missing loved ones who had disappeared in the Cultural Revolution. Australian journalist Daryl McCann wrote that on the day he visited the wall in October,

[T]he subject matter on the day of my visit concerned itself less with questioning the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party than pleading with authorities to find family members who had disappeared during the Cultural Revolution. Their missives tended to be along these lines: "With respect, what has happened to my husband? I have not seen him since he was taken away ten years ago. Is he safe? Is he still alive? Might he be returned to his family?"<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Wei and Huang. "Interview with Wei Jingsheng."

<sup>123</sup> McCann, Daryl. "Democracy Wall, Beijing, 1979."

These posters may have been personal but as the posters amassed on the wall, it became a political statement. Millions of Chinese people had lost loved ones in the Cultural Revolution. The wall became a testament to the shared suffering of the citizens of Beijing and a place to unite the masses.

The Democracy Wall Movement was a contemporary story of attempted pluralism in China, as different factions all had their own personal perspectives and agendas. It is important to note when examining the Democracy Wall that the activists and intellectuals at the base of the movement did not have the same mindset. Each group of intellectuals saw the wall as a platform for individual ideology. Wei Jingsheng's faction was militant and political while Huang Xiang's believed in a new Chinese renaissance of art and expression. The authors of *Beijing Spring* promoted Deng Xiaoping Thought while the rehabilitated bureaucrats in the Party feared Deng's ambition and tried to check his power. Factionalism perhaps prevented cohesion in thought and in method, and the heavy political voice of the more radical Wei Jingsheng may have dramatically distorted the more aesthetic visions of Huang Xiang. Nevertheless, Democracy Wall was both a place for all to be heard and an all too brief moment of open intellectual pluralism.

## 5. Conclusion: A Critical Approach to Historical Analysis

In my research on the Democracy Wall Movement I found many misconceptions and generalizations surrounding the movement's general narrative. These misconceptions were apparent in the literature on the movement and were even reaffirmed in some of my interviews with Wei Jingsheng, Huang Xiang and Merle Goldman. The story of the Democracy Wall can be approached by various angles. My three different approaches in analyzing the movement led to three different stories. The structuralist approach examined the movement from the top down, examining the impact of the CCP shift from Mao to Deng. In reading the literature from this viewpoint it is easy to believe that Deng Xiaoping genuinely supported the Democracy Wall in its early stages because that is the message that Deng wanted to put forth. The intellectuals and activists in the Democracy Wall believed that Deng supported the wall in its early stages when in reality he saw it only as a political opportunity.

The culturalist approach led me to analyze the impact of historical social movements on the Democracy Wall and the impact of many important events leading up to the movement. In my analysis I realized that the Democracy Wall Movement should not be characterized as spontaneous: the movement may have seemed spontaneous in its early stages but it is deeply rooted in history and is an important part of the cycle of repression and relaxation which characterizes the relationship between the CCP and Chinese intellectuals. The rationalist approach led me to interview Wei Jingsheng and Huang Xiang. In these interviews I realized that the movement meant very different things to the two men, leading me to examine the many factions which influenced the movement. Some studies make it seem like the intellectuals acted as one force against the state when in fact the lack of cohesion in the movement is one of the most important parts of its identity.

In examining Chinese history it is important to analyze the sources of one's information as well as the information itself. The misconception that Deng Xiaoping supported the Democracy Wall in its early stages comes from propaganda from the Chinese government. Many intellectuals, activists, and others believed this propaganda, and this skewed their perception of the movement in which they were involved. This misconception is similar to the one surrounding the length and severity of the Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng rivalry. Deng did campaign against Hua in the summer of 1977 but was fairly securely in power by the time of the Democracy Wall Movement in the fall of 1978. Deng continued the story of the "rivalry" in order to maintain favor with the people and keep the threat of a return to Maoism (represented by Hua) in check. In both ways Deng was able to twist the people's perception of the Democracy Wall Movement and used the demonstrations on the street to gain public support.

The idea that the movement was spontaneous was influenced by the Chinese government as well. The movement may have appeared spontaneous to the people of China but was in fact part of the long cycle of repression and relaxation of intellectuals by the state. The idea that the movement was spontaneous and the first of its kind in Chinese history may have come from the Chinese peoples' lack knowledge of their own history. Mao's educational policies had a large impact on the middle generation of intellectuals. Many of them were sent down youth and missed years of standard socialist education. Those in school were taught a controlled curriculum which did not include mass social movements. To the people of China, the movement may have felt spontaneous but it was actually deeply rooted in history.

Propaganda from the United States government is partially responsible for the misconception that the Democracy Wall Movement was a cohesive movement. Wei Jingsheng was released from Chinese prison on medical parole to the United States in 1997. In order to



highlight the wrongdoings of the Chinese government the United States government spread the narrative that Wei had been arrested merely for bringing up democracy. In fact Wei had been arrested for calling Deng Xiaoping a dictator and criticizing the Communist system. His arrest was still deeply unfair, but it was for a different reason than the United States government claimed. The Chinese government is also responsible for spreading this misconception because they arrested very political figures, such as Wei Jingsheng along with less political figures, such as Huang Xiang. Huang Xiang suffered for this misconception and it still haunts him to this day. He spoke of how people come to interview him and ask him about his role as a political figure in the movement. Huang truly identifies himself as a poet and artist and still today expresses confusion when he refers to his arrest.<sup>124</sup>

