

Democracy Wall
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Summary/Abstract

Democracy Wall is arguably the starting point of the Chinese democracy movement after 1949, though the political goals of its participants varied greatly, and generally remained within the frameworks of Marxism and socialism. From November 1978 to April 1979, ordinary citizens engaged in unprecedentedly wide-ranging public debates on previously taboo topics such as Cultural Revolution injustices, the relationship between socialism and democracy, official malfeasance, elite politics and Mao Zedong's legacy. Triggered by the official reversal of the "counterrevolutionary" verdict on the 1976 Tiananmen Incident, the discussions initially took the form of thousands of handwritten posters pasted on a 200-metre stretch of brick wall in Beijing's Xidan area in mid-November 1978. This "Democracy Wall" attracted crowds of readers, who began holding impromptu street forums, leading to the formation of dozens of grassroots groups that published hand-produced unofficial journals. Such activities spread from Beijing throughout the country over the winter, until a succession of arrests in March and April 1979 signalled the end of CCP tolerance of independent publishing and activism.

The nature of the movement defies simple description. On the one hand, Democracy Wall generated the PRC's first independent political organisations and activists, many of who became key figures the Chinese democracy movement. But on the other hand, most participants were far from radical in their political orientation, and the broader movement pursued a diverse array of goals. A large volume of wall posters were personal in nature, appealing for redress over injustices suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Many expressed support for the rise of Deng Xiaoping within the party elite, or attacked his opponents. Some groups were focused on opening up forums for artistic expression rather than explicitly addressing politics. A handful of poster writers broke new ground by criticising Mao and exploring political reforms within the framework of Marxism and the socialist system. But only a handful argued for radical political changes such as the introduction of electoral democracy or individualist concepts of human rights. Overall, then, rather than a *democracy movement* in the sense suggested by the English-language term,

Democracy Wall is better defined by a shared purpose of widening the scope of socio-political and artistic expression in China.

The movement had a complex relationship with the party-state. It was sparked by developments in high-level politics, but also influenced arguments within the party elite. Various party-state officials and departments sought to understand, exploit, infiltrate, or curb the movement, while many activists and poster-writers hoped to feed their arguments into elite politics, including via the foreign media in a process referred to as “exports for domestic consumption” (出口转内销). Emerging amidst a crucial, month-long meeting of top CCP leaders that cemented a pragmatic political line, the movement manifested vivid popular support for Deng’s personal political authority and the repudiation of Maoist orthodoxy. In foreign policy, meanwhile, the apparent flowering of free speech in Beijing helped smooth the way for the normalization of relations with the United States on January 1, 1979.

Deng’s strongly positive comments about Democracy Wall, particularly in interviews with foreign journalists, suggested an attempt to take advantage of the movement to advance both domestic and international goals. However, Deng’s decision to launch a crackdown in March 1979 raises unresolved questions about the extent to which the movement was manipulated opportunistically to serve Deng’s political interests, or developed spontaneously in directions unanticipated by CCP leaders.

Introduction

On April 4, 1979 in Beijing, a scruffy-looking man pushed his thick-rimmed glasses up from the tip of his nose and started gluing large sheets of paper to a wall. A small crowd was milling around, a common sight near this section of wall, which was covered with handwritten posters of different shapes, sizes and colours. This was what activists in Beijing were calling “Xidan Democracy Wall”, a 200-metre stretch of grey brick with a bus depot behind it, the spiritual and physical home of open political debate in China. The man’s name was Ren Wanding, founder the China Human Rights Alliance, one of several dozen grassroots political organisations that had emerged from the dusty sidewalks in Xidan over the preceding winter.

From mid-1978 onwards, and especially since November, ordinary people had posted thousands of wall-posters here on topics ranging from personal grievances and injustice in the Cultural Revolution to rumours about Party leaders, criticism of corruption, ideas for political reform, Mao’s legacy and other previously forbidden subjects. Amidst this unprecedented outpouring of open political discussion, some citizens decided to form groups to produce unofficial journals, printed using hand-cranked mimeograph machines. Similar poster walls and unofficial journals soon appeared in dozens of cities across China. But Ren Wanding’s April 4 poster was protesting recently-announced restrictions on poster-writing and the arrest of a fellow activist six days earlier. Ren was putting up his second sheet when two plainclothes policemen pinned his arms behind his back and took him away.

The poster writers struggled on until the wall was shut down in December 1979, and grassroots publishing and artistic activities persisted in various forms — under mounting pressure and constraints from authorities — until April 1981. But already with Ren’s arrest, the five-month-old “Beijing Spring” was over.

