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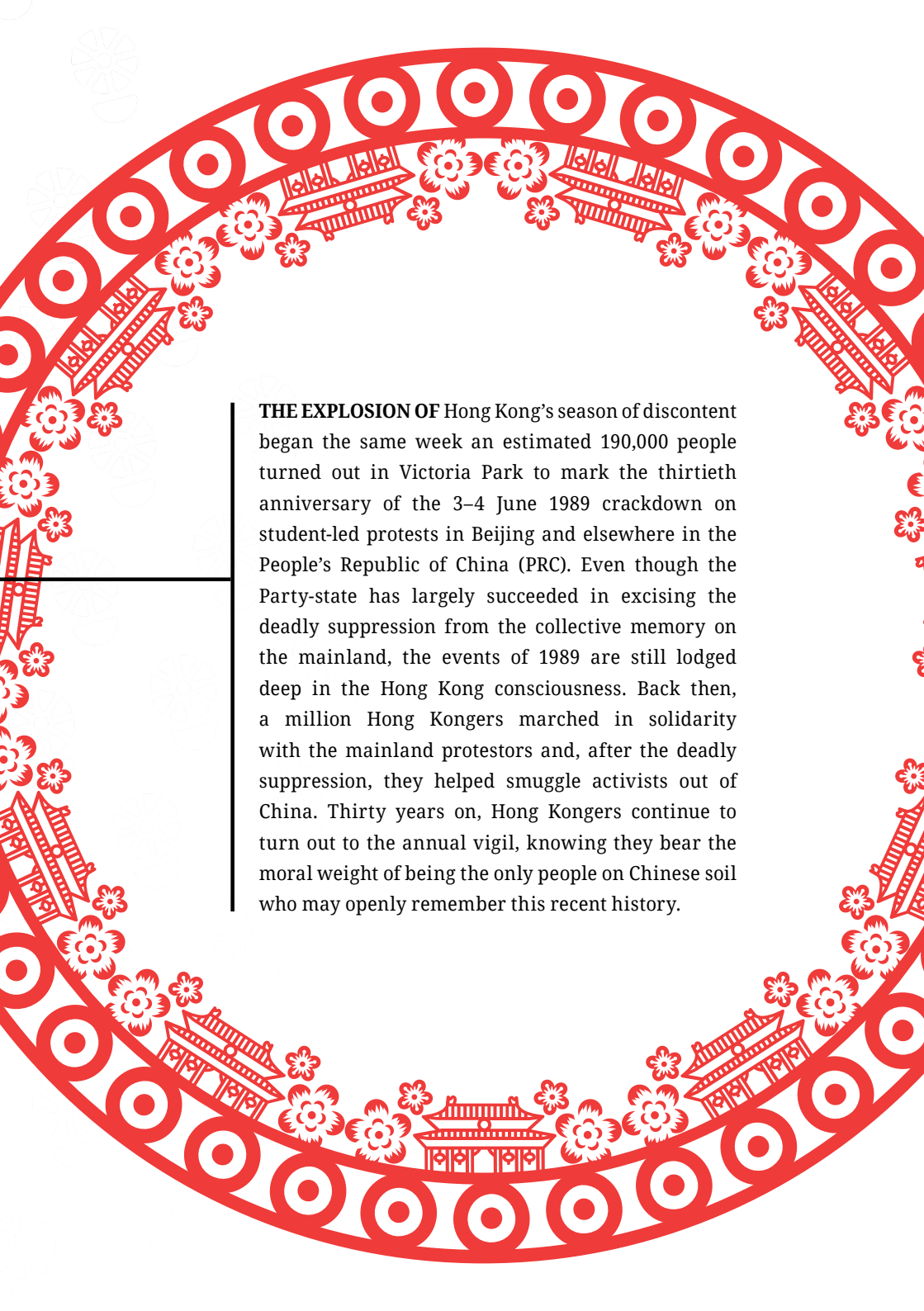
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HONG KONG AND THE TIANANMEN PLAYBOOK

