

New Evidence on the Authenticity of the *The Tiananmen Papers*

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## I. Introduction

*The Tiananmen Papers* English edition was published in January 2001 by PublicAffairs Publishing House. (The Chinese edition is titled *June Fourth: The True Story* was published in April of the same year by Hong Kong's Mirror Books.) Claiming to be based on confidential documents of the Chinese Communist Party provided by someone using the pseudonym "Zhang Liang", the book was edited and translated by two leading scholars in China studies, Columbia University professor Andrew J. Nathan and Princeton University professor Perry Link. I believe the scholars' treatment of the materials available to them at the time was sound and professional, and offered, for the first time, a panoramic view of the Tiananmen crackdown.

For many westerners, its title echoed the 1971 book *The Pentagon Papers*, which was a revelatory look at the Vietnam War and helped shift public opinion. *The Tiananmen Papers* also had a significant impact on the public understanding of China amidst its rapid economic rise. *Foreign Affairs* magazine published excerpts from *The Tiananmen Papers*. *The New York Times* published a review by the Yale professor Jonathan Spence that largely accepted that the documents were real, and published an op-ed by the veteran China-watcher Jonathan Mirsky that the papers "look real and significant."

This is why questions about the documents' authenticity are still, today, of paramount importance in understanding the events of 35 years ago. Soon after their publications, the documents were criticized as of dubious provenance. Overall, however, they have largely remained accepted as valuable sources of historical knowledge—essentially as documents leaked from CCP archives.

Since then, however, many subsequent publications on June 4th have provided significant evidence that can help clarify the authenticity issue. Over these twenty years, pieces of evidence have emerged sporadically, without being summarized and drawn attention to by many. Listed here, readers can judge for themselves.

## II. Initial Controversies over the Papers' Authenticity

Soon after the English edition was published, controversies arose regarding whether its contents were derived from confidential party documents:

- On January 6, 2001, scholar Xie Xuanjun in the United States first raised doubts, stating there was "no hard copy material evidence."
- On January 9, 2001, Xinhua News Agency published an article calling *The Tiananmen Papers* a fabrication. That same day, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhu Bangzao, when asked by foreign journalists, said, "I have already said that these are all distorted and fabricated materials. How much clearer do you want me to be?" Official statements lacked specifics and evidence, making them difficult to trust.
- On January 21, 2001, *The New York Times* published a book review by scholar Jonathan Spence. Spence seems to have largely accepted the documents' authenticity, although he commented after reading a dialogue involving Deng, Zhao, and Yang, that "In my opinion, the tone of this conversation seems somewhat artificial." He also said "doubts remain in my mind about ...their provenance" but did not provide evidence to support his feeling.
- In March 2001, Sing Tao Daily reported: "Recently, a person using the pseudonym Xiao He on the mainland contacted the media, revealing the true origin of the so-called top-secret documents provided by Zhang Liang, and at the same time providing a large number of examples, revealing another version of the source of the 'June 4th Truth' data. He wrote to this newspaper pointing out that Zhang Liang, who was once his good friend, took all the materials on the 'June 4th' incident that several friends had spent many years collecting and organizing, and claimed them as his own, taking them to the United States and labeling them as 'CCP confidential documents,' thus creating a false appearance."
- In June 2001, the English academic journal *China Quarterly* published a book review by American scholar Lowell Ditmer, who suggested: firstly, the documents seem to be divided into two different parts, one of which corresponds to materials that have already been publicly circulated since 1989 by Beijing Municipal Committee, Ministry of Education, and other government offices. The other part, consisting of records of high-level party meetings, is questionable. One example is that there are significant differences between the record of the April 25 meeting and the "Self-defense speech by Zhao Ziyang at the Thirteenth Fourth Plenary Session" already publicly disclosed. Another example is that parts of the text of "Deng Xiaoping's conversation with Li Peng and Yao Yilin on May 31" published in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* in 1993 was inserted into different parts of *The Tiananmen Papers*.
- In March 2004, *China Quarterly* published an article by scholar Alfred Chan, directly accusing Zhang Liang of fabrication. If readers judged solely based on the question of motive, then they could easily dismiss accusations by the anonymous person Xiao He against Zhang Liang as destructive rumors released by official sources. But Chan argued that details provided by Xiao He could not be so easily denied: first, in *The Tiananmen*

