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TIANANMEN REDUX

THE HARD TRUTH ABOUT
THE EXPANDED NEOLIBERAL WORLD ORDER

Peter Lang

Introduction: A blow to our collective conscience

Every year, the south of China is beset by the monsoon. For Hong Kong, Guangdong province and the coastline all the way up to Shanghai, summertime means constant buffeting by typhoon-force winds. Long into autumn, thunderstorms continue to roll in across the south, forcing the unprepared to hurriedly hail a taxi or buy themselves yet another umbrella from the vendors that suddenly emerge out of every nook and cranny. On Thursday 13 October 2011, the monsoon swept in across the city of Foshan in Guangdong. Qu Feifei, mother of two-year old Yueyue, rushed out to rescue her drying laundry. It was late afternoon and as her mother's back was turned, the little girl toddled off. Suddenly, Yueyue found herself on a narrow street crowded with hardware shops selling construction material. The leaden storm clouds looming overhead had plunged the cramped alley into twilight. It was the kind of commercial road that can be found in millions of villages and cities across China. Hustle. Bustle. Rushing.

Yueyue was hit by a white van and ended up under one of the vehicle's front wheels. The driver paused for a second, then immediately pushed on. The back wheel slowly rolled over the little girl, and the white van was gone. The girl lay prone, feebly moving her arms and legs ever so slightly. Crying, she clutched her bleeding head. Eighteen people passed the seriously injured child without attempting to help her, without calling an ambulance. Eighteen people.

Some stopped to look, only to rush on. A mother walked by with her own child, a five-year old girl. While the indifferent passers-by ignored her, a second, even larger vehicle, a lorry, ran over Yueyue. Finally, an older female street cleaner, Chen Xianmei, approached the injured girl to see how she was. She made sure Yueyue got to a hospital. The doctors did everything they could but were unable to save her life. A week after the little girl was admitted to the intensive care unit, Yueyue's inconsolable parents watched as her heart stopped beating. They blamed themselves – their own failure to stay alert and vigilant – for what had befallen them.

A horrible accident; a family tragedy; two brazen hit-and-runs. But also a tragedy of a higher order: The nineteenth person to pass was the first to help Yueyue.¹ Is only one in nineteen people in China today a Good Samaritan? That would suggest that of China's population of 1 367 million people, just over 70 million feel compassion, while the rest are cold-hearted brutes. That clearly cannot be the case. And yet the incident remains incomprehensible. It conceals within it something more profound, something that can explain the reactions of the people who chose to leave an injured child in the gutter. Could this incident have happened anywhere in the world? Maybe. But the risk is lower in societies and groups where the bonds between people are strong than in environments, such as China, where trust levels are very low.² Does the story of Yueyue reveal something about Foshan? About Chinese people more generally? Canadian China correspondent Mark MacKinnon thinks not. Writing in *The Globe and Mail* after Yueyue's death, he sought a more nuanced approach to the topic of widespread moral decline in China.³ Rather than blaming individuals guilty of walking past a person in need with seeming indifference, he pointed to China's authoritarian institutions in general and the inadequate justice system in particular. People, he claimed, are afraid to offer assistance because they worry about being blamed for any injury caused. On occasion, victims have been known to blame the people who helped them in order to secure financial compensation. There is something to this argument, but the problem needs further elaboration. The fact that Chinese people value so much in life according to its inherent earning potential is the result of broader developments in society. Corrupt courts kowtowing to the moneyed elite outside or inside the Chinese Communist Party is not the only phenomenon that affects the level of trust between individuals. Huge migration to cities has increased

1 Hewitt, Duncan. China debates its 'moral compass'. *Inside Story*. 2011-11-21. <<http://insidestory.org.au/china-debates-its-moral-compass>> (Accessed 2015-06-12).

2 World Values Survey Database. Online Data Analysis. <<http://www.worldvalues-survey.org/WVSONline.jsp>>, (Accessed 2015-06-12).

3 MacKinnon, Mark. Ignored toddler doesn't tell the whole story about China. *Globe and Mail*. 2012-09-10.

the social distance between people, and led to intense competition on the job market and in schools, but more importantly the economic reforms and state-sanctioned pursuit of materialist values have had a negative impact on the trust people place in one another.