The Origins of Democracy Wall

The origins of the movement’s key practices – poster-writing, poetry and publishing – lie in the Cultural Revolution, while its politics trace directly to the April 5, 1976 Tiananmen Incident (Hu 2004; Goodman 1981; Nathan 1985; Garside 1981). That day, during the Qingming Festival honouring the dead, crowds of Beijingers had clashed angrily with police over the removal of wreaths and posters honouring the recently departed Premier Zhou Enlai, who had died in January 1976. Zhou was seen as a voice of moderation through the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, and many of the Tiananmen protesters seized the opportunity of his passing to denounce the radical CCP leadership in poems and posters. But with an ailing Mao determined to uphold his legacy, the demonstration was suppressed and designated a “counterrevolutionary” incident (Teiwes and Sun 2004).

Just over two-and-a-half years later, on November 16, 1978, official media announced it was now “a completely revolutionary event” (Teiwes and Sun 2019). This announcement provided the spark that ignited the Democracy Wall Movement (Goodman 1981:35; Nathan 1985:10). Occasional handwritten big-character posters (*dazibao*) had been appearing in Beijing since mid-1978, following Constitutional revisions pushed through by Chairman Hua

Guofeng mandating “Four Great Freedoms”: airing of views, mass demonstrations, big-character posters, and great debates (Baum 1994:53-54; Xiao 2008:42; Hu 2004). The reversal of the verdict on the Tiananmen Incident effectively legitimized the exercise of public speech and even mobilization against Maoist excesses, and catalysed the veterans of the 1976 incident to spring back into action, prompting a much broader wave of political discussion to swell, centred on the “Democracy Wall” at Xidan.

On November 19, the first Sunday after the Tiananmen verdict was reversed, a poster at the Xidan Wall raised an obvious, but dangerous question: if the suppression of the now-“completely revolutionary” 1976 incident had taken place under Chairman Mao, didn’t this mean the Great Helmsman had made mistakes? Since his death in September 1976 public criticism of Mao had remained firmly off-limits. The Cultural Revolution was over but the Party line was that the blame for any of its negative effects must be attributed to the “Gang of Four” led by Jiang Qing, not Mao himself. Yet here was a poster on a wall in central Beijing that read: “Chairman Mao’s thinking had become metaphysical in his old age . . . He supported the Gang of Four in raising their hands to strike down Comrade Deng Xiaoping, and suppressed the Tiananmen Incident.” The poster, signed “Work Permit 0538,” alleged that Mao’s mistaken judgement had been used (by the Gang) in an “all-out attack on the cause of revolution in China” (Garside 1981:212-213). Contrary to all expectations, the poster remained in place rather than being removed by authorities.

The days that followed brought massive crowds and multiplying numbers of posters — big and small, colourful and plain, calligraphic and scribbled. Competition for space on the Xidan Wall was soon so fierce that less interesting or original posters were being quickly covered over with new material, and writers started pleading for others to allow their poster to remain uncovered (Garside 1980:219). As activity around the Wall swelled, the crowds held a series of impromptu sidewalk discussions from November 25 to 30, with speakers trying to win the support of crowds hundreds, sometimes thousands, strong (Nathan 1985:10). Foreign journalists, diplomats and students mixed freely with the crowd, excited at the opportunity to talk openly with ordinary Chinese people, especially on political topics, for the first time since 1949.

Another watershed was the founding of an unofficial political group and the publication of a hand-printed journal discussing political and social issues. On November 24, a group of men from Guizhou, led by poet Huang Xiang, unveiled a 60-metre-long big-character poster on a fence opposite Mao’s mausoleum in the centre of Tiananmen Square, and proclaimed the birth of the Enlightenment Society (启蒙社) (Seymour 1980:39-40; Garside 1981:218). The group then distributed copies of a magazine they had produced using a hand-cranked mimeograph machine. A trail had been blazed: soon two dozen such unofficial publications (民间刊物) had emerged in Beijing. Poster walls or unofficial publications were reported in at least 28 other cities, particularly Guangzhou, which spawned *Voice of the People* (人民之声) and Qingdao, where *Ocean Spray* (海浪花) and several other publications appeared. A mainstream party history states that there were more than 80 groups (Cheng et al. 2008:291); one source lists the titles of 67 unofficial journals published outside Beijing; others put the number as high as 127 (Goodman 1981:167-70; I-Mu 1986:39-54, 67-80; Nathan 1985:24; Xiao 2008:49). The fact that a master for each edition had to be carved by

hand, and the mimeograph machines cranked several hundred times for every page, offers some idea of the intensity of activism of those involved in these unofficial publications.