Despite these misconceptions, the Democracy Wall as an important movement because it shaped the modern relationship between the state and intellectuals and set the tone for democracy movements until 1989. Wei Jingsheng ended his “Fifth Modernization,” poster with a powerful statement. “Xidan Democracy Wall has become the first battlefield in the people’s fight against reactionaries. The struggle will certainly be victorious, though there will still be bloodshed and suffering.”<sup>125</sup> The crackdown on the wall was not especially harsh and the masses were not punished. Because of this, the Democracy Wall Movement inspired a series of democracy movements in the 1980s and led to the 1989 Tiananmen Square Movement. The Democracy Wall Movement was an attempt to construct new parameters of dissent under the terms of the people rather than the state. These parameters continued to be defined after the state crackdown on the Xidan Wall Movement, in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest, in modern dissent activity

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<sup>124</sup> Huang Xiang Interview

<sup>125</sup> Wei, 55.

by such dissidents as artist Ai Weiwei, and constantly changing patterns of accepted access and expression on the internet.

Dissidence in China continued after the Democracy Wall movement and the parameters of dissent allowed by the state have shifted over the past decades. The most monumental clash between the state and the people occurred in 1989 in Tiananmen Square. The movement had similar themes as the Democracy Wall Movement: democracy, representation, and freedom. Despite similar themes, the rhetoric of the two movements differed; in Tiananmen Square the people lacked support for Deng Xiaoping. The masses at the Democracy Wall Movement had been thrilled with the promise of change from the darkness of Mao. The intellectuals of the 1989 movement were a new generation and had not suffered under Mao. To the new generation a simple promise of change from the top was not enough anymore. The 1989 movement, unlike the Democracy Wall Movement, was clearly an anti-authority and anti-government demonstration. The mass protests at Tiananmen Square, frightened the government in the same way that the Xidan Democracy Wall movement did years before. Deng tightened the parameters of dissent in this movement in his forceful crackdown on the Tiananmen protesters bringing yet another cycle of repression and relaxation to a violent end.

I predict a new beginning for this cycle in the next decade. The internet has allowed for greater intellectual freedom in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and many Chinese students are exposed to new ideas when studying and traveling abroad. In the past decade the internet has become an important tool for the masses as a means for social and political expression. The vast cyber power of the internet has made it difficult for the government to control political conversation and has forced the state to change the parameters of dissent. Modern capitalism in China has also opened the nation to new ideas and points of view, making it difficult for the government to

control activism. In contemporary society the CCP has been forced to accept competing voices in economics and culture, but still refuses to open discussion on political ideology in part because of the same fear of the masses that drove Deng Xiaoping to close the wall at Xidan.

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## Appendix: Interview Transcripts

### 1. Interview with Merle Goldman



Harvard Fairbanks Center  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
Editing and Transcription: Jill Levine  
Selected Answers  
February 1, 2013

Merle Goldman: When Deng Xiaoping first came to power after Mao's death in 1976, he allowed an opening up and the students took advantage of that, and I think the Democracy Wall Movement was the freest movement, for liberalization, and opening up, that China has had. There has been nothing comparable to that. They started putting the posters up all over in Beijing and then moved to other cities. It really took off. And Deng became frightened by it. And he cracked down very severely on them. Under Mao, it was very difficult to speak out. With Deng Xiaoping there was an opening up to the outside world and to different points of view so that even though he cracked down he still had a much more liberal environment so that intellectuals could continue to speak out and continue to press for their ideas.

Jill Levine: So, it was example of the intellectuals working for society, instead of for the state

MG: They did not want to be outside the state, the Chinese tradition of intellectuals working with the state, the literati tradition of intellectuals working with the state is so strong that Chinese people do not want to be outside of the system.

JL: Are you talking about Hu Yaobang in this case?

MG: All of them under Deng Xiaoping. I find that Deng Xiaoping was more open than Hu Yaobang, considering the times. But the Democracy Wall Movement was a really grassroots movement of students calling for democracy and calling for more freedom and it got to the point where Deng felt it was threatening the Party. He let it go so far but when he saw it really threatening the Party, he cracked down. But it was like a crackdown like those you saw under Mao which, for example Hu Feng and his followers were totally devastated. These people were silenced but they came back later, so they weren't totally excommunicated. The intellectuals in the establishment were silenced for a time, but they weren't totally silenced, they waited for a period of relaxation so they could speak out again. I guess you would say that the people in the Mao period who spoke up were much braver because retaliation was devastating for them and their families, not just them, their families, their children, all their relations were totally ostracized, so it was much more difficult under Mao.

JL: What was Hu Yaobang's role at the time?

MG: He was a good Party man, he wanted open up China, wanted democratic institutions. So the change really started under Hu Yaobang, and of course he was purged. And also Zhao Ziyang. IF

you can going to talk about the leaders who were most open to democratic change were Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang.

JL: I feel like it is important in this case to note the difference between intellectuals in the state and intellectual outside the state.

MG: Under Mao, you had to be in the state otherwise you were totally silenced, while Deng Xiaoping it was much more relaxed and so you could be, but even so, the Democracy Wall Movement was outside the state and he crushed it and there were other movements as well in the post-Mao period. He wasn't as draconian as Mao, but he certainly silenced any over-opposition. You could be subtle but you couldn't be overly critical. You can't even, now, be overly-critical, you'd get in trouble right away.

JL: One thing I noticed, factions between intellectual groups? It seems like some people saw it as an act rebellion, while some people saw it as expression?