Many Chinese reacted strongly and emotionally to the story of Yueyue, which illustrates the fundamental existential and moral conditions of a rapidly modernising China. Many more pieces must, however, be added to a jigsaw that is oftentimes a very contradictory research puzzle, before a more comprehensive picture of China's troubled moral and social landscape can emerge. The transformation of the ideology, strategy and vision of the Communist Party under the reigns of the leaders who succeeded Chairman Mao Zedong in 1976 – Deng Xiaoping in particular – are clearly of great importance. But when and how did this still ongoing monumental transformation assume distinctively new properties, turning human energies onto the specific track that has generated the Chinese society of today? What are the results of economic inequality, social discrimination, stressful competition, and widespread official corruption? Sweeping social changes, generation gaps, the politics of collective memory, how meaning is created and existing community ties? To construct a more persuasive account, a more thorough investigation is required. Where to start? The *long durée* explanation can be found in a series of traumatic catastrophes that befell China in the twentieth century, which the Communist Party has deliberately guided the Chinese people to forget. Above all, and this is the central argument of this book, the sociopolitical and moral landscape of China today originates from the repression of the Chinese student and democracy movement in 1989.

Many Chinese were shocked by the story of Yueyue. Four and a half million people considered what happened a blow to China's collective conscience. That is the number of people estimated to have posted a comment online within a week of Yueyue being run over.⁴ One person criticised both modern Chinese culture and the practice of insincere commenting on the microblog Sina Weibo.

4 Chinese toddler dies a week after being hit by cars, ignored by passersby. *CNN*. 2011-10-21. <<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/10/20/world/asia/china-toddler-dead/>> (Accessed 2015-06-12).

Yueyue was consumed for a week by the fake kindness of netizens... All the well-wishes are fake and only the 18 passers-by are real. Farewell, and do not be born in China in your next life.⁵

Many of those who commented on Weibo probably did so with a heavy heart. But in a society where competition and stress have become the dominant forces, the question is how quickly they put the incident behind them and hurried back to work and school. Government and public institutions as well as far-reaching economic and social reforms help shape the political culture, the norms we share and the glue that binds individuals together in a society-wide community, which is to say trust, solidarity and concern for one's neighbour, outside of one's immediate family context.

This book is about June Fourth 1989. A day that changed China in roughly the same way as the 9/11 attacks against the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon irrevocably changed the United States. But there is a big difference. Few conceptualise and comprehend the global significance of the Beijing massacre, whereas it is widely understood that Osama bin Laden's coordinated aerial attack on Manhattan and the Pentagon in 2001 altered both the international position of the United States and world politics in one fell swoop. According to conventional wisdom, the student movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989 was a parenthesis rather than a site of rupture in the modern history of China;⁶ the calls for democratisation raised at the time were exceptional in the sense that they were non-consequential and yielded no sociopolitical changes. But was that really the case? Could not the Beijing massacre and the social, economic, and educational policies that were implemented in its wake instead be viewed as the start of the political and economic program of modern-day China, i.e. the origin of a neoliberalising, re-kindled and reinvigorated authoritarian party-state? The answers to these questions may demonstrate just how much the massacre on June Fourth 1989 was, in fact, a site of pivotal rupture in Chinese history. If not for that day, China's economic,

5 China's hit-run scandal: Yue yue dies. *Sydney Morning Herald*. 2011-10-21. <<http://www.smh.com.au/world/chinas-hitrun-scandal-yue-yue-dies-20111021-1mbpc>> (Accessed 2015-06-12).

