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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The 1978-1981 Democracy Wall Movement and the Reformists in the Communist Party Leadership after Mao's Death

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In late 1978, two years after Mao's death, a reform debate on a wide range of economic and political issues erupted under Deng Xiaoping's leadership. Groups of young people demanded liberties and a democratisation of the political system. They published their demands on big-character posters (*dazibao*) and in small independent journals in a number of cities – a movement soon called the "Democracy Wall Movement" or "Spring of Peking". Some reformers in the communist leadership were attracted by this grassroots movement of young citizens. Heated debates involved even the highest levels of the Party hierarchy. Deng Xiaoping had at first praised the role of critical opinions, but later, in his famous speech on the Four Basic Principles, the sympathisers of this grassroots movement were eventually stopped by him. Based on interviews with activists and the memoirs of some reformist party cadres, this article traces the flow of information towards the leadership, cross-relationships between reform activists inside and outside the CCP, and the evolving roles of party leaders such as Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang.

1978 年底，時值毛澤東逝世兩周年之際，鄧小平領導下的中國爆發了一場縱貫政治、經濟領域的改革大辯論。一些年輕人主張社會自由化、政治民主化。他們把訴求以大字報的形式張貼在城裡的民主牆上或發表在小型民辦刊物上。這一運動很快被冠以“民主牆運動”之名，也被稱為 1978-1981 年間的“北京之春”。中共領導高層的一些改革派也被這次黨外的基層民主運動所影響，甚至在最高層的中央改革會議上也能聽到各種不同的觀點。鄧小平起初對大字報及其發揮的批評作用予以肯定，但後來在關於“四項基本原則”的重要講話中，遏止了同情民主運動的勢力。本文基於對民主運動親歷者的採訪和當時黨內改革派人士的回憶錄，分析高層幹部 and 領導人獲取基層民主運動信息的縱向途徑、黨內改革派與黨外民運活動分子的橫向關係。對民主運動的鎮壓由鄧小平親自策劃指揮，時任中共黨委書記、前共青團第一書記的胡耀邦並無足夠權力支持這次基層運動並保護這批年輕的民運人士。

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**Keywords:** Democracy Wall Movement, *dazibao*, Forum on Theoretical Work, Deng Xiaoping, reform faction

**關鍵詞：**民主牆運動，大字報，理論工作務虛會，鄧小平，改革派

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## Introduction: Witnesses speaking out

The “Spring of Peking” 北京之春 of 1978 to 1981 (in contrast to the Tian’anmen events of 1989, also sometimes referred to as Spring of Peking) was a young citizens’ movement at the beginning of the Reform and Opening (*Gaige Kaifang* 改革開放) era at the end of the 1970s. On “big-character posters” and in independent journals, it advocated civil liberties and democratic reforms. A number of artists and writers joined the movement.

Some reformers inside the Communist Party sympathised with the youthful rights activists; others saw them as allies against the still powerful “conservatives” in the leadership. But as the Democracy Movement also challenged basic principles of communist rule, all pro-democracy activities were banned in early 1981. Dozens of activists were eventually arrested and received harsh prison terms; many later went into exile.<sup>1</sup>

This article focuses on how high-level cadres and politicians were kept informed on the movement, and on the relationship and cross-connections between Communist Party reformers and the grassroots democracy activists. Between 2013 and 2015, this author interviewed about 30 main activists and observers, most in their 70s or 80s at the time. Related memoirs and personal accounts published on the internet, as well as some articles and books printed inside and outside mainland China, have also been analysed. (The interviews and other materials are accessible at <https://beijing-spring.univie.ac.at>.)

Until the late nineties, about fifteen to twenty years after the events, there was still little information available from China on the debates between party officials and independent activists. After 1989, China continued to remain silent on much of the contemporary history related to democratic and liberal ideas. Many former activists were still in jail or did not dare (or have an opportunity) to speak out. Those in exile were often

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<sup>1</sup> For summaries and details of this first Spring of Peking, see (among others) Sidane 1980, Christiansen et al. 1981, Garside 1981, Nathan 1985, Black 1993, Goldman & MacFarquhar 1999, Paltemaa 2005 and Chen 2006.

more concerned with political campaigning than with historical details. And foreign sinologists rather focused on the 1989 events and issues of China's new global role. International authors analysing the Democracy Wall Movement and the key events of 1978-1981 either lacked information about such cross-relations, or they often focused on factional disputes within the party leadership.

Even Ezra Vogel, whose book *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, which first appeared in 2011 (Vogel 2013), discusses at length the power struggles with Mao's declared successor Hua Guofeng 華國鋒 and his supporters, also puts the debates on Democracy Wall into this perspective. But he had also interviewed exiled reform economist Yu Guangyuan 於光遠, who reported some of the sympathies at the 1979 Forum on Theoretical Work (*Lilun Gongzuo Wuxuhui* 理論工作務虛會) for the Democracy Wall activists (Vogel 2013, 254-260). George Black and Robin Munro in their *Black Hands of Beijing* do already mention the meetings between Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 and activists Wang Juntao 王軍濤 and Lü Pu 呂樸 and the debates among various dissident groups (Black 1993, 54-73). The question of party officials systematically collecting information on the Democracy Movement was not touched upon.

It was only around the year 1995 that some of the former activists (almost all in exile by now) and former party cadres (some also disgraced and in exile, other reformists remaining inside China, but often side-lined or disappointed by the increasing anti-reformist mood in the country) were willing to speak out and contribute their personal recollections and views. These are the new insights this article tries to analyse. Even official Chinese publications on Party history have tried to give an interpretation of what happened at this crucial crossroad of recent history, namely the years of intensive reform debates and social changes after Mao Zedong's death in 1976, and the emergence of a new political power center around Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 and leaders such as Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang 趙紫陽 (see Cheng et al. 2008).

Even today we can obtain only a partial view of how the leadership dealt with this grassroots democracy movement. Many details remain tightly locked up in the Party archives away from the Chinese and international public. From some of the highest

Party and state leaders we just know of a few remarks that need interpretation and analysis. From some others, though, especially some mid-ranking cadres, we have obtained more comprehensive accounts.

The sources I was able to use for this analysis are by no means fully representative, but – as often for Chinese contemporary history – we have to take what we can get and try to evaluate the information available. The following accounts are an analysis of oral history (the interviews) and various personal reminiscences of people active in the movement (or on the side of party reformers), and an attempt to relate these memories to known historical and political facts.

Some of the main questions that this article tries to answer are the following:

- How well were high-ranking cadres in China actually informed about the Spring of Peking movement?
- How close were the contacts between the young grassroots activists and known reformers inside the Communist Party?
- How was the Democracy Wall Movement debated at various Party conferences?
- To what extent did the demands and proposals of the independent activists impress and influence reform-minded cadres?
- And what role did politicians such as Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang play?

## **Internal reports on the Democracy Movement**

The Chinese system of privileged information for different levels of the “elite” (Party and other cadres) has been analysed by various authors (e.g. Rudolph 1984, Schoenhals 1985, or Opletal 1981). Nevertheless, actual material relating to the democracy movement of that time remains scarce. Again, we have to rely on the little available to draw conclusions. Still, this gives us an idea about what higher Chinese officials knew about the movement, and what kind of biases were carried by such reports for the “elite”.

Top Chinese politicians, it seems, were all along well informed, not only about political statements and goals of the democracy movement, but also about individual activists and debates inside the organisations. A number of internal (or classified) government publications for high-ranking cadres reported on the contents of the independent journals and big-character posters and on the debates at the Democracy Wall and even in the meetings of activists.