MG: In the post Mao period you couldn't do that, you couldn't do anything like that in the Mao period. In the Mao period you'd have to wait for something like the Hundred Flowers, some period of relaxation, but if it went too far he cracked down. In the post Mao period there is a relaxation and an opening to the outside world. But if you question the Marxist-Leninist system, you're in trouble. You can do it intellectually, maybe, but you can't do it in an open forum. It's still very difficult to be a political critique in the People's Republic.

JL: The activists could only speak in Marxist terms because of their education, how did this affect the movement?

MG: They did not know anything else. I think now, with the opening to the outside world they are learning more and students are going abroad and coming back, but in the post Mao period, even DXP who I consider one of the more enlightened leaders in China, it was difficult to express dissenting views. You could deviate but you couldn't dissent openly.

JL: Why wasn't the movement ever cohesive?

MG: It was purely spontaneous, it wasn't organized, it just happened. With Deng Xiaoping coming to power and relaxing controls the students just gathered. It only became organized once they got into [Tiananmen Square]. It's not surprising that you didn't have a well-organized movement. It's amazing it occurred at all. It took so long for Deng to really crack down. He allowed it go on as long as it did.

JL: Do you have a theory on why Deng reacted the way he did?

MG: I think he got scared. He thought it would be the end of the Party. He wanted to be part of the modern world, he wanted to open up, but he didn't want public opposition within the party.

JL: Does it have anything to do with Hua Guofeng?

MG: No, he was hopeless, he never did anything.

JL: A lot of people see it as a power struggle between Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng.

MG: No, there's no evidence of that. Deng controlled him, he controlled Hua Guofeng. He had no voice whatsoever. Not Hua Guofeng, no way. Other officials, maybe Peng Dehuai, but no, it was just Deng. But he was open to all alternative views, any real threat, he thought to the Party, he was totally against, but he was open to other points of views within that spectrum.

JL: I've read that he encouraged the idea of democracy, but got scared with people wanted it

MG: That caused a lot of confusion. He did get scared. He really thought it would be the end of the Party and the Party was more important to him than anything. They started chanting "Down with Deng Xiaoping." "Down with the Party," and that's what scared him. I have a lot of sympathy for Deng Xiaoping. Considering the leaders of China, Zhou Enlai was nothing. He did anything Mao wanted. Deng Xiaoping had a point of a view and he wanted to bring China into the modern world.

JL: It was a test of a new state by the intellectual activists groups and the people in general.

MG: Yes I think so, small groups can do it, individuals can do it, but as soon as you get any kind of organization they will stop it. There is no concept of a loyal opposition. But there was less of a penalty than under Mao. You may lose your job but you can get a new job in the market economy. Intellectuals can get jobs in think tanks that have been created in the opening up. The state is no longer totalitarian but is authoritarian.

JL: The wall supported Deng Xiaoping as well as Zhou Enlai, why do you think the people continued to support Zhou Enlai?

MG: He did everything Mao told him to do, he did everything Deng told him to do. I don't think there was one original thought in anything. He was just a charming man, but he didn't make any major changes in China, he just carried out the policies of those leaders. And under Mao he did exactly what Mao told him to do, he never deviated.

JL: Deng was popular because of liberalization and many saw themselves in him because he suffered under Mao.

MG: He was very brave, considering the times. Mao had a certain affection for Deng. He said to a visiting leader, "You see that little guy there, he's as smart as mustard seed," and for Mao that was a big compliment. He had a lot of admiration for Deng, surprisingly. But Deng was not a flatterer of Mao, he didn't do what Mao told him, but he wasn't like Zhou Enlai. [Mao] could have done much worse to Deng Xiaoping. When we met Deng Xiaoping, he really was a little guy, his feet would dangle when he sat on a chair. In my first trip to China I went the American university presidents. We went to universities and there was nothing going on, everyone was

talking about Mao thought, asked Deng “What do you think of our universities?” They said, “They’re terrible, you’ll never be a modern country with universities like there.” Deng said, “I know.” And then Mao died, and Deng took over and things changed. He talked with us for an hour and a half, he was very open and he said what he thought.

JL: What do you think about his actions in 1989 [Tiananmen Square]?

MG: I don’t know what to think. It was obviously causing a lot of chaos and a lot of turmoil. He could have cracked different. The saying is that Mao was 70% good 30% bad, I think he was 70% bad. I think Deng was 70% good and 30%. I think he just lost his cool and was frightened over what was happening and he was spreading to other cities so he cracked down.

JL: What do you think about modern dissent?

MG: The internet, students going abroad; you have to remember that that is a small portion of students exposed to this. China is still 50% agriculture. So there will be change, but it will be slow.

## 2. Interview with Wei Jingsheng

Washington D.C.

Translation: Ciping Huang  
Transcription & Editorial Work: Jill Levine  
February 15, 2013

Wei Jingsheng: Modern Chinese democracy really began with the Democracy Wall. There were many movements in the past but the Democracy Wall Movement was the first movement that both asked for democracy and called for the end of the one party dictatorship of the Communist Party. In the past, different movements had called for democracy but none of them ever really asked to end the one party dictatorship. At the time, even the Communist Party had said that they wanted democracy, but in reality, the democracy of the Communist Party is false. Without the end of the one party dictatorship you cannot really have true democracy.

Jill Levine: How did your background in the Cultural Revolution affect your personal ideology?