6 Swedish historian Henrik Berggren, for example, made this argument in an editorial column. Berggren, Henrik, Demokrati: Om Europa ska påverka Kina krävs enighet [Democracy: Unity is required if Europe is to affect China]. *Dagens Nyheter*. 2009-05-14.

social and mental landscape would not have undergone the kind of dramatic and breakneck social and economic transformation that has made China rich but unequal, open but hyper-nationalist, moralistic but immoral. As historian Perry Anderson argues: “The depth and scale of the upheaval of 1989 in China was far larger than anything in Eastern Europe in that year, let alone in Russia, then or later.”⁷

Liusi, as the massacre is called in unofficial Chinese parlance, *liu* for “June” and *si* for “Fourth”, was as formative as it was brutal. That day was China’s Ground Zero and paramount leader Deng Xiaoping exploited it as a springboard, launching China and the world into an era referred to by foreign admirers as China’s century. But the story of the crushing of the student movement has not yet been told in a way that enables us to understand the conditions underpinning the national and international politics of today. Our own time and current affairs are so difficult to understand because the misinterpretation of our near past has left many contemporary developments indecipherable. The British Conservative Party under Prime Minister David Cameron has argued that the Conservatives are “the party of working people”;⁸ in order to adapt to a ubiquitous neoliberal logic, even the Swedish Social Democratic Party has a “business plan for Sweden”; a young American responsible for the leaking of information about his country’s intelligence services’ mass surveillance of the country’s citizens flees into exile and seeks political asylum – in authoritarian Russia. Furthermore, many outsiders and quite a few seasoned China-hands stubbornly hold the belief that China is still communist or that a socialist model prevails there – because the Chinese Communist Party claims it is managing a “socialist market economy” and has not seen fit to change the political affiliation on its business cards. Thus, it is high time to clarify what type of social model and political system China has created since Deng Xiaoping initiated economic reforms in 1978.⁹ The events of June Fourth 1989 meant that a new type

7 Anderson, Perry. Two revolutions. *New Left Review* 61, January-February (2010), 88.

8 Dominiczak, Peter. David Cameron revives right to buy and says Tories are the “party of working people”. *Telegraph*. 2015-04-13.

9 Deng’s reform policies were pushed through at the canonized Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee from 18 through 22 December 1978. It was this meeting that marked the beginning of China’s new “open door and reform” agenda.

of hope and optimism about democratic nation building was abandoned in favour of a different state-orchestrated dream of individual pursuit of economic success. Today, this manifests itself, more clearly than ever in Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping's slogan, "The Chinese Dream", which has been heavily marketed by the country's state-owned broadcasters and sleekly packaged on billboards in the street, at bus stops and in airports. Today, flag-waving nationalism is the only discernible collective expression that transcends the materialist and consumerist level of the individual in China.

There is a link between Xi Jinping and Foshan, where Yueyue lost her life. Xi's father Xi Zhongxun pioneered the Special Economic Zones that were established in southern and southeastern China in 1979. Capitalist enclaves were peacefully to coexist with the country's socialist political system. Foshan was one such free zone for new industrial estates. It was a particularly suitable region for research and development on account of its geographical proximity to Hong Kong, which at that time was one of the crown jewels of the Royal British Empire. Foshan underwent rapid transformation in the 1980s, as it became a city of settlers, when migrants seeking a better life arrived with their families from every corner of China.

Much like during the early stages of industrialisation in the United Kingdom and Germany, the rural Chinese population abandoned their fields and raced to fill monotonous workstations in cramped urban milieus where they worked and lived in dreadful conditions. Having once been a place whose inhabitants shared a common history, local culture and distinctive southern dialect, where everyone knew everyone, Foshan turned into a melting pot where everyone was surrounded by strangers.¹⁰ This portrayal calls to mind the image conjured of what economist and sociologist Karl Polanyi in his classic work *The Great Transformation* termed Needhamland, which denoted the English countryside, whose farmers were swayed to move to industrial cities by promises of higher living standards and fewer hardships.¹¹

10 Lee, Haiyan. *The stranger and the Chinese moral imagination*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014.