Louisa Lim and Graeme Smith





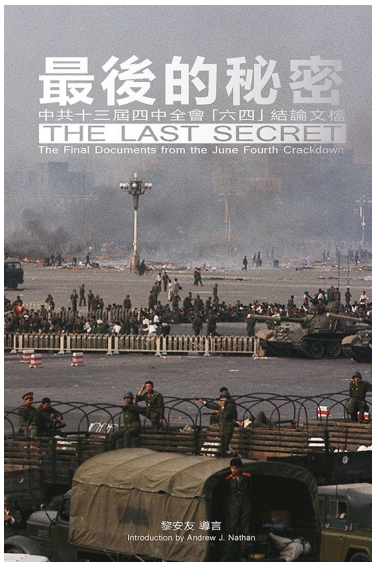
THE EXPLOSION OF Hong Kong's season of discontent began the same week an estimated 190,000 people turned out in Victoria Park to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the 3–4 June 1989 crackdown on student-led protests in Beijing and elsewhere in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Even though the Party-state has largely succeeded in excising the deadly suppression from the collective memory on the mainland, the events of 1989 are still lodged deep in the Hong Kong consciousness. Back then, a million Hong Kongers marched in solidarity with the mainland protestors and, after the deadly suppression, they helped smuggle activists out of China. Thirty years on, Hong Kongers continue to turn out to the annual vigil, knowing they bear the moral weight of being the only people on Chinese soil who may openly remember this recent history.

Just five days after the 2019 commemoration, a million people congregated at the same spot to march against the extradition bill. It was a protest path — Victoria Park to the Legislative Council building in Admiralty — that became well-trodden over the following months by crowds that swelled to an estimated two million people at one point (for details of the protests, see Chapter 2 ‘Hong Kong’s Reckoning’, pp.51–67).

The massive protests were covered intensely by the international media. What received less coverage was the appearance that same week of a small volume that does much to explain Beijing’s response to the ongoing crisis in Hong Kong — a slim book printed by Hong Kong’s New Century Press 新世紀 called *The Last Secret: The Final Documents from the June Fourth Crackdown* 最後的秘密——中共十三屆四中全會「六四」結論文。¹ It is a collection of speeches and notes leaked by an anonymous official and written by China’s leadership at two extraordinary meetings of the expanded Politburo on 19–21 June 1989 to consider the events of that

month, create a strategy to prevent a recurrence, and set China’s future political course. The speeches were printed and circulated among 500 officials at a meeting held a few days later. As a classified document, all copies were meant to be collected afterwards. One copy remained at large.

In the introduction to *The Last Secret*, the author (using the pen name Wu Yulun 吳禹論) remarks that operational flexibility underpins the longevity of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and explains the logic of the meetings held in the wake of Tiananmen:



The Last Secret book cover
Source: New Century Press

This kind of process, usually involving purges, is the key mechanism by which a Stalinist party remains in power. Its primary purpose is to ensure that the one-and-only supreme leader remains in charge, often with total disregard for any purported ideology, existing laws or institutional regulations. It is for this reason that these procedures have always been regarded as the most top secret by the Party. Thus, not only do these documents reveal the 'last secret' of the Tiananmen protests of 1989, they reveal what may well be the ultimate secret of how the Party stays in power to this day.

The book lifts a thirty-year-old veil on the aftermath of the violence in Tiananmen Square. As events in Hong Kong unfolded in 2019, it became increasingly clear just how much China's rulers are still informed by the Tiananmen playbook thirty years on, despite Hong Kong's own particular political proposition. As the protests continued to grow, Beijing's rhetoric, its on-the-ground tactics, and the solutions endorsed all seemed to hew close to the Tiananmen model. Andrew Nathan summed up the lessons the Party learned thirty years ago:

First, that the Chinese Communist Party is under permanent siege from enemies at home colluding with enemies abroad; second, that economic reform must take a back seat to ideological discipline and social control; and third, that the party will fall to its enemies if [it] allows itself to be internally divided.²

China's position in the world may have changed dramatically since 1989, but these lessons still hold true today.