The movement's emergence reflected a range of latent social forces stemming from common Cultural Revolution-era experiences of rustication, political persecution, and stifling constraints on intellectual and artistic expression. Former Red Guards and educated youth sent to live in the countryside had been returning to the cities, where they found limited employment prospects. Many also brought back a reflexive scepticism of the radical politics they had once embraced (Yang 2003; Paltemaa 2007:610). Cadres persecuted under Mao—and their children, many of whom were part of the returning Red Guard generation—suddenly had good reason to expect their cases might be revisited (Goodman 1981:36–38). And for intellectuals and artists, the emergence of Democracy Wall signalled a rare opportunity to explore ideas and forms of expression outside the stultifying official culture. If the wave of mobilization that followed was a response to elite political developments, it was one deeply rooted in the social context of China's cities in late 1978.

The nature and goals of the Democracy Wall movement

In what sense do the events described above constitute a movement? Dictionary usage tends to define movements by a goal, objective or principle shared between its participants.¹ Yet Democracy Wall's posters covered all manner of topics, and the movement's most ardent activists expressed widely diverging political viewpoints (Paltemaa 2007; Brodsgaard 1981; Yang 1998; Tang 2015). The mushrooming numbers of unofficial publications and groups – many of which resulted from the splintering of newly-formed activist organisations – offer an indication of the fragmented nature of its political goals.

The varied political positions of the movement can roughly be summarized as:

- Left faction drawing primarily on Marxist examples to advocate for the strengthening and democratisation of the socialist system in China, as epitomized by *Beijing Spring* (北京之春) and *Fertile Soil* (沃土);
- Reform faction exploring the adoption of features of bourgeois capitalist political systems for the purpose of strengthening socialist democracy, as epitomized by the *April Fifth Forum* (四五论坛) and the Enlightenment Society;
- Radical faction advocating for fundamental systemic changes including electoral democracy and individual concepts of human rights, most prominently associated with the *Explorations* (探索) group and China Human Rights Alliance.

Alongside these more overtly political groups, many participants in the Democracy Wall movement were primarily interested in opening up space for new forms of artistic and

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*: movement, *n.*, 8.a. A course or series of actions and endeavours on the part of a group of people working towards a shared goal; an organization, coalition, or alliance of people working to advance a shared political, social, or artistic objective. Freq. with modifying word. *American Heritage Dictionary*: movement, *n.*, 4. A series of actions and events taking place over a period of time and working to foster a principle or policy; 5. An organized effort by supporters of a common goal.

literary expression (Goodman 1980:9-10,103).² The publication *The Moment/Today* (今天), for example, provided a platform for poets, and the “Stars” (星星) group organized a landmark public art exhibition.

Even the key term around which the movement coalesced – *minzhu* (民主), usually rendered “democracy” in English – there were widely varying interpretations (Guang 1996; Nathan 1985). Based on the two component characters’ varied historical usage, Lei Guang showed that *minzhu* connoted at least three distinct meanings among Democracy Wall writings. One, based on Marxist theory, was particularly concerned with restoring popular sovereignty over the people’s dictatorship, emphasising popular “supervision” and economic democracy. This latter conception was most common among the writers of political posters and unofficial journal articles (Lei 1996:431-432; Nathan 1985:xiii, 15, 24). A second, associated with Confucian political thought, held *minzhu* to mean “active concern [from leaders] for the welfare of the people” (Guang 1996:428). This more paternalistic idea was evident in the support for, and faith in, Deng Xiaoping expressed by many writers and speakers at the wall — and the pro-Deng crowds who gathered there in November 1978. The third was the individual rights-based concept that has been prevalent in Western thought. Guang’s quantitative content analysis confirmed *minzhu* was the most frequently used political word in the unofficial journals in 1978-79 (1996:418-419). However, given the variations in its meanings, Guang (1996:440) concluded it is “almost a misnomer” to equate the Chinese term *minzhu* with the English word “democracy.”

Calls for democracy and freedom were a common thread among the great variety of Democracy Wall activities, but hopes for their realization were overwhelmingly focused within the party-state system, not outside it (Goodman 1981:9). Collections of Democracy Wall documents include many explicitly pro-Deng posters, and groups such as the Enlightenment Society explicitly aligned themselves with Deng and his supporters’ slogans of the time, “seek truth from facts” and “practice is the sole criterion of truth.”³ Posters critical of Mao commonly cited his purging of Deng as the rationale, and nearly all the activist groups professed their loyalty to socialism and the CCP. Some analyses have argued the radical faction increasingly came to represent the movement (Baum 1994:72-73; MacFarquhar 1997:323; Brodsgaard 1981:764-770). However, British diplomat Roger Garside (1981:231), who maintained close contact with the leading radical, Wei Jingsheng, wrote that Wei was “almost alone in calling into question the good faith of the pragmatic reformers” in the Party. Other sources, both Chinese and foreign, echo this assessment (Goldman 1994:44; Nathan 1985:104-106; Rudd 1980:96; Xiao 2008:51). In short, the Democracy Wall movement generally operated within what James Scott described as “the official discourse of deference.”