WJS: Before the Cultural Revolution I absolutely supported the communist regime because of my education and background. Many of us, especially the youth, felt that we were cheated by the Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution. We started to have doubts about the Communist Party. This is the first time we came together and created an organization that was against Mao Zedong. A lot of youth began to see what was wrong with Mao Zedong thought. We began to further doubt the roots when we found out that even Karl Marx was not right.

This group of youth were the children of cadres who had access to more information than their counterparts. We found information about western democracy. We didn't know much but we concluded that it was better for us than communism. The youth who were with me in doubting the Communist Party include many people who are current leaders of the communist regime in high level and low level positions including both Xi Jinping and Bo Xilai.

Amongst the youth we had a slogan that we wanted to get to know the true China. We would be the peasants, we would be the workers, we would go to the army, we would get to know rural China and go to the bottom of society in order to do it. Going to the bottom of society had a tremendous impact on us as youth because when we went to the countryside, factory and army we saw that the realities were far worse than what our teachers had taught us. From 1976 to 1979 these youth participated in all the political movements including the April 5<sup>th</sup> 1976 movement in Tiananmen as well as the 1979 Democracy Wall Movement.

That is the general picture: youth who were looking for truth in society. They all later went down different paths. Some of them became officials in the government, some of them became officers in the army and some of them, like me, became workers in the civil society, doing our share.

The reason that my articles that were written during the Democracy Movement got a large response was because at that time a lot of people in China were sick of the way it was but few people dared to speak up. I am one of the few people who talked about it.

JL: How did the ordinary people in Beijing feel about Mao Zedong after his death and Deng Xiaoping during his rise to power?

WJS: At the time of the Democracy Wall Movement Deng Xiaoping did not really hold the power, he was still fighting for power against Hua Guofeng. In that time there was already a lot of information being passed around in Chinese society. People would share hard copies of articles including novels, poems, literature and political commentary: that itself was already enough to form a movement.

There was a very strong internal fight within the Communist Party. The people would generally post big posters on the wall to express disagreement with Hua Guofeng's policies and the continuation of the two whatevers. The police would come to the wall and tear down the posters. They would also summarize the contents of the posters and report back to Deng Xiaoping. Because of those summaries of the opinions of the people, Deng Xiaoping was able to use it to go against Hua Guofeng in the 11<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party.

People at the Democracy Wall were generally more supportive of Deng Xiaoping because they felt that Deng Xiaoping would at least be a change from Mao Zedong. I, however, had a closer observation and I had a different opinion. I felt that Deng Xiaoping really wanted to be a dictator. I had information that Deng Xiaoping was going to put down the Democracy Wall after the Vietnam War ended. When I first criticized Deng Xiaoping most people were against me. But Deng Xiaoping was really stupid because as soon as he arrested me, he really proved that my opinion was right. So after Deng Xiaoping arrested me, the people who criticized me became the people who came to rescue me.

JL: When did the publications that went with the movements started and when did your publication start?

WJS: My publication Exploration was one of the last and my big post, "the Fifth Modernization," was really one of the later articles published on the Democracy Wall when compared to others. Right after the Cultural Revolution I was really uninterested in politics and did not want to participate. Then, one event happened that stimulated me and made me want to write the article.

This event was the meeting that Deng Xiaoping had with Robert Novak around the end of November in 1978. Basically, Deng Xiaoping told Mr. Novak that those at the Democracy Wall should really go back to their work positions to do work for the revolutionaries instead of staying there and talking about politics because the communist leaders would take care of the politics. Some of the youth on the Democracy Wall responded saying that they would follow the words of Deng Xiaoping and go back to their places of work to do revolutionary work. They were going to withdraw from the Democracy Wall.

This made all the people in Beijing, including myself, very angry. My co-workers in my work unit would say things like, look, we the Chinese are so useless, only after a few days, as

soon as the top leader says to shut up, we are ready to be silent. They said things like the Chinese are hopeless, the Chinese have a soft backbone and they do not dare to speak up. That stimulated me. I wanted to show that not all Chinese had soft backbones. So, one night I wrote "Fifth Modernization," and posted it early in the morning on the Democracy Wall. I signed my name and left my phone number. At that time, not many Chinese had telephone contacts, so it resulted in over a dozen people who were not happy with that time or with their own organizations or situations. They came to my home and we had a meeting to figure out how we could get together start a magazine to spread the idea of the Democracy Wall even further in China.

I told the dozen people who came that I would give them three days to consider and that if they really wanted to do this, they must be prepared to lose their head. In the end, only three people decided to follow me. These were the earliest members of the Exploration magazine. Because we had this readiness to be killed we were the boldest, we were not reserved and that's exactly why we spoke our mind. Our magazine became the most popular magazine in the Democracy Wall Movement.

It is publicly recognized that people looked to our magazine as an indicator of the Democracy Wall Movement. As soon as we had a new issue of Exploration all of the people immediately came out and tried to buy it. There were so many people that you couldn't get a place in the crowd. It is very interesting because in those days, every day there were lots of big posters so people often disputed what should be kept up. One of the members of Exploration was eventually chosen to decide which articles must be kept and which could be covered.

I think that at the time what Deng Xiaoping and the Communist Party were most scared of was the existence of a little center of authority in civil society which is not under the control of the Communist Party. We had decided that we would have an organization to unite all of the people and the different organizations. We already had a name: The Coalition. That is exactly what the communists feared the most.