The Rhetoric of 'Black Hands' and 'Turmoil'

Beijing signals its mindset through its rhetoric, and the language deployed regarding Hong Kong draws explicitly on the Tiananmen lexicon. On

12 June 2019, Hong Kong police fired tear gas and beat protestors who had been blocking lawmakers from reaching the Legislative Council for the second reading of the contentious extradition legislation. Chief Executive Carrie Lam then characterised the events on the street as a ‘riot’ 暴動. That designation echoed the label of ‘turmoil’ 動亂 given to student protests in the 26 April 1989 editorial in the *People’s Daily*. In both cases, the designation inflamed the situation, swelling the size of the marches and sparking a new demand from protestors — namely, the withdrawal of the terms ‘riot’ and ‘turmoil’. The fact that Hong Kong, and not Beijing, officials used such terminology strengthened suspicions that Hong Kong policy was being dictated from Beijing, or at least from its representative office in the territory, the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government.

The recycling of Tiananmen-era phraseology illustrates how Beijing continues to fall back on its instinct to blame unrest on a small number of people with ulterior motives. In 1989, the Party-state consistently blamed ‘black hands’ 黑手 or ‘a very small number of turmoil organisers and plotters’ for whipping up the students. In 1989, those ‘black hands’ included the disgraced Communist Party secretary general Zhao Ziyang 趙紫陽, whose fate was sealed at that 19–21 June meeting and who spent the next sixteen years under house arrest; physicist Fang Lizhi 方勵之, who subsequently fled to the United States; cultural critic and later Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo 劉曉波; and democracy activist Chen Ziming 陳子明; as well as the Voice of America, and Hungarian American financier George Soros.

In 2019, the term ‘black hands’ re-emerged. The Chinese state broadcaster CCTV labelled US Consul-General Julie Eadeh a ‘behind-the-scenes black hand creating chaos in Hong Kong’ after she held a meeting with pro-democracy politicians including Nathan Law 羅冠聰 and Joshua Wong 黃之鋒. State-run media also accused a number of foreign bloggers and journalists of being US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agents, while nicknaming four senior pro-democracy figures — Martin Lee 李柱銘, Albert Ho 何俊仁, newspaper tycoon Jimmy Lai 黎智英, and former civil

servant Anson Chan 陳方安生 — the ‘Gang of Four’ and accusing them of being ‘agents for Western anti-China forces’. Singling out small numbers of instigators deflects attention from the protestors’ actual demands. One key difference between 1989 and 2019 is the Party’s use of social media to seed and spread these disinformation campaigns among Chinese-speaking communities worldwide. In 2019, these disinformation campaigns — using Twitter and Facebook as well as WeChat — have caused deep rifts between overseas Chinese and Hong Kongers around the world.

Writing of the Party’s response to the 2008 Lhasa protests, Ben Hillman could have been describing present-day Hong Kong:

The CCP’s identification of protestors as antagonists with links to ‘hostile forces’ gives local authorities limited political space to show tolerance toward protestors. Sympathizers risk being accused of disloyalty. It also discourages local officials from experimenting with conflict-sensitive social and economic policies lest they be accused of stoking Tibetan ethnic consciousness or nationalism. This has also resulted in decreased cooperation between local governments and local and international NGOs [nongovernmental organisations], further limiting the space for public debate and policy influence.³



A poster
inspired by *V*
for Vendetta
Source: Studio
Incendo, Flickr



'Is now 1989 4th June?' and 'Blood Debts will be Repaid in Blood' graffitis
Source: Louisa Lim

Tiananmen in the Popular Imagination

The spectre of Tiananmen has been a consistent motif both in the Hong Kong popular imagination and in the protest movement's presentation of itself. The movement has drawn inspiration and imagery from sources including Japanese anime culture, actor Bruce Lee, and Hollywood movies such as *V for Vendetta*. But Tiananmen-era imagery is ever-present in the use of tanks and People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers in posters and memes.