² Of course, advocating an apolitical space for art and literature was itself a political act in the context of the ruling party’s orthodoxy that art should serve the working class and socialism, as expressed in Mao Zedong’s famous Yan’an talks of 1942.

³ See, for example, the documents collected in James Seymour, *The Fifth Modernization* and David Goodman, *Beijing Street Voices*.

Rather than any particular political goals, what united the movement under the banner of “democracy” was a desire for – and practice of – freer expression on social, political and artistic topics. The desirability of freedom of speech was a key point of convergence across the diverse unofficial publications’ writings (Paltemaa 2007). More importantly, the movement’s core activists repeatedly banded together to protest moves to restrict speech – whether or not it aligned with their particular view or political agenda. In January 1979, for example, the arrest of Fu Yuehua, a peasant activist who organized a demonstration “against hunger, for democracy,” prompted a collective statement from six activist groups. The arrest of Wei Jingsheng in March 1979 similarly became a major rallying point at the wall, despite his ideas being rejected by most participants (Tang 2015:12). Activists across the political spectrum criticized the arrest, and even lobbied for his release in subsequent meetings with party officials (Opletal 2021:149). The movement is therefore better defined by what it did – expanding the scope of social, political and artistic expression in China – than what it said (Goodman 1981:9; Goldman 1999:4).

Democracy Wall and elite politics

The Democracy Wall Movement had a range of complex connections with CCP elite politics, with influence flowing both downward and upward through numerous channels. On one hand, the strong outpouring of public sentiment, and arguments made by Democracy Wall activists, influenced intra-party discussions and debates, and broke taboos that party leaders likely had no desire to see broken.⁴ On the other hand, there is evidence that Deng and his supporters made judicious use of the opportunities the movement presented in order to advance their domestic and international political goals.

The Democracy Wall movement’s emergence was directly related to developments at the top of the ruling party, but it was by no means a simple top-down political mobilization campaign. Hu Jiwei (2004), who was then Chief Editor of the *People’s Daily*, describes two forces simultaneously pushing for an end to Maoist-style politics and the return of more pragmatic leaders purged during the Cultural Revolution:

One was a top-down force, the other bottom-up. The former was that group of figures Mao Zedong had called ‘those persons in authority taking the capitalist road’ . . . [the latter was] many low-level cadres, young workers and college students who had been attacked and ruined during the Cultural Revolution.

Some connections to elite politics were straightforward. The *Beijing Spring* group had family connections within the party, and even published two pseudonymous articles by Yan Jiaqi, a close associate of then-head of the CCP Organisation Department Hu Yaobang (Nathan 1990: 228n9). The *April Fifth Forum* also called for a public trial of the Gang of Four and the rehabilitation of Yu Luoke shortly before both were announced, suggesting “inside access” (Nathan 1985:18).

The outpouring of pro-Deng popular sentiment around the wall contributed to the shift in political authority towards Deng at the November 1978 CCP Central Work Conference (Shen

⁴ Deng in particular was concerned about the movement’s criticisms of Mao, due to the potential that this could lead to instability (Teiwes & Sun 2019:111, 114).

2004:82). According to Party historians, the movement's open criticism of Cultural Revolution-era injustices and political opponents of Deng provided "societal and public opinion support to objectively complement the intra-party 'reform faction' in their struggle" (Xiao 2008:55). One of Deng's key opponents referred directly to Xidan poster-writers' criticisms in a written self-criticism delivered at the conclusion of the Central Work Conference on (see Yu 2008, 98-105). As Vogel (2011:256) surmises, the wall posters allowed Deng "political room to follow a new path without having to take part in the attacks himself."

The bottom-up influence of the Democracy Wall movement was facilitated in part by elites within the party who actively sought to investigate and understand the activist groups and their ideas (Opletal 2021). Chairman Hua Guofeng (1978) stated that in November 1978 the Politburo Standing Committee had "listened to reports from the Beijing Party Committee and Communist Youth League on the masses' responses to the reversal of the Tiananmen Incident verdict and the situation of the *dazibao* on Beijing's streets." Most activists were receptive to direct approaches from party-state officials, viewing them as a channel through which to expand their influence. But other parts of the party-state took very different approaches in their investigations. While associates of the liberal-leaning Hu Yaobang within the propaganda system, including the *People's Daily*, attempted to grasp the movement's ideas and argued for allowing its continued existence, cadres in the security services regarded it as a threat and sought to infiltrate and control the publishing groups. This process fed back into intra-party struggles: security officials used information gleaned from spies in the movement to attack propaganda officials who advocated ongoing tolerance (Opletal 2021:146).