When the Chinese government was still involved in the Vietnam War, I heard from people in the department of public security that Deng Xiaoping had already signed a list of names of those who should immediately be arrested after the war. I immediately informed all of the others in organizations, telling them to be ready to retreat. First, we should destroy all the related documents and second we should hide the people on the list so that they are not harmed. However, not too many people believed me at the time. They doubted me because they believed that Deng Xiaoping was different than Mao Zedong.

The people thought that because Deng Xiaoping was different than Mao Zedong than he would have least have some form of democracy. Moreover, they thought that since Deng Xiaoping had gotten his power from the support of the people, how could he be trying to suppress them? That's why I said that Deng Xiaoping was really stupid because if he wanted to

continue to deceive the people, he shouldn't have arrested me. He arrested me and proved that I was right. And now everyone believes me.

JL: I have a question about the timeline with Fifth Modernization, to the wall closing to Mr. Wei's arrest. I've found different information regarding this timeline, many think you were arrested because of Fifth Modernization but it was posted early in the movement, what is the real story?

WJS: I posted "the Fifth Modernization," on December 5, 1978. Within a few days, we had a small organization to form the magazine Exploration. In those days in China it was not easy to form a magazine. We had to hand carve the original copies of our articles and then use ink to print the magazines by hand one by one. Even in those days, printing machines were strictly controlled by the government. There were only printing machines in government offices and schools. Both paper and ink were controlled by the government, individuals could not buy it themselves. Fortunately, in those days we had our back doors, so we were able to purchase the paper and the ink that we weren't supposed to have. We would secretly smuggle the printing machine out of the school and we were able to print our magazines. It just so happened that two of four people in our group had a lot of connections. Mr. Yang Guo was a teacher in a school so he was able to smuggle the machine for our use. Mr. Liu Ding had lots of social connections in society so he was able to contact the right people to buy ink and paper.

We published our first issue of Exploration around January 3, 1979. When we first went to sell the magazine it was so popular that we had to get on top of the wall to sell it to the crowds. I found out later that if we only made a few hundred copies the message would be spread much further because people would hand copy our magazine within their organizations. Many people had a copy of a copy of a copy. We decided to have one issue every month because it was very difficult to print. By the third issue, I was arrested by Deng Xiaoping.

In the third issue, we had a special extra: an article which I wrote titled Deng Xiaoping: Democracy or Dictatorship? In the article I wrote that Deng Xiaoping wanted to be a dictator. On the third day after the publication of article I was arrested. People often have the impression that I was arrested on the third day after the Fifth Modernization but it was actually the third day after the other famous article, Deng Xiaoping: Democracy or Dictatorship?

JL: Yes, usually people think you were arrested the third day after Fifth Modernization.

WJS: I was able to stay free for four months after the first article, which was the Fifth Modernization. This is because even within the Communist Party a lot of high level leaders agreed with what I said. These high level officials had been imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution and had just been released.

Many scholars and journalists in the West often have the wrong prerequisite: they think that everyone in the Communist Party is the same. That's not quite true. Within the Communist



Party, people are different. The idea democracy was often talked about within with Communist Party, even in the time of Mao Zedong. During Deng Xiaoping's time, democracy was not allowed to be mentioned. Many people do not realize, especially in the West, that the communists have actually always talked about democracy. Democracy is not a new word in China.

All the Westerners got excited when Jiang Zemin came to the United States and mentioned democracy. The Westerners were excited and said the communists were talking about democracy. The communists have always talked about democracy, but what is important about the Democracy Wall is that we pointed out the democracy that the Communist Party talks about is a false democracy. The Party will always talk about democracy but do not allow people to have a democratic system.

JL: I've heard phenomena this compared to the idiom about Lord Ye's dragons.

WGS: It is not quite so. What the Communist Party wanted is not democracy. It is best to look at the words of Karl Marx when he defined democracy as the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Party defines democracy in that way, which is different from the people's definition. When the communists spoke of democracy it is a completely different concept than the people think. When the Party spoke of democracy they were sincere but their understanding of democracy is the dictatorship of the proletariat.

JL: Which definition of democracy were people using in the name "Democracy Wall?"

WGS: Initially when the big posters went up on the wall in Xidan, most people were just expressing their own opinions and ideas. In Mao Zedong's Four Big Democracies, writing big character posters was one of the democracies. People would put up the posters to voice their opinions. People started to call the movement the Democracy Wall after I put up my big character poster, the Fifth Modernization. The term Democracy Wall spread very fast and very far away. People understood it as a place where you could express your opinions. It spread very quickly, not only to other cities in China but to other countries like Taiwan where there was no democracy. I think that the spreading of the Democracy Wall to all those places in 1979 is why the Berlin Wall and dictatorship in other communist countries ended ten years later. I think it is all closely associated. The youth in China in those days invented something very important.

JL: Going back to political terminology: How is having one term with many meanings and translations between Eastern and Western cultures is a problem with the term socialism as well?

WGS: The Chinese Communist Party's definition of socialism is different than the definition used by the West. If you look at the newspapers published by the Communist Party you will notice that they never mention socialism in Western society because socialist society in Western countries is different than what is defined by the Communist Party. Even from the time of Karl Marx, his definition of socialism was different than the definition used by the socialist movement

in Europe. By the time of Lenin's socialism, it was used totally differently from socialism in Europe.