“Reporters” (in fact party officials sent out by their superiors to collect information) were conducting interviews with the mostly young (and often a bit naïve) activists, with the objective of writing “internal” (*neibu* 内部) accounts for the political elite. One such report on the Guizhou Enlightenment Society (*Qimengshe* 啟蒙社) was leaked a few years ago and made public on various websites (e.g. Wang & Zhou 1979).

The Harvard College Library (Cambridge, Massachusetts) holds copies of several issues of a publication called *Situation Summary* (*Qingkuang Huibian* 情況彙編) from the end of 1978. This information bulletin, restricted to high-ranking cadres, was printed by the *People's Daily* up to several times a day. The available copies report some contents of the latest big-character posters as well as current trends and debates at the Beijing Democracy Wall.

Several of the activists interviewed by this author describe how they were contacted and questioned at the end of 1978 or in 1979 by such representatives of internal party media. They were not only media workers, but also sent to observe and sound out Democracy Wall activists. Nevertheless, they often used their real names, and the young civil rights activists (and avant-garde artists) were usually quite aware of their identities. They knew that these journalists were not only reporting, but also playing a mediator role between the dissidents and leading officials. Details of a number of their reports have become known since then.

### The Story of the Guizhou “Enlightenment Society” (“貴州啟蒙社”始末記)

In 1979 (the precise date is not mentioned), two journalists of the *People’s Daily*, Wang Yong’an 王永安 and Zhou Xiuqiang 周修強, were sent out to investigate the Guizhou Enlightenment Society, one of the first grassroots groups of the Democracy Movement. In October 1978, the poet Huang Xiang 黃翔 and some of his friends had travelled to Beijing to put up posters with their poems and political demands.

The two journalists held several longish interviews with Huang and other members of that group. Their report was published by the internal service of the *People’s Daily*, but was later leaked to websites outside China. It was reposted on several Chinese sites, but has been removed since. A copy of the original printed report is held by the Harvard College Library.

The report itself tries to be neutral, often even sympathetic to the group and its main representatives. It explains their family backgrounds (e.g. noting that some of their parents had been “unjustly” considered “spies” and “counter-revolutionaries” during the 1950s, and that some were imprisoned or executed). It speaks of maltreatment of the young activists during the Cultural Revolution (when Huang Xiang was labeled both a “reactionary” and a “mentally ill person”; others were kept in prison as “counter-revolutionaries”). Such experiences are explained as reasons for their critical stance towards the Communist Party and their demands for “democracy”, “human rights”, or a “legal system”.

The account also explains that Huang Xiang and the others were encouraged in November 1978 by Deng Xiaoping’s statement that China’s constitution allowed *dazibao*. But it also recounts that when Huang Xiang, just after the establishment of diplomatic relations with Washington in January 1979, wrote his letter asking for support from US President Jimmy Carter, some “representatives of the masses” critically asked, “Is America really a paradise for democracy?” and “Why should China discuss its internal politics with foreign leaders?” This letter was also presented as one reason for a split in the Society in February 1979. The report also describes debates in the group whether to support or oppose Deng Xiaoping, and disagreement among Guizhou

provincial leaders whether to arrest the activists or just put them “under surveillance” (a kind of house arrest).

In its conclusion, the article argues against persecution of the activists. Yes, they did commit “some mistakes” in their writings, it says, but often their “words were distorted”, adding that they acted openly, exercising their “right to form associations”; and it argued that the fact that the “enemy” (notably a Taiwanese radio station) had praised them was not enough to consider them “bad people” (all quotes from Wang & Zhou 1979).

### **The “Situation Summary”**

This was a regular publication printed twice a day, informing high-ranking cadres about on-going delicate political developments, and supplying details usually not available to average newspaper readers.

The five available issues of this internal publication from late 1978 give an interesting insight into how high-ranking cadres learned about the Xidan Democracy Wall in Beijing and the contents of *dazibao*. The issues represent only a limited period of time and are certainly not sufficient for an overall analysis, but we can see that the details were carefully selected; the quotes from *dazibao* were brief, with their context often omitted. It specified places where posters had been affixed (No. 758, 24.11.1978), and it added some analytical comments. Readers were, for example, informed that the number of *dazibao* had “increased” and that “many, many thousands” (No. 770, 30.11.1978) gathered to read the posters.

It is mentioned also that readers of the *dazibao* debated with foreigners present (No. 758, 24.11.1978), and that they questioned them about the Watergate scandal when US president Nixon had to resign in 1974. The *Summary* refers to “open letters” to Party Chairman Hua Guofeng and other leaders (usually giving a few details), and says that many authors of posters speak about personal grievances, often asking for rehabilitation and removal of past injustices (*ibid.*).

The same issue mentions a critical *dazibao* posted by the Enlightenment group from Guizhou, without quoting the contents, but saying that others “refuted” such criticism, and told them “just to go back to Guizhou”. Readers are told that the group made “malicious attacks on the Great Leader Chairman Mao”, which again were strongly “refuted” by other authors (*ibid.*).

One issue a few days later (No. 780, 2.12.1978) reports that “more posters that disapprove debating about Chairman Mao are seen in the streets of the capital”, citing a large number of positive remarks on Mao and also his successor Hua Guofeng. Especially from this issue, the intention to manipulate its high-ranking readers into a certain direction can definitely be felt. In general, from the few issues available, criticism of the leadership is mentioned, but often without giving precise wordings, while voices affirming the official line seem to be highlighted.

### **Tang Xin’s internal report on the Democracy Movement**

One name regularly mentioned in the interviews with activists<sup>2</sup> is that of Tang Xin 唐欣 who used to work for the *Beijing Daily* 北京日報 internal service, but who was also a party official in close contact with Beijing mayor Lin Hujia 林乎加 and other “moderate conservatives”. In his reminiscences in an interview given in 2008 to journalists of the reformist magazine *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Yan Huang Chun Qiu* 炎黃春秋) and later published in Hong Kong (Ding & Xing 2015, 1-27), Tang asserts that between February 1979 and 1980, he had drafted “a number of internal reports” on the activities of dissident groups, and that they were read by politicians such as Hu Yaobang (Tang 2015, 13).

Tang is the son of Tang Ke 唐克, who held several ministerial posts (such as those of petroleum industries and metallurgy) during the 1970s and 80s. Tang Xin also studied engineering, but became a “journalist” (or rather a party cadre) of the *Beijing Daily* in

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<sup>2</sup> University of Vienna [n.d.] includes interviews with Xu Wenli, Wang Juntao, Liu Qing, Huang Xiang and Xue Mingde, conducted in 2014.



1978, more precisely of its internal publications department, an institution that existed (and still exists) in every big state or Party newspaper. Such publications were not intended for “ordinary” readers, but for selected groups of cadres and high-ranking politicians, as they also reported on politically sensitive issues and details not usually covered by the regular media.

At the end of 1978, Tang Xin relates in his memoirs (Tang 2015, 4), living in the home of an important politician, he already had access to such classified information on dissident activities and the contents of critical posters from Democracy Wall. As he often asked himself why it was mainly foreign journalists who were reporting on them, he proposed to his editor-in-chief to take a closer look himself at the *dazibao* near the Xidan intersection.

The editors agreed, and in early 1979, initially for ten days, Tang Xin investigated Democracy Wall. He met with a number of leading dissidents and drew up a 10,000 character report headlined *Investigations and Impressions from Democracy Wall* (*Minzhuqiang wai caifang yinxiang ji* 民主牆外採訪印象記) and printed by the *Beijing Daily Internal Service* (*Beijing Ribao Neican* 北京日報內參) (Tang 2015, 8).