Although Deng Xiaoping did not initiate the Democracy Wall movement — he was overseas when it first began to bloom, and was not involved in the reversal of the verdict on the Tiananmen Incident — he made judicious use of the opportunities it presented (Chubb 2016). One party history describes Deng Xiaoping as having "intentionally borrowed (借助) the power of popular forces" to attack his rivals (Xiao 2008:55). On November 26, 1978 Deng told visiting Japanese Socialist Party leader Sasaki Ryosaku that the poster campaign showed the masses were "carrying out democracy." Deng stated that poster writing was permitted under the constitution and, importantly, that even though some of the views expressed on the posters were incorrect, this was nothing to be afraid of: "If the masses have opinions, let them vent their anger" (*Renmin Ribao*, 28 November 1978, 1). The following day, Deng granted an interview to influential US columnist Robert Novak, in which he "volunteered his approval" of the Xidan Wall without being asked. He also repeated, apparently verbatim, his tolerant and relaxed attitude towards "incorrect" views (Evans and Novak 1978). Deng's comments, combined with the unusual medium through which they were transmitted, brought the movement to a well-timed crescendo.

Deng also used the movement to pursue his major foreign policy objective, American diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic. Novak (2007:330) understood Deng's purpose in granting him an interview as "send[ing] Washington the message that he wanted 'normalization' quickly and did not have a high asking price." However, alongside this message, the foreign media also transmitted another, perhaps less accurate, message regarding Deng's political attitudes. Novak's own report began:

“PEKING – Teng Hsiao-ping, Communist China’s dominant figure today, heartily endorses free speech in wall posters now covering Peking even while disagreeing with some of their comments... .” (Evans and Novak 1978)

Prefaced with this ringing endorsement of Deng’s (and by extension Communist China’s) compatibility with the values of freedom-loving America, the interview gained major coverage across the US media (Novak 2007:329), setting the tone for a raft of similar reports exclaiming at China’s apparent freedom under Deng.

Deng’s statements of support for the wall were also intended to project an image of stability, both in the Party and in society. With China seeking technology and investment from capitalist countries, projecting an image of social and political stability abroad was crucial (Yu 2008:233-234). Accordingly, at the same time as encouraging the Democracy Wall movement — and the foreign reporting of it — Deng also repeatedly stressed that it did not imply elite turmoil, nor any official reappraisal of Mao Zedong. When the November 28 edition of the *People’s Daily* reported Deng’s comments to Sasaki and Novak supporting the Xidan posters, the front-page headline emphasized: Party Centre led by Chairman Hua is united and unanimous. In sum, as former Propaganda Department official Zheng Zhongbing (2009) recalls: “When Democracy Wall appeared in 1978 [Deng] got other people to pay attention to it, saying there was something good that everyone should go and see, showing the masses’ freedom and democratic awareness, and a display of stability in China.”

Democracy Wall and foreign actors

On November 25, public conversations suddenly started taking place between locals and Chinese-speaking foreigners at Xidan (Garside 1981:220). Topics ranged from life in foreign countries, American politics and the Watergate scandal to Deng Xiaoping, the Tiananmen Incident and the wall itself. Canadian journalist John Fraser (1980:231), who had been stationed in Beijing since 1977, expressed amazement at suddenly being permitted to talk freely with Chinese people for the first time. This development had consequences for the movement, for wherever international media personnel go, they carry with them the potential for social activists to publicize their causes and viewpoints and seek outside support. Many English-language reports on Xidan carried direct quotations from wall posters, sometimes even excerpting activists’ writings at length. Foreign journalists thus became gatekeepers of a conduit that could carry ideas and arguments to the outside world, and from there back to China.

In the context of China in 1978 some Democracy Wall activists believed that through foreign journalists they could reach mass audiences within China, and even the leadership. This perception was grounded in their own experiences of the use of media in Chinese politics. The most popular newspaper in China at the time was *Reference News* (参考消息) a four-page digest of translated foreign news reports. It had a higher circulation than the *People’s Daily* and a much larger readership, despite its official “restricted” status, and was particularly popular among those who frequented Democracy Wall (Nathan 1985:158; Rudolph 1984:5). Between November 1978 and March 1979, *Reference News* carried more than 20 translated foreign reports mentioning the movement, mostly on the front page (Chubb 2016:580). This was important because activists knew that much more

comprehensive foreign news digests circulated among higher-level officials, leading some to believe that by communicating with the foreign press they could potentially reach the CCP leadership (Fraser 1980:262; Rudolph 1984:17). The activists' attempts to use the foreign media were encapsulated in the vivid metaphor of "export goods for domestic consumption" (出口转内销) (Chubb 2016:580).

