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Aaron Peron Ogletree on The Tiananmen Papers compiled by Zhang Liang, edited by Andrew Nathan and Perry Link. New York: Public Affairs, 2001. 513pp.

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Abstract

A review of:

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Keywords

China, Democracy, Communism, Tiananmen Square

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There are many who believe that democracy is a cure-all for the evils of bad governance. However, this is largely illusory. Even in the United States, where there is supposed to be a system of checks and balances to hold our elected officials accountable for their actions, there are some officials who seem relatively immune to such scrutiny. This lack of accountability, however, has less to do with who is governing than the systematic problems associated with democratic governance. So, to merely substitute democracy for another form of government—as has been the policy of the United States in the last 60 years—is not a cure-all for *other* problems, such as corruption and mismanagement of the economy. Yet, it provides the illusion that these problems will be solved.

In 1989, Chinese students and workers were willing to face death and imprisonment in order to demand governmental reforms. Zhang Liang's book, The Tiananmen Papers, recounts this attempt to further democratic and economic reforms in China, as well as the indecisiveness and fighting within the Chinese government. This book attempts to show “how the dynamics of factionalism in China combine with personal ties and power interests with real issues of policy and ideology” (xxxi) by documenting that “these personal links into political factions are policy dilemmas intrinsic to China's transition from the ... Maoist system” and how this “clash produces valid differences of opinion” (xxxi).

Liang's book is divided into ten chapters presenting the personal accounts of Chinese authorities, who describe for the first time the Tiananmen crisis from their individual points of view. While many might question the authenticity of these accounts, Liang makes a point of examining them with that skepticism in mind. In fact, Liang's support of democracy and his prejudice against the Chinese government undermines further the credibility of the book. Fortunately, he tries to minimize the effect of his prejudice by corroborating the Chinese accounts with reports from the Western news media. Of course, there is evidence in this book and journals like the *Columbia Journalism Review*, that show the media has a tendency to misconstrue events themselves, so the subjectivity that Liang inserts into the telling of their accounts does have a greater effect than he might have intended.

What seems an important aspect to the book is the chronological narrative that documents how college students and workers seized upon the death of Hu Yaobang—the former Party General Secretary and a symbol of political and economic strength within the party—to further their agenda of reform. Included here are accounts of Chinese authorities who believed this gathering was merely an expression of mourning for Hu and support for the status quo—as Hu was a symbol for ending the corruption and inflation that weakened China—rather than a turning point in the agenda of the reform movement. This belief did not change until it became evident that these people were a threat to the stability and order of China. The realization of this threat led to the imposition of martial law and the downfall of Zhao Ziyang, Party General Secretary, for allowing the situation get out of hand.

Liang describes how these changes did not settle the concern within the government, as Chinese authorities believed that Taiwan, and the United States (and capitalists more generally) were using Chinese students and workers as pawns to overthrow the Communist Party and the

socialist system. In their accounts, the Chinese authorities contend that they have evidence that the United States and Taiwan provided funds, used propaganda, advised, and organized subversive organizations to aid them in achieving their objectives. As a result, the authorities thought they had no alternative but to use the military to clear Tiananmen Square. Unfortunately, as it turns out, the Chinese authorities ordered the military to resolve the crisis peacefully, however the military had to resort to violence that resulted in the murder and injury of several thousand people, extensive destruction of property, and ultimately an economic downturn. As the Chinese government had hoped, the protests ceased while reforms were entrusted to another generation.

Beyond the question of who is to blame for this tragedy, The Tiananmen Papers emphasize the importance the Chinese people place on improving the standard of living in China. The tragedy in Tiananmen Square led many Chinese citizens to eventually recognize the need for reforms in order to improve their standard of living. In addition to account of Chinese authorities, the book is also peppered with accounts from foreign governments and investors. These include accounts from the United States, Japan, the European Union, and many European countries, such as Sweden and Switzerland, all of whom condemned and sanctioned China for the tragedy—ultimately pressuring the Chinese government to begin reforms.

When these diverse narratives are combined with Liang's simple writing style the end-product is less of an academic effort and more of a provocative read for those seeking a better understanding of China and what led to the tragedy at Tiananmen Square.

*Aaron Peron Ogletree, J.D., The Journal of Buddhist Ethics and the Kui Xing Journal
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