The full text of this report has never become available to the general public inside or outside China, but from Tang’s own account and from a leading dissident who had a chance to read it (Liu 2014),<sup>3</sup> we learn some details about what was written up for the state and party officials. The basic assessments that Tang elaborates in his memoirs seem to follow those from his original report:

I felt like this: At Democracy Wall there were three factions. The first and most important one was the ‘April 5th Forum’ led by Xu Wenli 徐文立, Liu Qing 劉青 and Yang Jing 楊靖. ... Xu had, like many others, suffered during the Cultural Revolution, but not very heavily. His main slogan was that common people should also participate in debating big politics. ... The second faction

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<sup>3</sup> Liu Qing was a co-founder of the independent journal *April 5th Forum* in Beijing. Arrested in 1980 for publishing the transcript of the 1979 trial of Wei Jingsheng and imprisoned for almost eleven years. In 1992 he arrived in the US where he became chairman of the organisation *Human Rights in China*.

was the leftists, represented at Democracy Wall by the journal *The Spring of Peking*.<sup>4</sup> Their chief editor was Zhou Weimin 周为民, a Central Committee member of the Youth League, and his deputy was Wang Juntao, an alternate member of the Committee. ... Among the eleven editors, nine were sons of high-ranking cadres, and almost all of them were “April 5th Heroes”.<sup>5</sup> They ... seemed to follow the most radical party line.<sup>6</sup> ... The third faction stood on the right; it consisted mainly of Wei Jingsheng 魏京生. Wei was more advanced than all others in the emancipation of minds. His journal *Exploration* proposed a “Fifth Modernisation” because “Four Modernisations” without political modernisation were inconceivable for him. And he opposed any form of personality cult; he was particularly worried that such a cult might arise around Deng Xiaoping. (Tang 2015, 9)



Photo 1: Selection of independent journals

<sup>4</sup> *The Spring of Peking* was the English title for the journal *Beijing zhi chun* 北京之春 used at the time by its publishers.

<sup>5</sup> Persecuted activists of the 1976 Tian'anmen protests.

<sup>6</sup> Advocating reforms more than others.

Liu recalls Tang's very negative assessment of Wei Jingsheng's journal *Exploration*, adding that activists from other journals (like his *April 5th Forum*) also disapproved of some of Wei's positions, but Tang's opinion seemed a lot more devastating:

For Tang Xin it was not only “extreme” but it also represented a bourgeois and reactionary ideology and dangerous leaning. He included in this group organisations like the Chinese Human Rights Alliance.<sup>7</sup> The journals that Tang Xin liked most were ‘The Spring of Peking’<sup>8</sup> and ‘Fertile Soil’,<sup>9</sup> both almost openly praised by him. In his article he also wrote positively about ‘Today’,<sup>10</sup> which he referred to as a “contribution” and an “achievement” for literature and arts. The other people's journals and organisations he just described as remaining in a grey area. (Liu 2003, 3)

When Liu Qing, a leading editor of the dissident journal *April 5th Forum* (*Si Wu Luntan* 四五論壇), talked to this author in 2014, he said that he never possessed Tang Xin's report, but had a chance to read it at that time. In his recollections written in 1995 (Liu 2003, 3), he still remembers some of the details of Tang Xin's judgments on the Democracy Movement. Liu more or less confirms Tang's accounts:

Tang Xin's article emphasised the individual personalities: to more than ten he devoted a whole paragraph in his text. ... On the ‘Spring of Peking’ people he made quite flattering remarks, calling them “Tian'anmen heroes”,<sup>11</sup> and adding that some of them were Central Committee members or candidates of the Youth League, that they came from families of high-ranking cadres, and therefore they possessed a good background in politics. They also had a clear political stance, and they were usually a few steps ahead of the leadership's intentions. The staff members of the other journals and organisations were more vaguely

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<sup>7</sup> Zhongguo Renquan Tongmeng 中国人权同盟 of Ren Wanding 任畹町.

<sup>8</sup> Beijing zhi Chun 北京之春, the journal close to the *Youth League*.

<sup>9</sup> Wotu 沃土.

<sup>10</sup> Jintian 今天, a dissident literature and art magazine.

<sup>11</sup> Referring to the 1976 protests.

described: on the ‘April 5th Forum’ he wrote that we mainly consisted of workers who preferred organisational activities, and that we showed no peculiarities in regard to ideology or theory. (Liu 2003, 3)

Liu Qing also tries to analyse how Tang Xin did his work, and why he had more sympathies for some, and less for others:

Tang Xin’s article was obviously based on personal impressions, sometimes far from reality. As for the ‘April 5th Forum’, he only noticed some members of the core editorial board, although there existed several other gifted contributors ... Tang Xin himself was the son of a high-ranking official, and therefore he more easily understood ideas and opinions that came from the same sphere. Some of his judgments still seemed quite questionable. ... The internal reports only painted a rather vague picture; it was certainly not a signal for repression, as the authorities at that time were more interested in influencing the Democracy Movement and even clinching a deal with it. (ibid.)

Liu Qing, the main interlocutor of Tang Xin, tried to justify his preparedness to talk openly to the party official by saying that he believed the analysis of such “journalists” could exert a positive influence on the opinion of the Chinese leadership, different from much harsher State Security files:

Although these were internal reports, they were quite different from those forwarded by police or security institutions who wrote on us in the style of enemy reconnaissance, while the internal media, although not eulogising, employed a generally objective and fair approach towards us. Not just any reporter could write for the internal publications: their journalists always acted on behalf of someone. What happened at Democracy Wall was considered important, and those who had contact were all well-trained and influential. A bit later we could also read this report. It began with a sentence in which the reporter described

his participation in the Joint Editorial Conference<sup>12</sup> as being like a step on the surface of the moon, as arriving in a completely different world. (ibid.)

When we analyse the various reports that have become known externally (in full, or by some details reflected in various accounts and memoirs), we should still keep in mind that they were not objective and comprehensive factual accounts, but tried to filter information in such a way as to give it a bias intended by the authors (or those who had ordered the reports).

What Tang Xin tried to do, for example, was to distinguish between “good” and “bad” dissidents. But assessments like his seem to have only temporarily influenced the higher party leaders. In the end, when the general crackdown was ordered in early 1981, Deng Xiaoping put them all into the same basket of “illegal publications” and “anti-party” and “anti-socialist” groups (Zhonggong zhongyang, 1981).

### “An Analysis of the Xidan Democracy Wall” (*Xidan Minzhuqiang pouxi* 西單民主牆剖析)

Several sources mention another internal report on the Democracy Movement that was presented to the Forum on Theoretical Work held in Beijing in early 1979 (e.g. Zhang 2015, 52). This was a meeting of several hundred leading propaganda and media cadres, economists, social scientists, and some *Politburo* members (including Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang, who did not actually participate but delivered important speeches).

This *Analysis of the Xidan Democracy Wall* by two *People’s Daily* reporters, Fan Rongkang 范榮康 and Yu Huanchun 餘煥春, was first orally presented to the participants of the Forum, then printed in one of the briefing papers (*jianbao* 簡報) for the participants, and later in the *People’s Daily Internal Service* (*Renmin Ribao Neican*

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<sup>12</sup> General meeting of editors of the independent journals.

人民日報內參), distributed to a much larger number of high-ranking officials throughout the country.

Again the full text is not available, but some details have become indirectly known through recollections of participants and a book by the official party historians Cheng Zhongyuan, Li Zhenghua, and Wang Yuxiang (Cheng et al. 2008), analysing the Theory Forum and confirming the wide-spread sympathies for the Democracy Wall activists among the participants.