A related belief was that foreign press attention could enable activists to reach domestic mass audiences, not only via *Reference News* but also via foreign short-wave radio stations. It is not yet possible to know whether the CCP leadership really was learning about any groups' views through foreign media, as opposed to their own reporters and infiltrators, but there are numerous indications that audiences around Chinese were. An AFP assistant at the time remembered local people at Xidan asking her where to find particular posters they had heard about on the VOA and BBC (Chubb 2016:58). In the absence of any access to domestic media, *April Fifth Forum* founder Xu Wenli considered this a "greatly useful and greatly effective" channel for disseminating his group's views and raising its profile. According to Xu, the group picked up subscribers in almost every province, an effect he attributes largely to foreign broadcasts (Chubb 2016:580-581). In the words of Garside (1981:234), activists used the foreign media as "a megaphone to talk to their compatriots."

The activists' determination to exploit foreign media reflected the view of the media as a "mouthpiece" (喉舌) that they had grown up with. Radical Wei Jingsheng, for example, described maintaining contacts with foreign journalists as vital in order "to disseminate Democracy Wall propaganda to the outside" (Wu 1998). After Wei's arrest, his *Explorations* colleagues issued a statement via foreign journalists that attracted widespread attention outside China (Garside 1981:258-259). The China Human Rights League's first poster explicitly asserted the right to converse with foreign journalists, and the group was one of several who began notifying correspondents in advance to try to attract coverage for their writings (Sidane 1980:30). However, the Western media could only fulfil this mouthpiece function to the extent that the activists' or poster-writers' stories and messages fitted with their news values. Understandably, then, the most radical activists – particularly Wei and Ren – were most successful in the "export goods for domestic consumption" venture, with coverage focusing on radical calls for Western-style democracy and human rights (Chubb 2016:577-579).

On occasions Democracy Wall activists obtained direct foreign assistance. Some Western journalists recalled feeling a sense of responsibility to help (Fraser 1980:242; Butterfield 1982:409). While *Explorations* normally sold for no more than 0.5 yuan (about 30 US cents), foreigners paid a special rate of 20 yuan (around \$13) per copy (Rudd 1980:175). Most were happy to pay the inflated price, even though they could have read it for free on the wall at Xidan. This was a significant financial boon for Wei's group, helping expand *Explorations'* circulation from less than 200 copies to more than 1,700 (Rudd 1980:76). Other journalists supplied Wei with reference materials such as an encyclopaedia, and one provided a tape recorder (Rudd 1980:164; Chubb 2016:582). According to Michel Oksenberg (1990:216), one foreign journalist even "advised one dissident in the preparation of a poster that the journalist subsequently wrote about." Wei's own view was that foreign journalists' "concern and support" was helping improve China's foreign relations (Garside 1980:244-245). However, it also may also have contributed to the movement's demise.

The downfall of Democracy Wall

Once Deng's political opponents were sidelined and the normalization of Sino-American relations was achieved, elite political support for Democracy Wall began to waver. In January 1979 the CCP convened a Theory Work Forum (理论工作务虚会) to debate and consolidate the pragmatic post-Maoist political line encapsulated in the slogan "practice is the sole criterion of truth" (Cheng et al. 2008:244-305). The marathon meeting, which concluded in March 1979, featured vigorous debates over previously taboo topics such as the appropriate form of socialist democracy and appraisals of Mao Zedong. According to mainstream CCP historians, the trend of bottom-up influence seen in November and December continued, with numerous viewpoints from Democracy Wall circulating in the meeting. The same historians place significant blame on ideas from Democracy Wall for the emergence of "incorrect thinking" among CCP cadres at the meeting (Cheng et al. 2008:291-297).