This is exactly what happened in the 1960s, we were discussing socialism and we weren't sure if the socialism we were talking about was the true socialism. This is why we decided to go to the countryside and the factory and the army to see what society truly looked like and then make our conclusions. Mr. Xi Jinping spent several years in the countryside so he probably has a pretty good comprehension of the realities of socialism.

Many truly sincere Communist Party members were confused about socialism at that time. The socialism that they were taught was wonderful and beautiful and they wondered why their society didn't look like that. They would come to me secretly and ask for my magazine so that they could read and try to solve this dilemma.

We were the few people who said that the communist system was not good. Most of the Chinese people thought that the communist system was good but Mao Zedong ruined it. Deng Xiaoping was able to take power because of these thoughts. Now over thirty years have passed and many have realized that it is the system that has problems. Thirty years ago, Deng Xiaoping said that the system was good but Mao Zedong was not good, so everyone believed him and gave him a chance. Now thirty years have passed and everyone sees that Deng Xiaoping has not brought good either. People came to the realization that it isn't the leaders but the system.

JL: Why did you choose to title your poster the Fifth Modernization, after Zhou Enlai's Four Modernization?

WGS: I named it that so that the average people could understand. At the time, the Four Modernizations were very popular. If you continue the train of thought and put out the idea of a fifth modernization people could easily pick up on the idea. It was sort of like a tabloid magazine; they all have eye catching subjects and then you open the article and read what the authors really meant. This is a tactic I learned from being with the workers and peasants in the bottom of society. When you want to put out your opinion and everyone is already talking you need to have something noticeable to catch their attention.

Many people told me that after they read the title they thought that the communists were saying that we needed a fifth modernization and that four was not enough. Then they read it and realized that the fifth modernization is completely different than the four. I even heard that on the high level Politburo meetings some elderly cadres asked why they couldn't have the fifth modernization if they already had four. They said, "We already learned four of them from the West, why can't we learn the fifth from the West?"

What I was trying to tell people was that the communists were really good at using the idea of the great prospects of the future but they failed on all of these promises. They used promises to win people's hearts. They had realized that socialism and communism would not

attract the people anymore so they decided to put out the Four Modernizations. I was trying to say that they'd failed because their system has a problem.

At the time this was a big puzzle with the Chinese people, including the intellectuals. Socialism sounded so good in theory: why couldn't it be realized? What I talked about solved their puzzle. You cannot realize it because the system is no good.

The importance of the article Fifth Modernization is that it brought a whole set of movements in the 1980s in China. Initially the communists always tried to convince the people that the system is good and Mao Zedong was wrong, but when people read my article they came to the realization that the problems come from the root of the system.

It even continues now: your attitude about the Fifth Modernization determines which side you are on. If you say the system is not a problem, then you are speaking for the communists. Even the communists use this same standard in their judgments. If you criticize certain things without criticizing the system, if you say that some leaders are bad or did something bad, then they will still tolerate you. As soon as you criticize the system overall then you are a dissident and should be put in prison. The difference between criticizing individuals and criticizing the system is very important for the communists. They are very clear minded on it.

Westerners do not understand that there is a fundamental difference and they want to treat all critics as dissidents. They do not understand why some of the so-called dissidents can criticize and are still outside of jail while other dissidents criticize and are sent to ten years in prison. Americans sometimes support dissidents who are not actually dissidents or are not the people who supported democracy to start with.

JL: If you were still in China today would you still be criticizing the system?

WGS: Yes. I was released in 1993 and was put in prison a half a year later exactly because of that. People would come to me and say that I was wrong when I said without democracy China would not have the Four Modernizations. Those foreigners did not understand China and did not understand the fundamental differences between China and the West. They said that China was now modernized and has a lot of money. You have to remember that in America, the wealth is more spread out, even among the poor. In China, yes there is a lot of money, but it is concentrated on the very few rich.

A lot of Western scholars and journalists are stuck in this dilemma: they saw that the Chinese people had a lot of money and people seemed to overall have a much better life than thirty years ago. Why were people so upset and so unhappy? That is because the Westerners had been taking democracy for granted, like fresh air. Then when you get to China, without fresh air, you realize how important democracy is.

Westerners have the wrong perception. They think that all of China is rich, a lot of people and a lot of money. That is true in the cities especially, there are tens of millions of very rich Chinese. Some of them even have a better life than people in the United States. You have to remember however that tens of millions of people is a small percentage within a population of more than 1 billion. You have been in China before, you know the life of the peasants and workers who try to work in the cities. Look at their lives. Look at the peasants in the countryside, look at their lives: they are the majority. There is a high disparity between the rich and poor in China.

There is a huge social conflict in China, but many Western scholars will say that China is developed and getting a middle class so there were naturally eventually have democracy. I'm afraid that those Westerners do not even understand their own democracy. Those Westerners should understand that there is a better life in the West because of democracy. Everyone has an equal opportunity and therefore each individual can strive for their best and get rich, or at least be in the middle class. In China, it's dictatorship. The people in power want to control the power and to be rich. If the average people were rich then they will not make as much money. For them, it is not equal opportunity. This is not only true in China but is apparent in other dictatorial governments. Corruption and disparity of wealth and power: if you look at those problems more fundamentally it becomes of issue of whether or not you have a democratic system. When you do not have a democracy you do not have a way to solve these issues from the root. Many Westerners do not understand this. They think that if there is money then there will be democracy, which is just not true.