When a Hong Konger stood in front of a policeman with a loaded gun, the media dubbed it Hong Kong's 'Tank Man' moment, and Hong Kongers have used language explicitly linking their movement with 1989. One example is graffiti on the Prince Edward Mass Transit Railway (MTR) station, where unsubstantiated rumours held that police beat someone to death. Spraypainted on the wall was early twentieth-century writer Lu Xun's phrase 'Blood debts will be repaid in blood' 血債血還, which was so often used in connection with the 1989 deaths.

When riot police besieged students inside the Polytechnic University in late November 2019, lobbing tear gas and firing rubber bullets to stop them from escaping, graffiti appeared on a prominent advertising hoarding, reading: 'Is now 1989 4th June?' Such messages are a vivid reminder that Hong Kongers have access to Western history books and

may publicly remember the Tiananmen anniversary at the annual vigil, unlike mainlanders, most of whom do not share collective memories of the events due to effective government censorship.

‘Life or Death Struggle’

In both cases, the Party has portrayed the stakes in existential terms. In August 2019, Wang Zhimin 王志民, director of the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in Hong Kong, said the turmoil represented a ‘life or death fight for the very future of Hong Kong’ and warned there could be ‘no retreat’. This echoes language from 1989, when the protests were described as a ‘struggle involving the life and death of the Party and state’. Such language, which is designed to mobilise domestic and diaspora support for the Party, also underlines how seriously the Party views the threats posed by large-scale protests.

The Last Secret reveals the existential anxiety that animated the speeches of party bosses in 1989, dovetailing with a fear of external forces, real or imagined. Only strict adherence to Deng Xiaoping’s Four Basic Principles — upholding socialism, the ‘people’s democratic dictatorship’, the Party, and Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong Thought — could safeguard the Party from destruction. According to *The Last Secret*, party elder Peng Zhen 彭真 meanwhile contended:

In reality, the enemy forces at home and abroad who hated and wanted to destroy our socialist system have not ceased for one day their struggle against us, have not ceased for one day their activities to overthrow our state. The painful lesson for us is that these riots are the result of their long-term, deliberate fabrications.

His solution, which implicitly criticised Deng’s leadership, was to end the neglect of ideology. Peng noted: ‘For many years our party has not engaged in a systematic, thorough-going, all-round rectification of

thinking, organization, and work styles.’ Thirty years later, President Xi Jinping took up this task with vigour.

The Solution

If the rhetoric sounds familiar, so too do the solutions. In 1989, five days after the crackdown, Deng Xiaoping said the Communist Party’s biggest failure was one of political education. This led to the birth of the patriotic education program — an ideological education campaign that continues to this day.

In 2019, senior pro-Beijing figures in Hong Kong returned to this theme, repeatedly blaming the protests on failures in the education system. One pro-Beijing advisor, George Lung Chee-Ming 龍子明, argued: ‘A small minority of young people do not recognise their country, and are affected by “Hong Kong independence” because they are sick, and patriotic education is a good cure for such sickness.’ Yet it was the attempt to introduce ‘national and moral education’ to Hong Kong’s curricula in 2012 that created the student-led movement that brought young activist Joshua Wong to prominence. But pro-Beijing politicians take their cautionary tales from Beijing’s textbooks rather than Hong Kong’s recent history.