The precise deliberations that led to the crackdown remain unknown. What is clear is that by March 1979 Deng Xiaoping had decided to launch a crackdown on the movement's most radical elements (Opletal 2021:158). One explanation is that a Machiavellian Deng was always planning to suppress the movement down once it had helped him achieve his objectives. As a victim and close observer of the Cultural Revolution, Deng was wary of the risks of mass mobilizations, and would never have countenanced allowing the movement to continue once it was no longer serving his political goals (Dittmer 1987:232). Deng had also had a record of working with Mao in implementing the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign, which had similarly suppressed critics who had originally encouraged to speak out. A second view holds that Deng wanted to allow the movement to continue but was forced to order a crackdown by other members of his reform coalition, particularly older figures like Chen Yun (Garside 1981:258). At a meeting of the Politburo in mid-March 1979, a majority wanted a crackdown on the Democracy Wall Movement. Deng allegedly voiced disagreement but acceded to the majority (Baum 1994:78; MacFarquhar 1997:324). Proponents of this explanation have noted that in his "Four Cardinal Principles" speech laying out the grounds for the crackdown, Deng repeatedly referred to the views he was expressing as those of the Central Committee, rather than his own (Baum 1994: 401n53).

Sources with direct involvement in the events suggest a third scenario is the most likely: Deng initially supported the movement based on some combination of ideological alignment and political expediency, but then changed his mind. Deng speechwriter Yu Guangyuan recalled a private conversation in December 1978 in which the Deng asked Yu to prepare remarks denouncing a planned investigation into Democracy Wall by Beijing municipal authorities. Yet when he delivered the speech on December 13, Deng did not follow through on the comments, a sign he was beginning to rethink his position. The same could also explain why Ye Jianying's praise for Democracy Wall in a speech the same day was deleted from the official transcript (Yu 2008:160). Other well-informed sources concur that Deng changed his mind, though they disagree on the timing of the shift (Hu 2004; Ruan 1994:9). One party historian argues it was the war on Vietnam that Deng launched in February 1979, resulting in tens of thousands of Chinese casualties, that changed Deng's

attitude. Following the failure of the operation, Deng became more sensitive to criticism, leading him to crack down on the movement when posters and unofficial journals began critiquing the war (Xiao 2008:65-66).

Scenario One: Machiavellian Deng	Scenario Two: Deng's hand forced	Scenario Three: Deng changed his mind
Supporting free expression was expedient for Deng as he sought to bolster his own authority, repeating a pattern established by Mao Zedong in the Hundred Flowers Movement of 1957. Deng, as a victim of the Cultural Revolution, never really approved of the masses freely expressing their wishes. Deng cynically used the Democracy Wall Movement to consolidate internal power, and allowed it to continue while he mounted a charm offensive in the US, then shut it down.	Deng wanted to allow the movement to continue but was forced to crack down by other members of his reform coalition. At a meeting of the Politburo in mid-March 1979, with his prestige affected by the Sino-Vietnamese War, Deng was forced to accede to a majority advocating a crackdown. Hence why in his <i>Four Cardinal Principles</i> speech Deng repeatedly referred to the views he was expressing as those of the Central Committee, not his own.	Deng initially supported the Democracy Wall-related activities, but soon became convinced that it had to be curtailed. This change in Deng's views may have occurred as early as December 1978, when Deng aborted a plan to criticise the Beijing municipal government's investigations into the wall, or as late as March 1979, when Democracy Wall activists turned their attention to critiquing Deng's personal power and the disastrous war he had launched against Vietnam.

Irrespective of exactly when and why Deng reversed his stance, the text of his “Four Cardinal Principles” speech clearly laid out the rationale for the curbing and suppression of the movement. The speech suggests the arguments of the movement’s radical flank, combined with its connections with foreign media, led to the crackdown. First, Deng (1979) specifically criticized activists for “deliberately trying to get foreigners to give worldwide publicity to their words and deeds.” Second, he singled out open letters that appeared on the wall addressed to the US president as calls for “intervention in China's internal affairs.” The open letters, in their very design, illustrate how the international media presence, combined with the journalistic practice of seeking out and emphasizing political conflict and personalized struggles, prompted the movement’s radicals to speak out even more strongly—that is, more menacingly from the Party’s perspective—than it otherwise would have. Third, Deng specifically highlighted activists’ use of the language of democracy and human rights as a danger, stating: “these trouble-makers generally say they speak in the name of democracy, a claim by which people are easily misled.”

The foreign correspondents’ assistance to the radical flank, and the bold statements they focused their reporting on, probably also contributed to Deng’s change of position, even as it benefitted his international image. Considering the attention the Party leadership paid to Democracy Wall during the Central Work Conference and Theoretical Work Conference, their access to comprehensive internal digests of foreign news reports, and the prevalence of Democracy Wall reports in even the lowest-level *Reference News* bulletins, at least some

of the activists' most radical statements probably reached the decision makers via the foreign media. If so, this would have, at a minimum, provided ammunition for those leaders who were arguing for a crackdown. Whether Deng changed his mind of his own accord or acceded to the views of his colleagues, by boosting the radicals' prominence and broadening the reach of their statements, the foreign media increased the likelihood that the CCP leadership would designate the movement's activities as a threat.