While the basic text of this book comes from a version available in regular Chinese bookstores, luckily there exists a slightly expanded text, adding names and a few details. It probably derives from an earlier (maybe restricted) version of this book. The precise source needs still to be verified, but there is no doubt about the authenticity. On the Theory Forum of 1979 it says [with information from the “expanded version” in brackets]:

Two comrades [Forum participants Fan Rongkang and Yu Huanchun from the ‘People’s Daily’ wrote a long contribution and] spoke together on February 14 on the topic ‘An Analysis of the Xidan Democracy Wall’. They enumerated many facts, coming to the conclusion that the main tendency of the Democracy Wall was a healthy one proving that the young people analysed problems strictly according to the principles of Marxism-Leninism, that they courageously handled the truth and contributed their forces to implementing the Four Modernisations [of industry, agriculture, national defence and science]. The authors also pointed out that the Democracy Wall had caused many problems to be resolved. Nevertheless it seems that their viewpoints have approached those who used the Democracy Wall to propagate erroneous ideas and create unrest. (Cheng et al. 2008, 297)



Photo 2: Independent journals sold at the Xidan Wall (June 1979, photo by Helmut Opletal)

The presentation was followed by a lively debate and even a formal resolution to propose a central venue for the *dazibao* that could replace the Xidan Wall:

After the collective presentation [by Fan and Yu], a passionate debate emerged among the group members present, leading to a clear consensus: The Xidan Democracy Wall was a vivid example of democratic life in China that was widely noted in China and abroad. The issues debated at the Democracy Wall, the proposals and criticisms raised there, made it necessary to support it. In a resolution, the steering group of the Forum was prompted to transmit this viewpoint to the Central Committee. (Cheng et al. 2008, 297)

The expanded text (no page numbers) adds the precise wording of this proposal to the *Central Committee*, including some arguments:

The Workers' Cultural Palace should become a place where people could freely express their opinions. Inside the park, a space for putting up *dazibao* should be set aside, a location for discussions and controversial debates, a site

for people to express their personal opinions. This could also strengthen the close ties between the Party and the masses. Important Party and State officials could alternately show up there to listen to the opinions and demands of the people, and to directly explain the difficulties and problems of China. At the same time they could clarify contradictions. The tiny minority of troublemakers would be led to the right path in this way.

Noting the very sympathetic tone of the report towards the Democracy Movement, one must keep in mind that the main editors of the *People's Daily*, Editor-in Chief Hu Jiwei 胡績偉 and his deputy Wang Ruoshui 王若水, were already known as open sympathisers of the Democracy Wall at that time. In 1989, after the Tian'anmen events, they were both sacked. They left for exile in the United States. Therefore, when the first edition of this book was published by the Party historians in 1998, it was already used to present them as belonging to “a small number” of participants who “completely negated socialism and ... Marxism-Leninism” (Cheng et al. 2008, 296).

## **The meetings between Tang Xin and the dissidents**

To better understand the intentions and mechanisms of information gathering, it is worth taking a closer look at the contacts between *Beijing Daily* reporter Tang Xin and Liu Qing of the *April 5th Forum* and other dissidents already mentioned before. Tang himself talks extensively about this very peculiar episode, while Liu Qing has made public his version of these meetings.

During the time when Tang Xin was investigating Democracy Wall in 1979, he met most of the leading dissidents, altogether 125 persons, as he recounts, and he drew up the 10,000 character report mentioned before. Before visiting the Wall for the first time, Tang Xin spoke to his direct superior Wang Fengyu 王豐玉, who was a close collaborator of Hu Yaobang (a Politburo member in charge of propaganda at that time), which means that Tang's research was known and agreed at the highest level.



Before it started, Tang worried about how he would be received by the dissidents, and he even took some precautionary measures:

Going to Democracy Wall for the first time, I felt quite anxious. When I arrived there, I found an edition of the 'April 5th Forum', one of the big publications. It had a contact address written on it, Dong Si Shi Tiao 東四十條, Liu Qing's apartment. I noted this address on a piece of paper which I handed to my sister telling her: In case I am not able to come back, please immediately call Uncle Lin<sup>13</sup> so that he can rescue me. But when I arrived at Liu Qing's place, he received me very cordially. This was the beginning of my long contacts with the Democracy Wall that were to last for several months. (Tang 2015, 8-9)

From the other side, Liu describes this first meeting like this:

Tang Xin briefly knocked at the door, opened it, and stepped in. I was just in a conversation with Lin Gang of 'Spring of Peking'. ... Tang Xin looked at us and asked which person was Liu Qing of the Joint Editorial Conference. He introduced himself as a journalist of the 'Beijing Daily' and pulled out a press card to show it to me, smiling, not bragging, but more to prove himself open and trying to gain our trust. It belonged to his job to meet us, unlike other officials who had come and told us that they wanted to talk to us in a private capacity. (Liu 2003, 3)

Liu Qing says that he remained sceptical when Tang tried to explain and justify his interest:

Tang Xin said that the whole world was discussing Democracy Wall, but the Chinese media kept their eyes closed; it seemed an awkward situation that they did not notice and ask questions. He hoped that information would not only depend on reports from abroad. He had come to find out things himself, without any ulterior motives; there was no reason for us to worry. I did not know

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<sup>13</sup> Beijing's Mayor and Party Secretary Lin Hujia.

why he used this phrase, but it seemed as if he was actually trying to tell me the contrary. ... We had often heard of spies and had earlier discussed this among us, but we wished to remain open and transparent, and even the police we wanted to receive in such way. That is what I also told Tang Xin ... to demonstrate our openness and transparency to him, and as there was a meeting of the Joint Editorial Conference planned for this very evening, I decided to tell him that he could also come and listen if he wanted. This time he arched his eyebrows and just said “Really?” (Liu 2003, 3)

Liu had just invited the representative of one of the main Communist Party papers to attend the Joint Editorial Conference of the various independent journals, where the dissidents coordinated – especially after the arrest of the female activist Fu Yuehua 傅月華<sup>14</sup> – their common approach and line of action. It was by any measure an extremely sensitive meeting. But, as Liu Qing recalls, there was hardly any critical remark: the participants of the meeting were even interested and eager to talk to an official, hoping that such a meeting would lead to “objective” articles in the media, and they thought that the unforeseen interest by an official journalist was probably arranged by reformist forces in the Party. Liu Qing remembers:

Tang Xin arrived an hour later than agreed; he explained that he wanted to give us the opportunity to discuss thoroughly whether we would really allow him to attend the Joint Conference. ... It seemed that his thoughts were even more numerous and weirder than ours. That probably had its reasons. He removed his coat, and again pulled out his journalist accreditation to let every single participant inspect it. Most were taken by surprise: they only kept it briefly, some even said, “Did we not trust you enough?” But not with all of them did the perplexity exceed their curiosity. When someone wanted to hand the press card back to Tang Xin, Wei Jingsheng and Lu Lin 路林, who were sitting at the end of the bed, interrupted him. Lu Lin stretched out his hand to grab the

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<sup>14</sup> A woman arrested because she had organized a protest march in January 1979 by so-called petitioners who carried a banner reading “*Down with hunger, down with repression, we want human rights, we want democracy*”.

card, turning it around also to closely scrutinise both the front and the back. And smiling and completely innocently, they asked Tang Xin two more questions, whether the press accreditation had been issued just recently, and if he was a reporter working for the internal publications department. (Liu 2003, 3)

Liu Qing thinks that one reason why Tang eventually, in his report for the *Beijing Daily Internal Service*, portrayed Wei Jingsheng and the *Exploration* magazine in such a negative light, was the cool reception and scepticism he felt from Wei on this first occasion.