11 Polanyi, Karl. *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001 (1944).

The difference between Needhamland and Foshan is that the farmers of southern England were reasonably content with their small plots of land and their village communities, and thus had no urgent desire to abandon their demesnes, while the farmers in southern China, having been constricted by the country's planned economy, were more easily lured and enticed by the policies of industrialism. They were escaping lives that still entailed extreme privation and miniscule incomes, despite the fact that the cultivation of private land and the selling of crops had been allowed since the early 1970s. During the reign of Mao Zedong, farmers had not been allowed to travel to their region's capital without seeking special permission to do so. They had been physically shackled to their land for generations. Paradoxically, Mao's Communist revolution in 1949 tied farmers even more closely to their place of birth through the introduction of a rigid household registration system. Therefore, it was the policies of Deng Xiaoping that first entailed truly Polanyian effects. Although there is no reference to Polanyi in Ezra Vogel's biography on Deng, its title, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, indicates the magnitude of the socioeconomic changes that occurred during his reign.¹²

The story of little Yueyue stirred up intense feelings in China. This was reflected in popular postings on the internet, but also in state-controlled media, because moral degeneration, whether perceived in the form of elite corruption or grassroots indifference, can be used for crafting authoritarian policy.¹³ This is not the first time the view that Chinese society is in a state of rapid moral decline has gained a broad following. But indifference to one's neighbour, the topic of a number of powerful short stories written by modern Chinese master Lu Xun in the 1920s and 1930s as well as the works of the writers of "Scar Literature" in the 1970's,

12 Vogel, Ezra. *Deng Xiaoping and the transformation of China*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.

13 A clear example is China's new social credit system that will serve as a remedy to a problem described thus: "China's social transformation has resulted in its gradual transformation from a society of acquaintances into a society of strangers. This has eroded trustworthiness." The article explicitly mentioned the problem that "In recent years, the dilemma of whether or not to be a Good Samaritan has sparked debate in Chinese society." This system is set to register citizens' online and offline behavior to their personal identification card. See: China to set up national credit system, *Chinese Social Sciences Net*, 2014-05-27. <http://english.cssn.cn/topstories/201405/20140527_1186569.shtml> (Accessed 2015-06-15).

after the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution, has taken on new forms today. This time, it is not the consequence of the trampling of China's civilisation under the heels of militarily superior foreign powers such as Japan and the British Empire, as during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nor is it caused by the erosion of popular faith in messianic Maoism, as during the nearly two decades between 1957 and 1976, a period marked by recurring crises, the cult of personality, and continual class struggle.

Writers and critics of the Chinese New Left believe that the degeneracy and moral crisis of post-Mao China are inextricably linked to the pursuit of material happiness and abandonment of socialist values and the Chinese revolution.¹⁴ In this atmosphere, corruption has become endemic at every level of the political system as well as the civil service.¹⁵ Among new leftists such as economist Hu Angang and political scientist Cui Zhiyuan, historian Wang Hui is held to be one of their most prominent members. Apart from Wang, few Chinese intellectuals, whether new leftists or liberals, link the decline of public morality to the 1989 Beijing Massacre and the economic policies that the political leadership were able to implement in the context of the political apathy that followed in its wake. Few foreign scholars have examined this linkage in-depth.¹⁶ I would contend, however, that the death of political idealism in the Chinese mainstream and among most ordinary people has contributed to a pervasive sense that there are no alternatives to the status quo,¹⁷ despite

14 Misra, Kalpana. Neo-left and neo-right in post-Tiananmen China. *Asian Survey* 43, no. 5 (2003): 717–744.

15 It has become the lifeblood and primary motivation of the one-party state. Former member of the Politburo Standing Committee Zhou Yongkang and his partners in the oil industry are said to have embezzled \$14.5 million. See Kang Lim, Benjamin and Blanchard, Ben. China seizes \$14.5 billion assets from family, associates of ex-security chief. *Reuters*. 2014-03-30. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/30/us-china-corruption-zhou-idUSBREA2T02S20140330>> (Accessed 2015-06-12).

16 For exceptions, see: Nathan, Andrew. Modern China's original Sin: Tiananmen Square's legacy of repression. *Foreign Affairs*. 2014-06-03. <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2014-06-03/modern-chinas-original-sin>> (Accessed 2015-06-12); Lagerkvist, Johan. China's risky reforms: why Beijing has reason to worry. *Foreign Affairs*. 2014-02-19. <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2014-02-19/chinas-risky-reforms>> (Accessed 2015-06-12).

17 The once dynamic "new citizens movement" and several of its leaders, such as Xu Zhiyong have been sentenced to prison by an increasingly repressive state security