At the level of individual targets of suppression, the international media's role is even more clear-cut. Close contact with foreign correspondents, and in some cases direct assistance, opened activists to charges of being foreign-influenced and unpatriotic. Citing official documents, CCP historians describe Ren Wandong's group as having "brazenly asked [foreign journalists] to interfere in China's internal affairs" (Cheng et al. 2008:292-293). In Wei Jingsheng's case, a foreign journalist's actions formed the pretext and possibly even the evidence for his jailing (Rudd 1980). Of course, even if authorities had not obtained the taped recordings of Wei in conversation with a Reuters journalist, they would almost certainly have arrested and jailed him anyway. But the foreign media had made his arrest more likely in the first place by increasing his prominence. Their assistance expanded *Explorations'* circulation and its range of content, and raised Wei's domestic profile, increasing the authorities' incentive to suppress him. Their keen coverage of his fighting words also conflicted with Deng's aim of projecting an image of political stability to the outside world in order to facilitate economic cooperation.

Ironically, the press corps' presence and reporting of Democracy Wall may have temporarily extended its lifespan, even as it made suppression more likely overall. Just before the arrests began in Beijing on March 29, most of the Beijing correspondents were taken on an unprecedented tour of the top-secret Vietnamese border area, suggesting the authorities may have been concerned about bad publicity (Thwaites 1984). Had there been no foreign journalists present in Beijing, or little active reporting of Democracy Wall, Deng may have decided to launch a crackdown as early as December 1978. However, the lesson Deng (1986) drew from the interactions between Democracy Wall and the foreign media was evident in a speech eight years later: "A few years ago we punished according to law some exponents of liberalization who broke the law. Did that bring discredit on us? No, China's image was not damaged. On the contrary, the prestige of our country is steadily growing." The foreign press's interest in the movement and its radical activists proved to be, at best, a temporary paper shield.

Conclusion

Legacies of Democracy Wall continue to play out in the Chinese democracy movement, in Chinese elite politics, and international politics. First, although its politics remained overwhelmingly within the status quo, it nonetheless shattered taboos, particularly public criticism of Mao, and discussion of corruption and elite politics more generally. This in turn paved the way for the first demands for fundamental, systemic political change emerged in China. Although smaller in scale and rooted in different demographics — workers and former Red Guards rather than students — Democracy Wall was a forerunner to the protest movements of the second half of the 1980s. Some activists, notably Wang Juntao of the

Beijing Spring group, would play key roles in the Tiananmen movement of 1989 ([Link to Tiananmen Democracy Movement](#)). More generally, many Democracy Wall activists went on to become prominent leaders of the overseas Chinese democracy movement ([Link to Wei Jingsheng](#)).

Second, Democracy Wall's interactions with elite politics resulted in the crystallisation of key parameters of politics in the PRC arguably to this day. The movement hastened the swing of political authority towards Deng in late 1978, partly as a result of the existing pro-Deng orientation of many of its participants, and partly due to Deng's exploitation of the opportunities this afforded for burnishing his position. Although the movement hardly opposed Chairman Hua, who was already moving the PRC in a pragmatic, arguably reformist direction (Teiwes and Sun 2011; 2019), it aided the consolidation of Deng's "paramount leader" status within the party. In a bitter irony, Democracy Wall also prompted Deng's enumeration of the "Four Cardinal Principles" that continue to delineate red-line limits of acceptable political speech in the PRC: upholding socialism, dictatorship of the proletariat, CCP leadership and Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought.

Third, Democracy Wall had a major impact on Western public opinion regarding China, smoothing the way for the 40 years of "engagement" policy. Although there is a lack of appropriately timed opinion poll data, surveys found U.S. public perceptions of China changed from strongly negative in 1976 to strongly positive in 1979. The proportion of Americans viewing China as a "friendly" country shot up from 22 percent to 45 percent, while perception of it as an "enemy" country fell from 25 percent to 9 percent (de Boer 1980). In November 1978, just before the diplomatic breakthrough that led to the normalisation of US-China relations, Amnesty International released a damning report on political imprisonment in the PRC, but it made little impact in comparison to the torrent of stories about Chinese people's new "freedom" of being allowed to gather in public, demand "democracy," and speak their minds in conversations with foreigners. The State Department dismissed Amnesty's report by arguing China's human rights record had recently improved. The Xidan Wall, Deng's professed hearty endorsement of it, and the foreign media's reporting of both, could only have helped create the conditions for the rapid normalization of US-China relations that Deng was pursuing.

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