In his later recollections, Tang Xin seems somehow to euphemise his judgments on the Democracy Movement, or at least put it into a more positive context, without mentioning some of his originally negative conclusions. He says, for example, that in one of his conversations with Lin Hujia, the Beijing mayor also opposed Wei Jingsheng's detention (Tang 2015, 11), and he mentions that he convinced Lin Hujia that Ren Wanding's arrest, in April 1979, was not right:

Wei Jingsheng was arrested in March, Ren Wanding on April 5th because of his 'Human Rights Manifesto'. This seemed a bit exaggerated to me, as people were there to protest Wei Jingsheng's detention. I happened to be present that day. Plainclothes police in gym shoes, but otherwise in street wear, had come to beat up the crowd; they pushed the Democracy Wall people directly towards a female foreign correspondent. When I left, as I had no other business, I went directly to Lin Hujia's office. That's roughly what I told him: "How can it be that during broad daylight, you are sending people to cause turmoil and making us look like fools in front of the whole world? Aren't we just losing our face this way?" Lin Hujia was furious; he banged on the table and loudly cursed the public security office. This was probably one of the reasons why they initiated an investigation against me. (Tang 2015, 12-13)

In the 2008 interview, Tang claims that he even became accused of "illegal activities" because of his connections with the dissidents. But Lin Hujia put this into the right

perspective again, yelling at a security director that he himself had ordered Tang's activities (Tang 2015, 12).

There were certainly other similar meetings between party officials and dissidents (e.g. at local levels), but those between Tang Xin and the independent Beijing editors are not only relatively well documented, they also clearly show how such relations were used by each side to sound out the other's intentions, to try to influence the other side, or to test some ideas. It was not a level playing field, though: the party representative was clearly in a stronger position (as it eventually turned out), and he certainly did not always reveal the full intentions and realities of power behind the scenes.

Tang Xin also mentions that practically all the dissident organisations were infiltrated by police informers (*ibid.*), a fact confirmed by other activists. Xu Wenli says in his interview that there had been at least one secret agent planted into the *April 5th Forum* editorial board under a false name. He passed information on a meeting of Xu with *People's Daily* editors directly to the public security authorities, who immediately informed Deng Xiaoping's office, with questions asked and negative consequences for the editors (Xu 2014). Deputy Editor Wang Ruoshui later (when he was in exile in the US) also confirmed that he had been formally denounced and questioned by the Ministry of Public Security for his contacts with Xu Wenli (Wang 1994).

### **Other reports**

There must have been many other "internal" reports published in Beijing and in the provinces. Tang Xin mentions other investigation papers he compiled (Tang 2015, 13). Liu Qing speaks of one of his contacts, Tang Ruoxi of the Politics Research Department of the Youth League: "Together with colleagues he drafted a report on the Democracy Wall in the name of the Youth League's Central Committee, describing meticulously various journals and organisations. The report contained many positive and commendatory phrases as well as some proposals on how to control and influence the Democracy Movement." (Liu 2003, 3) And the *People's Daily* chief editor Hu Jiwei remarks:

When the Democracy Wall first appeared, the central leaders all followed it very closely. Chen Yun 陳雲<sup>15</sup> issued special instructions for the People's Daily to send a reporter deep into the midst of the crowd to relay the movement's dynamics and situation. The paper dispatched Internal Political Bureau editor Wang Yong'an<sup>16</sup> to perform this task. I repeatedly warned him to do no more than try to learn the situation, understand its direction, and ask for materials, and to absolutely avoid declaring his own opinions. Wang Yong'an wrote numerous "internal" reports for the central leadership. (Hu 2004)

One question we might ask is whether the various "internal reports" on the Democracy Wall movement spread relative sympathy towards the movement and its activists. They probably did, particularly because some of the main media who published these reports (like the *People's Daily*, and to some extent also the *Beijing Daily*) were close to the reformist factions in the party. But if we look at Tang Xin's judgments, they were mixed or even negative towards some groups and individuals. And others, especially those that did not come from the media but from state security organs, were certainly not as benevolent to the activists and their demands.

### **Tang Xin as an intermediary**

Tang repeatedly portrays his own perception of the Democracy Movement in a positive light, and he even tries to present the attitudes of well-known conservative officials as more favourable than they probably were. But neither Deng Liqun 鄧力群 nor Hu Qiaomu 胡喬木 (both holding leading posts in the Academy of Social Sciences and in the CCP Propaganda Department) nor Lin Hujia were known to be friends of the Spring of Peking. This became clear also in a debate that Tang had with Hu Qiaomu on the removal of the Democracy Wall from the central Xidan intersection to the much remoter Yuetan Park 月壇公園 towards the end of 1979.

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<sup>15</sup> 1905-1995, Party elder supporting Deng Xiaoping.

<sup>16</sup> The journalist who co-authored the report on the Guizhou Enlightenment Society.

The authorities had already discarded the idea of allowing “a kind of Chinese Hyde Park” (Tang 2015, 11) in the city centre of Beijing at the Workers’ Cultural Palace just next to Tian’anmen and instead proposed the more remote Yuetan Park. Tang Xin was used to convey the leadership’s decision to close down the Xidan Wall and open a much more restricted venue to the democracy activists. Of course they did not agree, but Tang just put forward all sorts of arguments without disclosing that the matter had already been decided by his superiors: “I transmitted this opinion to Liu Qing and the others, and discussed this matter with them. Liu Qing has never understood in whose name I was doing this” (Tang 2015, 11).

Liu Qing remarks that he never considered Tang’s proposal an honest one. And looking back, he describes this conversation in a slightly different way:

As he always did, Tang Xin started with some explanations before exposing his new idea. This time he not only stressed in a serious and firm tone that these were purely his personal thoughts, that he spoke in nobody’s name, and that he had not been asked by anyone to do this, but he also explained verbosely the advantages and the necessity of moving the Democracy Wall. ... Only at the end did Tang Xin say that he considered Yuetan Park a suitable location. (Liu 2003, 3)

It became clear, Liu says, that Tang had not played honestly. And looking back on such a proposal, it remains very doubtful that the leadership would ever have seriously considered it.

### **Encounters between politicians and democracy activists**

There was another matter that Tang Xin saw himself in a capacity to mediate, apparently with some initiative of his own. He wanted to establish contacts between moderate democracy campaigners and politicians he was close to. He says that he personally initiated meetings between the CCP Central Committee members Hu Qiaomu and Hu Yaobang with the independent editors Wang Juntao and Lü Pu of the magazines

*The Spring of Peking and April 5th Forum*, activists who were both connected to the Communist Youth League. The meetings eventually took place and lasted several hours each. “The leadership wanted to solve the problems through dialogue and to make use of the positive attitudes towards democracy for the party’s course,” explains Tang (Tang 2015, 13). Wang Juntao, who now lives in the United States, confirms his meeting with Hu Qiaomu, although his recollection is much more negative than that of Tang Xin:

I have talked once with Hu Qiaomu; he was a rather disgusting person. When I talked to him in his apartment and said one must do away with corruption, he just answered: “Corruption has existed through all the dynasties, one cannot just do away with it, and this is not necessary.” (Wang 2014)

Hu Yaobang, on the other hand (in a different meeting), left a profound impression on him:

At first, our conversation should have lasted 15 to 30 minutes, but then he was so much into our talk that it continued for several hours. He told me that he had stayed at home that day because of a painful tooth, but I think that he took the day off because he actually wanted to talk with us.... I clearly told him that I opposed the detention of Wei Jingsheng. Hu Yaobang did not give an answer to this. He just pulled out a report by the Guizhou Provincial Party Committee and said: “Look, the Guizhou Provincial Committee ordered the arrest of Huang Xiang from the ‘*Enlightenment Society*’ and later released him again because of humanitarian considerations. I agree that this should be our way to solve problems.” ... Later he added: “Young people like you have three advantages: first, you have ideals; secondly, you are well educated; and thirdly, you have the zeal and energy to realise your aspirations. But you also have two disadvantages: you are not realistic, you never start from the facts when you consider what has to be done, you only believe it must be done like this or like that; and secondly, you are impatient and always worried.” (ibid.)