American scholars forget their own roots when they say that peace from rational nonviolence is an important principle. This is important within a democratic system, but can you talk about peaceful nonviolence to a dictator? You have to overthrow a dictator. They will not reason with you. I would ask these American scholars who call for rational peaceful nonviolence about the U.S. was established. Did you make a peaceful nonviolence approach when dealing with the King of England? They made use of force.

Now we've gotten too far away from the subject of the Democracy Wall...

JL: Back to the Democracy Wall, what was your individual goal in the movement, what did you want to specifically come out of the movement?

WGS: It was not a one moment thought. My idea evolved from the 1960s. I talked to my friends who worked with me and told to be prepared because we may lose our heads in front of the gun squads. However, we will be able to do an important thing: put a fresh idea into the minds of the Chinese people. The idea that we do not need the communists to get a democratic system, we can get a democratic system outside the communists. Spreading this kind of idea was important. In the Western world if you have an idea you can spread it and see if people will accept it. In China there is no such way to spread your ideas and no way to know about the outside world.

The communist system is the highest level of dictatorship among all forms of dictatorship, equal to the Nazis because both of them were able to control people and mask people's minds to make them think that their system is the best. The people cannot break the system, their thoughts are stuck and solidified. They cannot break out of this boundary. Several of us were determined to use our lives to break the boundaries and show the people that there is a larger freer world. I think the Democracy Wall was composed of young people like us. That was a group of very brave youth.

I did not die, which is why all of the others were not killed. Many people within the Communist Party thought that people like us should not be killed which is why we could stay and carry on. There were people in the high ranks of the party leadership who agreed with us, they thought the same things and they also spoke up. The Cultural Revolution enforced communist rule and made a lot of people doubt the communists. It made communist ideology much weaker. After the Cultural Revolution, the high officials within the Party realized the problem with the system. Because older people began to doubt the communist system, young people were able to push for another democracy movement in 1980s. If the youth in the Democracy Wall and I were executed then we would not see the democracy movement in the 1980s, ending in 1989.

JL: Did they want you to take back what you had written publicly?

WGS: Of course they wanted me to take back what I said but it was useless because I was ready to not live any further. I was not willing to make compromises and all of their efforts failed. They continued even after they sentenced me; they tried to negotiate with me and tried to make me confess. I said that it was useless because what I was doing was not for myself but for all of China. There was no use for me to retreat from where I stood.

Even if you do not fear death it does not mean you cannot avoid it. The reason I survived has a lot to do with the fact that I warned that Deng Xiaoping wanted to be a dictator. Many Communist leaders had been recently released from prison. They had been put in prison by Mao Zedong. They did not need another dictator so they strongly opposed executing me.

JL: At the time, did the people really see Deng Xiaoping as a positive change?

WGS: I think there were more average Chinese that supported Deng Xiaoping percentage wise than in the Communist Party. People thought that Deng Xiaoping stood for change. They did not agree with me and said to give Deng Xiaoping a chance to make China better. When I was in jail, lots of prison guards would treat me nicely and respectfully but they questioned me, saying that Deng Xiaoping wanted to make China rich, why did I go against him? It's a very natural question they had. At the time, people were sitting on the coattails of the Mao Zedong era. They thought that everything was very equal. Deng Xiaoping wants to make everyone rich, so why not? Average Chinese people were still in the socialist mindset of equally divided property: if we get

rich, then we all get rich. That is the basic thought of all the people that supported Deng Xiaoping.

### 3. Huang Xiang Interview

Queens, New York

Translation: Jiajing Lily Sun  
Editing/Transcription: Jill Levine  
Selected Answers  
February 23, 2013

Huang Xiang: My democracy involvement was different than many others at the time. Many of the others were more politically aggressive. I wanted to be a model for the renaissance of oriental art and use this model to push forward democracy. Democracy for me is not always a medium for words but for calligraphy, for painting and for art. The media was more like New York Times or other public media saw the Democracy Wall in its political meaning but I think there is more value in looking at the art in the Democracy Wall. I hung hundreds of poems in Wangfujing Avenue and they were very popular, lots of people gathered to see it. I think the Democracy Wall movement is only about self-expression, but the government thought regarded it as a subversive movement, so it became suppressed. It is misunderstood.

The Cultural Revolution is definitely a wrong thing in terms of idolatry and Mao Zedong's ideology, I should take the responsibility in your research to give you the true story. I think that Occupy Wall Street is quite similar to the Democracy Wall Movement, but at that time the Chinese leaders interpreted the movement in a very political way. Why was I put into jail again and again when I was in the movement? The attitude has changed so much over the years.

When I was putting up my painting in Wangfujing many people did understand me, including some foreigners who were like to see what is happening in China. I think that the cultural and the spiritual legacy of China has a high value and it is worth nothing, but many people because they only see the movement as political do not see the true value of the movement which I think it to question, what does it mean to be a person, and what it means to be a human. I put the self-expression value of the movement over political.