Thirty years ago, China’s leaders — even those known to be more liberal — were prescribing similar medicine. *The Last Secret* quotes Li Ruihuan 李瑞環, then party secretary of Tianjin, as he catalogued a host of social ills:

A variety of problems are emerging in society, such as corruption, bad social customs, ‘look to money in all things’, a lack of interest in ideals, a lack of interest in morality. There are many reasons for this, but we have to recognise the bad consequences of having weakened party leadership and ignored political thought work over these past few years.

There are chilling signs, however, that the official rhetoric could be shifting from the Tiananmen lexicon to the Xinjiang playbook. Towards



Hong Kong police at protests

Source: Studio Incendo, Flickr

the end of 2019, state-run media began referring to demands for liberal democracy in Hong Kong as an ‘infection’, echoing moves to pathologise Islam in Xinjiang, where as many as one million Uyghurs are in political indoctrination camps, according to credible reports received by the United Nations. An editorial in the *China Daily* in November 2019 explicitly made this comparison:

The problems of Hong Kong and that of terrorism have similar causes: lack of realistic economic opportunities and misguided ideology. Regarding terrorism, China has shown the world a more effective and humane approach than that pursued by other countries.

The editorial posited that a ‘weakened immune system’ can only be healed by the education of ‘corrigible’ youngsters, raising the chilling prospect of Xinjiang-style political re-education in Hong Kong. (See the *China Story Yearbook 2017: Prosperity*, Chapter 9 ‘Prosperity and Freedom: Hong Kong’s Dilemma’, pp.295–307.)

The Role of Police

As Hong Kong’s protests continue, one clear parallel is not the crackdown in Beijing in 1989, when the PLA opened fire on the people, but the lesser-known contemporaneous suppression of protestors in Chengdu,

when the People's Armed Police (PAP) dispersed people with batons and water cannon. According to official propaganda, eight people were killed in the Chengdu crackdown,⁴ though recent documents released in the United Kingdom hint that the real number of deaths in Chengdu could be as high as three hundred. In Chengdu, the PAP purposely beat protestors over the head, and hospital corridors were crammed with people suffering head injuries.

In Hong Kong, the brutal methods of the police have echoed some of the Chengdu tactics. In 2019, both Beijing and Hong Kong understand all too clearly the political cost of deploying the PLA against ordinary citizens and have firmly resisted such a move. But when Hong Kong police removed their identification badges, there was speculation that their ranks had been swelled by PAP from China. In October, Reuters reported that Beijing had doubled its troop presence in Hong Kong, including with elements of the PAP. Anecdotal evidence includes footage of mainland police being transported over the border carrying anti-riot gear marked with simplified Chinese characters, suggesting their mainland origin.

The Lessons of Tiananmen

One lesson from Tiananmen was the political cost of declaring martial law, which included costly international sanctions, opprobrium overseas, and resentment towards the army at home. By using the colonial-era Emergency Regulations Ordinance, Lam managed to impose a *de facto* curfew in October 2019 without declaring martial law. The ordinance has enabled the Hong Kong government on occasion to shut down entire public transport networks, stop university and school classes, and withhold permission for public marches — in effect, banning public assembly. People have been detained in the lift lobbies of their own apartment blocks or while walking back to the office after lunch break. A formal declaration of martial law has thus proved unnecessary. The flip side has

been a collapse in public trust in both the police and the government. Once eroded, public trust is unlikely to recover, even if the Party replaces Lam with a more popular chief executive.

The post-Tiananmen dream that emerged after Deng's Southern Tour of 1992 was an implicit bargain, whereby the state could buy stability with the promise of economic growth. This bargain — combined with intense investment in the apparatus of 'stability maintenance', which includes internal security agents and domestic surveillance — has worked to suppress mass expressions of dissent within China's urban areas, although this may also be due to more effective control of information and harsh treatment of activists. While there is still unrest in rural areas — often linked to corruption and the expropriation of farmland — protests are nearly always contained within county lines. And even relatively well-known protests such as those in Wukan 烏坎 in Guangdong, where participants demanded more democracy, have not had a significant impact on the stability of rural institutions.