There are some other accounts of these conversations between Hu Yaobang and the moderate dissidents (Black 1993, 54-55 or Baum 1995, 75),<sup>17</sup> basically confirming the mixed feelings this meeting left with Wang Juntao. He was proud of his direct access to a top party leader, but at the same time felt that he had not succeeded in impressing Hu. “Little brother,” Hu is quoted as telling Wang, “I recognise that you have done correct things, but you need to do them at the correct time and in the correct place.” (Black 1993, 55)

### **Welcoming Democracy Activists to the Communist Youth League?**

Liu Qing mentions another interesting proposal transmitted by Tang Xin. He suggested integrating at least some of the democracy activists into the official political structures, more precisely into the Communist Youth League, which was at that time considered close to the reform faction around Hu Yaobang. It was known that some of the dissident editors already had connections to the Youth League. Liu Qing quickly understood that Tang Xin had the intention and probably also some assignment to recruit at least some of the activists:

It was Tang Xin who clearly offered a co-operation to the Joint Editorial Conference, and also tried to influence it. ... Tang Xin then asked, how would it be if you and some others from the Democracy Wall who had some influence on young people were given posts in the Youth League Central Committee to engage in youth work there? This way, we could on the one hand remain committed to China’s affairs and show our courage to speak out and act openly; on the other hand, this would become supported and coordinated by an organisation. (Liu 2003, 3)

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<sup>17</sup> In a footnote (p. 412) Baum (1995) says Hu Yaobang invited Wang Juntao for this meeting “after visiting the Xidan Wall with Deng Xiaoping on November 16”. Such a visit, however, has not been mentioned anywhere else and seems very unlikely.



Liu Qing says that this surprised him, but he admits that it made him also ponder about the real intentions of the authorities:

I did not need to think much about Tang Xin's proposal, but rejected it outright. I told him that I had joined the Democracy Wall because I did not want any restrictions and obligations. Hearing this, Tang became a little embarrassed. ... The fact that he had made this proposal at least showed that the government had tried to think about an idea, that a certain faction in the communist leadership wanted to clinch a deal with us, tried to use us, and that this seemed more important to them than to suppress and persecute us. (ibid.)

Tang Xin told the activists that they should think about it for a few days. But none of the groups wanted to take up this proposal. That would have deeply split their ranks. Tang just expressed his disappointment.

## **Debates on the Democracy Movement within the CCP Leadership**

When the CCP Central Committee met for its legendary Third Plenary Session in December 1978 to debate mainly on economic reforms, people at Beijing's Democracy Wall were already discussing much more radical changes such as abolishing the monopoly on political power held by the Communist Party, freedoms of expression and the media, human rights, and the question of whether or not the "West" did possess a better political system than China. There was a group of high-ranking Party politicians who not only sympathised with the dissidents of Democracy Wall, but who took up some of their viewpoints to fuel debates within the Communist Party.

A "work conference" preceding the official plenary session (from November 10 to December 15, preparing the formal agenda) also came under some influence from the Democracy Wall that geographically was just a few hundred meters away from the conference venue. Off the stage "people were discussing daily the latest news from the Xidan Wall," writes the historian and former Xinhua journalist Yang Jisheng 楊繼繩, "the posters from the Xidan Wall and the debates at the conference on the

emancipation of minds got intermingled, ... inspired each other.” (Yang 1998, 137) Party Chairman Hua Guofeng and Wang Dongxing 汪東興, who led the Maoist traditionalists, were according to Yang “losing the right of control” on the contents of the debates at this work conference. More and more “forbidden subjects” became openly discussed (*ibid.*).

It was also during this work conference that the 1976 Tian’anmen protests were rehabilitated (on November 14) and Deng Xiaoping made his encouraging remarks on critical big-character posters and free expression of opinions (on November 26 and 28). On December 13, reports the reformist economic expert Yu Guangyuan, who also helped to draft Deng Xiaoping’s speeches, Deng asked him to include such a positive remark on Democracy Wall into the official discourse he was preparing for the Third Plenary Session, probably to take account of the new liberal mood among many delegates who would like to see more political reforms. But the speech eventually given by Deng did not contain such remarks (Vogel 2013, 254–255).

The (other) speech given by Deng earlier at the preparatory work conference apparently did contain some paragraphs on Democracy Wall and open debates in general, according to Yu Guangyuan. He says Deng asked him to prepare some disapproving remarks on Beijing municipal officials who wanted to prosecute people who had written critical posters:

On the day after the text was finalized, Deng Xiaoping asked me to come to his home. When he saw me, he said: “Yu Guangyuan, it is really absurd, that the Beijing municipal authorities want to open a case to investigate people who wrote their views on the ‘Xidan democracy wall’. In my speech, when I speak of the problem of ‘creating files’ on people to criticize, I will depart from the speech text to interpose a few remarks.” He assigned me to draft some remarks on my own and cite some instances. (Yu 2017, 139–140)

Speaking on “democracy”, says Yu Guangyuan, Deng used this term in a new and different way. The subheading of Deng’s speech was titled “Democracy is a Major Condition for Emancipating the Mind”. Deng also referred to the rehabilitation of the

1976 Tian'anmen protesters by saying: "The masses should be encouraged to offer criticism. There is nothing to worry about even if a few malcontents take advantage of democracy to make trouble." (Yu 2017, 144) All this confirms that at this point - in November and December 1978 - Deng Xiaoping held a positive attitude towards people expressing critical opinions, even on the party and its leaders.

Yu Guangyuan mentions that he himself would have liked to have some first-hand knowledge of Democracy Wall, but that he did not dare to go himself at his "advanced age", as he had heard that some party officials had been "roughed up" there. Only Politburo member and Party propagandist Hu Qiaomu, according to Yu's hearsay, insisted on a personal on-site inspection. He once "went there at night to read the big character posters by flashlight" (ibid.).

### **The "Forum on Theory Work"**

The Third Plenum and the preceding preparatory conference mostly dealt with issues of economic reform. The place where sympathies for the Democracy Movement became more evident, and other historical and ideological issues were hotly debated, was the Forum on Theory Work that lasted - with a long interruption - for more than two months in early 1979. Commissioned by the party leadership and organized by the Central Committee Propaganda Department and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, it started on January 18. Some 160 high-ranking Party journalists, legal experts, economists, and scientists were invited, representatives of the reformers (who seemed to constitute a majority at the beginning) as well as "conservative" Maoists. Hu Yaobang and Deng Xiaoping gave the opening and closing speeches. During the final stage of the conference (when Deng delivered his key address on the Four Basic Principles, departing 180 degrees from the originally liberal mood at the forum), more than 200 additional delegates from provincial institutions and the PLA were added to listen to and to evaluate Deng's speech.

The debates were closely linked to current political issues: how to deal with Mao's legacy and the Cultural Revolution as well as the negative repercussions of other political

campaigns of the 1950s and 60s; the need for a serious “De-Maoisation” (*feimaohua* 非毛化), a term that never appeared in the official media, but was widely used in the conference debates; the role of democracy and freedoms under socialism; cultural policies; the relation between Communist Party and state; the attitude towards the Soviet Union.

The discussions were quite controversial, including personal accusations among the delegates, as we can see again from the book on the *Pivotal Years: China 1976-1981*. One participant is quoted as saying, “The question of democracy is one of the big issues that have never been resolved well by the socialist countries.” High-ranking officials, he demands, should be democratically elected. Another delegate warns: “If China does not succeed in fully unfolding democracy, the society could develop some envy for capitalist democracy.” (Cheng et al. 2008, 274) Others, however, cautioned against “democratic individualism”, a term that Hu Yaobang had also used in his opening statement.