In 1978, October 11, after the movement had been ignited, the Party in China called an imperative meeting in order to suppress it. This was a turning point of the movement. Because I put up the exhibition in Wangfujing, the Party thought that I was a dangerous figure. They investigated documents in my hometown in Yunnan, pretty far from Beijing. They regarded me as a dangerous political figure or terrorist but then found out that I was just a poet. After the Party investigated my documents, I was sealed off in the city. On the night of the day when my housemate walked out of the day, we saw many people gathered around our house to write down my poems. We not only saw very many people gathered around, also some people that were meant to supervise us. We would just stare at each other. On the next night, we also some local officials who were supervising us, after that we went to the Great Wall in order to climb it and see the world. We were crying because we thought about how we had endured these movements and how the people are suffering. One day we went to Tiananmen Square, with the photo of Mao Zedong. There were four of us and we peed on the sidewalk next to the portrait. After we peed at the portrait we wrote two poems: even if you are peeing it can be a great sea of power, even if

you are farting it can be the sound of thunder. We felt like we had the power to do something at that time. There is a waterfall in our hometown that was very beautiful, but our pee was more powerful. We had the power to change the world.

Jill Levine: Why did they feel this way at this time? Was there any specific reasons or events?

HX: I started writing poems at the age of nine, I was refused at the junior high school because of the Cultural Revolution, but I had some female friends at the high school. I was very jealous at that time. I wrote friendly poems to them, but I was thrown into jail. At that time, writing a poem had rightist implications. During the Cultural Revolution, my grandparents was persecuted because of their rightist background and I was persecuted because I was the child of rightists. My family was declared politically wrong because my father was a KMT official and my grandfather was a landlord. When I was young, I was playing in my hometown and there was a water well. I saw a dead fish in the well, I was curious to see what it is. I went to catch the fish and some people say me and said, "Are you putting poison in the water and trying to kill us because you are a child of a KMT official and a landowner?" I was locked away. The people put a hat on my head. The hat said, "The Anti-Revolutionary Poisoner." But because I was in such a small village there was no place in the jail so I was put in the temple. My grandfather was also locked in the temple during the Cultural Revolution. The hospital tested the water and proved there was no poison so I was released.

I first published my poems in 1954, but in 1959 I was jailed when I was trying to continue to publish my poems. I was probably the youngest member of the Chinese Writer's Association at that time. It has been 54 years, but the Chinese government still prohibits me from publishing poems in China.

I always dreamed about very expansive grasslands. I dreamed of freedom. I dreamed about natural landscapes but it contrasted with the reality of my imprisonment. Then, the government prohibited me from officially publishing my poems so I went to Beijing to publish them myself. This is how the Democracy Wall came up. I needed a space for my poems and artwork. My poems were very different than others at the time, the others were acting collectively but my work was about individuality. Because I was writing poems about individuality, officials thought it was subversive and about being different from the other working class people, but my true meaning is basically saying that I feel very lonely in this natural environment and I wanted to integrate myself into nature, it is not a political implication. My true meaning is about the oriental philosophies of reintegration into nature, like Daoism. Students from Beijing University now send me mail saying that they think that people misunderstood me at that time. Like the poem, "Wild Beasts," was about how darkness is the true side of the beast. I was asking what are the origins of human beings, where does the person come from?

In answering your question, I think that my braveness came from the Buddhist philosophy that everyone is equal, why should I be afraid of other people? I am just expressing



myself. I think I was brave at the time just because of the way I was, but also because when I saw the portrait of Mao Zedong I thought of him as the puppet of politics. It's a not real or real power, in comparing to human actuality. So I dared to share my thoughts.

JL: You did put posters on Mao's mausoleum though, was that not a political act?

HX: I was against the authoritarian system at the time, but it is not merely about politics. The French Enlightenment, French Revolution, May Fourth Movement are not essentially political movements but about the expression of human beings in terms of art and writing. The basic meaning is not politics. In 1968, when I wrote a poem about freedom, was the same day that Woodstock happened. Human nature is the same all over the world, it is just about the Democracy Wall. Some people are required to stand up and speak out for freedom. Different cultures are quite the same when it comes to pursuing freedom. At Woodstock they were called for freedom through music and the Democracy Wall we were using art and writings, however we were put into jail and in the Western world, Woodstock was seen as a successful movement. When I look back, I see that all things in nature are the same.

The system in China right now is unequal. There are many privileged people and privileged officials and no respect for women. Over the years, I tried to pursue freedom for everyone. For equal human rights and for self-liberation. There were other young people, like you, who come to interview me. They ask me if I consider myself a political figure. I think that is only one facet of my personality. I was trying to pursue freedom in every aspect of life. Some of my activities were political, but that is only one aspect of my personality. People are distorted because they lose the sense to feel nature and feel the principles of the university.

Now, I am trying to promote Chinese culture in order to help Westerners understand. When people in other countries are touched by my art or films, it shows that human nature is the same all over the world.

When people read my poem, "Wild Beasts," they think it is about the age that turned people into beasts, but that is not the case. People are still interpreting my poems through a social background. It is changing thought right now, it is getting better.

True art is not a thing that can be regulated. When I write poems in Italy and Spain, people in China can understand them. The world is getting more and more open.

I always really loved China, but my poems were understood as subversive or against China. I disliked politics because it was always full of desires, I was just trying to be a child in the art world.

JL: How did the factionalism within the movement affect its outcome?

HX: All the people who started the movement were artists, writers and painters who were often naïve. They just said what they wanted to say and did not care about political meaning. This was

targeted a being too direct, or as a threat to the political system. This is how the movement was intensified.

JL: I interviewed Wei Jingsheng earlier and he said that he was willing to die for what he wrote, I assume you did not feel that same way.

HX: I didn't want to be a leader for the movement, for me it was about self-liberation. Wei Jingsheng comes from a really good family and was connected to Bo Xilai, it was different for people like that. For me the Democracy Wall was an individual wall, it was very different.