The post-Tiananmen bargain has been less than effective in China's restive peripheries, from Tibet to Xinjiang and now Hong Kong, where other sources of information are available and other futures can be imagined. While the Internet is ruthlessly censored, and sometimes disconnected entirely in Tibet and Xinjiang, Tibetans can identify with a nation led by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Dharamshala-based government in exile, while exiles from Xinjiang may feel stronger ties with their Turkic brethren than with Communist Party leaders in far-off Beijing. In Hong Kong, one method of providing an economic impetus to the territory has been allowing access to increased numbers of mainland tourists, yet this has not been welcomed by Hong Kongers, who fear the disruption caused by an influx of mainland tour groups. For Hong Kongers, whose per capita material wealth is nearly five times that of China's citizens, and whose economic success has been built on British rule of law and their own endeavours, trading liberty for economic wealth holds limited appeal. Campaigns to instil ideological rectitude are even more of a non-starter.



The 'Study Xi-Strong Nation' app
Source: ACM Tube, YouTube

Yet in the wake of a humiliating defeat for pro-Beijing candidates in Hong Kong's district elections, which left pro-democracy candidates controlling seventeen of Hong Kong's eighteen district councils, Beijing is more likely to favour rectification over concessions.

The dilemma for the Hong Kong administration is that it is effectively boxed in. In a leaked speech, Lam lamented her own lack of autonomy. She noted that Beijing was 'willing to play long, so you have no short-term solution. Hong Kong suffers, you lose tourism, economy, you lose your IPOs [initial public offerings] and so on, but you can't do much about it.' With Hong Kong already in recession, this could have a longer economic impact than the two years of economic stagnation that China suffered in the wake of Tiananmen, when growth slowed from more than eleven percent to around four percent per year, as foreign businesses and investors stayed away. In Hong Kong, the protest movement — which has targeted pro-Beijing businesses — has not shied away from actions that might hasten the territory's economic decline. One plank of Beijing's response, as some Chinese scholars are advocating, might be to accelerate Hong Kong's integration into the Greater Bay Area, an economic entity encompassing Hong Kong, Macau, and nine other cities in southern China.

The Last Secret reveals how elderly generals and officials took turns to condemn party chairman Zhao Ziyang for siding with his favoured 'think tank intellectuals' who advocated economic liberalism, while ignoring

the essential task of party building, which was code for enforcing greater ideological rigour on party members. The generals' aspirations are finally being met by today's President, whose 'Study Xi — Strong Nation' 學習強國 app is now used to track and rank the ideological enthusiasm of party members in real time. Thirty years ago, nonagenarian Marshal Nie Rongzheng 聶榮政 proposed a solution that would have met with Xi's approval:

We should sum up the experience of the political thought work of the 1950s, carry forward the Party's outstanding traditions, thoroughly rectify the atmosphere inside the Party, unify the masses, revitalize the national spirit, and promote patriotic thought.

But Nie was more explicit than most of his colleagues in naming what was going to keep the Party in power: violence. Recalling Mao's words in 1949, he reminded his colleagues that the people's dictatorship could only vanquish enemy forces because of its power as

a tool of repression, of violence, it's nothing to do with 'benevolence 仁慈' ... The last forty years have shown that whenever the dictatorship of the people prevails, the nation is peaceful, united and flourishing. When it founders, turmoil and suffering ensue.

As Carrie Lam now refers to students as 'enemies of the people', the state apparatus seems to be grinding inexorably towards a national security solution that could include more violence but will almost certainly boost patriotic and ideological education for Hong Kongers. The bargain of buying stability with economic growth has held on the mainland for three decades, but the idea that this type of post-Tiananmen solution could also be applied in Hong Kong is likely to be a pipedream; Hong Kong had both economic growth and stability before the return to mainland sovereignty and, so long as its people are free to remember and write their own history, they are unlikely to buy into such a 'bargain'.

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