In a subchapter that Cheng Zhongyuan calls “The flooding by false ideas and the errors of the conference” (Cheng et al. 2008, 291), he first describes the Democracy Wall activists in very negative terms before linking them to the Theory Forum:

A very small minority of bad elements propagated a bourgeois liberalisation of the society, questioning and even rejecting the leading role of the Communist Party, the socialist system, and the ideas of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the teachings of Mao Zedong. ... Even inside the Party and among theoreticians (including participants of the Theory Forum) there are a small number of comrades who do not understand the true character of this ideological trend and its destructive potential, and even support it directly or indirectly. During the Forum on Theory Work the flooding by false ideas has rather increased than decreased. (ibid.)

From the discussions cited, it becomes quite clear who the “small number” (in reality probably more numerous and certainly not insignificant) of sympathisers with the Democracy Movement were: liberal journalists like Hu Jiwei (chief editor of the *People’s*

*Daily*), leading economist Yu Guangyuan, Yan Jiaqi 嚴家其 and Su Shaozhi 蘇紹智, Marxist theorists from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, while the “conservative” Party faction at the Theory Forum was headed by Hu Qiaomu (President of the Academy of Social Sciences) and Deng Liqun (Vice President of the Academy). Cheng’s book describes the debates like this:

Some of the statements that had been made in the debates were leaked to become widely known to the outside public. But there were also some ideas from the Xidan Democracy Wall and the society in general that found their way into the Theory Conference. ... Some opinions did pop up that questioned, weakened, or even negated the leading role of the Communist Party, the socialist order and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, vilified or completely rejected Mao and Mao Zedong Thought. ... there were a few who held the Xidan Democracy Wall in high esteem and actively supported it. ... A ‘People’s Daily’ staff member [Su Shaozhi] said: ... The Xidan Democracy Wall is a good thing, a milestone of socialist democracy, one could say. Of course we cannot support some phenomena like the letter to Jimmy Carter, but it sounds a bit too harsh to speak of a tendency of “democratic individualism”. The Central Committee should adopt a positive attitude towards the Democracy Wall. (Quotes again from the 2008 edition, Cheng et al., 292-297, with names and details added from the slightly expanded version.)

In other instances, even some of the party elders praised the Democracy Wall activists. Zhou Enlai’s widow Deng Yingchao 鄧穎超 is quoted as saying that everybody who wanted to know what democracy really meant should go to see the Xidan Wall (Zhang 2015, 52). But let us not forget, Deng Xiaoping had also commended critical posters earlier.

### **The turnaround: Deng's "Four Basic Principles"**

Deng Xiaoping's attitude towards the Democracy Movement and critical posters seems to have changed completely between October 1978 and March 1979 – at least as far as we can verify this from his public and internal statements.

In November 1978, in meetings with journalists from the US and Canada, Deng still called *dazibao* "nothing to be afraid of" (*People's Daily*, 28.11.1978). Three months later, however, Deng had changed his opinion. In his famous speech at the end of the Forum on Theory Work on March 30, 1979, Deng proclaimed the so-called "Four Basic Principles" (sometimes also translated "Four Cardinal Principles"), meaning in their essence to maintain the Marxist-Leninist and Maoist teachings and the exclusive leadership of the Communist Party. The decisive phrases in Deng's speech went like this:

The Party Centre believes that in realising the Four Modernisations in China we must uphold the Four Basic Principles in thought and politics. They are the fundamental premise for realising the Four Modernisations. They are as follows: One, we must uphold the socialist road. Two, we must uphold the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Three, we must uphold the leadership of the Communist Party. And four, we must uphold Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. ... Moreover we must resolutely fight the ideological tendencies that cast doubt on the Four Basic Principles mentioned. (Cheng et al. 2008, 301)

Had Deng really changed his mind within a few weeks? Or were his positive comments on the Democracy Wall and critical posters more of a tactical nature, unleashing public criticism to contain the conservative adversaries of his reforms? Or did he want to appease the United States before the establishment of full diplomatic ties and his planned visit to Washington?

We do not really know, as we do not have enough insight into Deng's personal views and feelings, but we do have some indications that he was at odds with himself to some extent in regard to the issue of liberties and democratisation, and that he did actually change his mind. On the one hand he considered himself a reformer (and he wanted

to act like one), but he was not sure how far he should or could go. On the other hand he was up to all the dodges of a long-standing communist politician who had got to know the “dangers” of a debate becoming too liberal.

### **How Deng Changed His Mind**

At that time Li Honglin 李洪林 led the Party History Department of the Chinese History Museum. In 1979 he was also a delegate to the Theory Forum, and he was regularly asked to draft speeches for political leaders. In an interview recorded in 2008 and published in 2015 in a book by Ding Dong and his colleagues (Ding & Xing 2015, 61-94), he remembered how he perceived Deng’s change of opinion.

In a preliminary debate on the planning of the Theory Forum in mid-January 1979, Deng had demanded, “There must not be any forbidden zones or topics” (Li 2015, 63). But Li remembers also that there was pressure coming from a different direction: from Sichuan (from provincial Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang) and Shanghai there was criticism that protests by young people who had been sent to the countryside and now wanted to return home to the cities, or by victims of the Cultural Revolution who demanded rehabilitation, were getting out of control (Li 2015, 64). On March 27, Li was – together with three other officials – summoned by Deng Xiaoping to help to draft the speech he was to give three days later. The officials listened and made notes on Deng’s remarks in order later to put them into the draft. Li remembers:

What surprised me most was that he did not talk of an emancipation of minds any more, but criticised the extreme democratisation of society and the weakening of ideological work. He spoke in a very severe mood, in short he said things could not go on the same way, they had to be corrected! ... The speech that Deng eventually gave, was the one “On Upholding the Four Basic Principles” that everybody knows. ... Deng Xiaoping’s original draft was even more strident, but the text officially published later was made softer. Still, after the conference, some people said it was rather “Four Cudgels”. (Li 2015, 65)

Li notes, however, that two days before this conversation with Deng (on March 25), Wei Jingsheng, the editor of the most outspoken dissident journal *Exploration*, had posted his famous *dazibao* “Democracy or New Despotism” (*yao minzhu haishi yao xin de ducai* 要民主還是要新的獨裁), which personally attacked Deng Xiaoping (*ibid.*), calling him “a dictator like Mao”. But, in a footnote, Li Honglin remarks that this big-character poster could not be the original reason for Deng Xiaoping’s change of mind, as Deng had already, in another speech on March 16, severely criticised Democracy Wall and the Theory Forum, saying:

There are still many elements not in accordance with stability and unity. We must resolutely uphold the great banner of Chairman Mao, which is very important for the issue of stability and unity, and it also touches upon the question of international influence. In their articles the media also need to uphold the banner of Chairman Mao; we must not damage this banner. Whoever disowns Chairman Mao also disowns the People’s Republic of China and the whole history connected to it. (*ibid.*)

It was already in this speech that Deng had attacked Wei Jingsheng in person. This criticism had reached Wei’s ears, and his poster, nine days later, was actually a reaction to Deng’s speech, and not the other way round! (*ibid.*)

Li Honglin also refers to an episode that happened months later, after the court verdict against Wei Jingsheng (in September 1979, when he was sentenced to 15 years in prison). When Li happened to meet Hu Yaobang (at the time CCP Secretary General), he asked him why the sentence against Wei had to be so harsh. Hu told him that it had been Peng Zhen 彭真<sup>18</sup> who had brought the text of Wei Jingsheng’s *dazibao* to the attention of Deng Xiaoping, and it had been Peng who had convinced Deng to express his harsh reaction, to order Wei’s arrest and – later – to order the closure of the Xidan Wall. Hu Yaobang is said to have added: “I did not agree to his arrest. One could have chosen a softer method, more like teaching him a lesson.” (*ibid.*)

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<sup>18</sup> A former mayor of Beijing and high-ranking victim of persecution during the Cultural Revolution.



Back at the Theory Forum where Deng Xiaoping's March 30 speech was to be debated over the following two days, at least some of the delegates openly criticised Deng's Four Basic Principles as concentrating too much on questioning political reform groups and ignoring conservative Marxists and Maoists:

The most important and fundamental difference of opinions ... arose in debating the question what the "main danger" was. Some even ... did not agree with Deng's upholding the Four Basic Principles. One group's briefing paper asked: Is it really the case that the main danger at the moment comes from troublemakers and rightist tendencies such as the "Chinese Human Rights Group" or the "Discussion Group for Democracy", or does it rather come from an "Association for the Study of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought" which thinks that the Third Plenary Session means a restoration of power, and from revisionist "leftist" tendencies? (Cheng et al. 2008, 303-304)

Cheng Zhongyuan in his book (and in the extended version) names again the main critics of Deng's speech as coming from the group closely connected to the *People's Daily*: Hu Jiwei and Wang Ruoshui, and he adds the philosopher Zhang Xianyang 張顯揚<sup>19</sup> and the historian Li Honglin<sup>20</sup> (Cheng et al. 2008, 304-305).

On April 3, Hu Yaobang gave a second closing speech at the conference, and he also adapted his tone in accordance with Deng's remarks, says Li. It became clear that Hu did not want to snub the delegates. He does not know exactly when and how these decisions were taken, writes Li Honglin, whether there was for example a meeting of the innermost circle of the CCP Central Committee, but he adds:

What I could notice was a relatively liberal mood at the beginning. When (Hu) Yaobang and (Hu) Qiaomu spoke to me, they certainly did not just express their personal opinions, but they had made their deliberations for some time together with (Deng) Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng, and what they told me was

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<sup>19</sup> 1936-2013; during the 1970s at the International Philosophy Research Department of Peking University, in the 1980s at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

<sup>20</sup> 1925-2016; Party historian, in the 1980s at the CCP Propaganda Department.

also the opinion of the central leadership. So when did these changes happen?

It was during the time when the conference adjourned.<sup>21</sup> (Li 2015, 66)

The big changes towards a reform policy, and the beginnings of the Democracy Movement and the *dazibao* at the Xidan Wall, all coincide with the rise of the former Youth League First Secretary Hu Yaobang to the inner circle of the Chinese leadership. Hu served at the top of the official youth organization between 1952 and 1966, before he was purged during the Cultural Revolution and sent to a re-education through labour camp. His fate became closely linked then to that of Deng Xiaoping, who had also been persecuted. Only in 1977, when Mao had died, was he eventually rehabilitated – just as was Deng Xiaoping.

Hu became responsible in the party for the rehabilitation of Cultural Revolution victims; later he was head of the powerful Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee, in 1980 he was chosen for a seat in the Politburo Standing Committee (the highest Party organ), and became Secretary General of the Communist Party. The next year he was formally made its Chairman to follow Mao's originally chosen successor Hua Guofeng. But the real political power shifted more and more into the hands of Deng Xiaoping, although Deng had renounced holding any formal top positions.

Hu and others from his reformist faction supported in various ways the new grassroots Democracy Movement and the right to publish critical posters. And they opposed or criticised the arrest of well-known activist Wei Jingsheng. They viewed the dissidents as allies in their struggle against the old Maoist cadres who still occupied many key positions in the political hierarchy. At least between the end of 1978 and March 1979, there seemed to exist a possibility that the ideas of the Spring of Peking might take root and embrace larger parts of the Communist Party to become the foundation of a Chinese reform communism. One reason that this did not happen was Deng's political

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<sup>21</sup> After February 22, 1979.

turnaround. The titular Party Chairman Hu Yaobang eventually had to give in to the authority of the de facto leader Deng Xiaoping.

Hu Jiwei, who was chief editor of the main party newspaper *People's Daily* at that time, published in 2004, when he was already in exile in the US, some memories explaining how Hu Yaobang sympathised with the dissident movement, and how he also came under attack for this:

Comrade [Hu] Yaobang was greatly interested in the Xidan Democracy Wall, having already indicated his admiration for it, and believed its big-character posters to be different from those of the Cultural Revolution and before. He believed that in the past they had mostly been used by leaders to punish and harm people. This time, the big-character posters were like those of the April 5th Tian'anmen Movement,<sup>22</sup> voices coming from people's hearts, a new people's awakening. ... After the arrest of Wei Jingsheng at the end of March 1979, Comrade [Hu] Yaobang indicated his disagreement in a speech to the Second Session of the Fifth National People's Congress in June. [Hu] Yaobang said: "I support anyone exercising their democratic rights under a socialist system. I hope everyone can enjoy the greatest freedom under the protection of the Constitution. Despite the numerous comrades criticising me by name or otherwise during the Central Work Conference and this People's Congress, saying I was going behind the central government's back, supporting a so-called democratisation movement that violated the Four Modernisations, and encouraging anarchy, despite all that I still maintain my views". Regarding Wei's arrest he said: "I respectfully suggest that comrades do not arrest people who engage in struggle, still less those who merely show concern. Those who are brave enough to raise these problems, I fear, will not be put off by being thrown in jail. Wei Jingsheng has been held for more than three months, and if he dies he will become a martyr of the masses, a martyr in the hearts of all." (Hu 2004)

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<sup>22</sup> Of 1976, altered from "May Fourth Movement" in Chubb's translation with reference to the Chinese original.

Hu Yaobang apparently also initiated articles in the major Party media to support the rights of free speech and debate. On November 14, 1979 (just a few weeks after the harsh verdict of 15 years in jail against Wei Jingsheng), the *People's Daily* carried an article advocating that one should be able to speak out without being threatened by punishment. But Politburo member Hu Qiaomu complained to Deng Xiaoping that the *People's Daily* was supporting Wei Jingsheng by downplaying his “crimes”. This article had been edited and authorised personally by Hu Yaobang, according to Hu Jiwei.

Hu Jiwei cites even more instances where Hu Yaobang directly or indirectly supported free speech, *dazibao*, and a dialogue with young people who criticised the system and the leadership; and he opposed many of the measures to curtail it. But eventually he had to give up his efforts to change the party line:

As far as I know, Hu Yaobang knew all about the shifting circumstances that surrounded the arrest of Wei Jingsheng and the banning of Democracy Wall. He was clear on Deng Xiaoping's “*Uphold the Four Cardinal Principles*” and the gradual backsliding of the central Party's anti-leftist policy. ... [Hu] Yaobang was increasingly powerless to halt the Party's retreat from the anti-leftist policy following the “Four Cardinal Principles” speech. (Hu 2004)

## Conclusions

The available sources will certainly not sustain a completely new picture of this key era of Deng Xiaoping's rule, but they can show that there was a close relationship between party reformists and independent democracy activists, and that some high-ranking cadres bore more sympathy towards the Democracy Wall Movement than previously known; and that there was at least a brief period of deliberation among some top CCP leaders about whether to integrate some of the ideas (and activists) into the Party mainstream.

It becomes quite clear that Politburo member and Party Secretary General Hu Yaobang had strong sympathies for the Democracy Wall Movement and some of its demands. He was against arrests and judicial clampdowns, but at the same time he seemed to waver all along: he was concerned about Party unity, and he obviously knew that in the end he had to give in to the more powerful Deng Xiaoping.

As for Deng Xiaoping, we still cannot be sure how his thinking developed and why his convictions with regard to the Chinese political system might have changed. But these are the facts: the Democracy Wall Movement eventually failed, Deng Xiaoping and other top party leaders turned away from more radical reform ideas (such as much wider media freedoms or abandoning the leading role of the Communist Party). We do not have to rewrite post-Mao history. But we might perceive that – at the end of 1978 and in early 1979 – there existed a possibility (and inner-Party support) for much more substantial political reforms in China, initiated by a group of formerly completely unknown young people.

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