*Papers*, Yang Shangkun mistakenly identified Xu Qinxian as the son of Xu Haidong, when there was no father-son relationship; second, according to *The Tiananmen Papers*, the meeting at Deng Xiaoping's home on May 18, 1989, was held at 8:30 a.m., while media reports stated that on that morning, Zhao Ziyang, Li Peng, Hu Qili, and Qiao Shi were all visiting the fasting students in the hospital (although admitting the possibility of visiting students first and attending the meeting afterwards); third, a conversation between Zhao Ziyang and Xu on May 3, 1993, as recorded in the "Hong Kong Memoirs of Xu Jiatusun," appeared in *The Tiananmen Papers* in the form of "Zhao Ziyang's conversation with Yang Shangkun on May 6th." Similar instances of content lifted from elsewhere into *The Tiananmen Papers* were from *The Iron Troops: The Military History of the 38th Group Army*, *Remembrance and Reflections on 50 Days*, and other public and semi-public published materials.

### III. New Evidence Emerging After the 2004 Authenticity Debate

Whether *The Tiananmen Papers* can be regarded as true archival materials has remained an enduring issue. Just as fossils found in geological strata are sources of paleontology, archival materials are the original data for studying history. For significant historical events, subsequent studies are not completed all at once. Instead, historical events will continue to be studied and re-evaluated through time and space. Previous conclusions may be supplemented or overturned by newly discovered materials. However, the authenticity of the original archival materials themselves is a prerequisite for whether subsequent studies of them have any value.

In the public media, the debate over the authenticity of *The Tiananmen Papers* basically abated in 2004. Scholars seemed to believe that it was unlikely that conclusive evidence could be gotten on whether the papers published were true archives of the CCP, so their authenticity could only remain uncertain.

However, new material, listed below, has since emerged that raises serious questions about *The Tiananmen Papers*. This evidence points to the strong likelihood that most of the meetings and dialogue between top leaders, as published in the book, was forged. (All subsequent quotations from *The Tiananmen Papers* in this article were translated from the Chinese book *June Fourth: The True Story*.)

(1) On April 25th, Was Chen Xitong in Attendance at the Meeting at Deng Xiaoping's House?

#### a. *The Tiananmen Papers*

*On the morning of April 25th, Deng Xiaoping listened to reports from Li Peng, Yang Shangkun, Qiao Shi, Hu Qili, Yao Yilin, Li Ximing, Chen Xitong, and others at his home (Note: Deng Xiaoping had residences in the Beijing area and West Mountain, but all meeting records were only marked as "Comrade Xiaoping's place," without specific mention of which of Deng's homes the meeting was held in. Therefore, we cannot mark in the book which home each meeting was held in). From the record of the meeting records:*

*Li Peng: "There are also public demands for the government to step down. Hu said something about wanting to openly study and discuss China's existing political and power issues.*

*"Implementing universal suffrage, amending the constitution. Lift the ban on the party and the press, abolish the crime of counter-revolution. Illegal student organizations have already appeared in some universities in Beijing and Tianjin."*

*"What?" Deng Xiaoping was hard of hearing.*

*Chen Xitong said loudly, "Illegal student organizations. For example, some students at Peking University have established a 'Student Union of Solidarity,' inspired by the Solidarity labor union in Poland." Deng Xiaoping nodded. (Pages 194-195)*

*Chen Xitong's remarks made the already tense atmosphere even more tense. (Page 197)*

b. From *Chen Xitong's Account - Gold is Hard to Find but the Truth is Harder* by Yao Jianfu (2011)

*Chen Xitong: I have never attended any meetings at Deng Xiaoping's home, nor did I attend the meeting on April 25th, 1989, as described in The Tiananmen Papers held at Deng Xiaoping's home. (Page 122)*

(2) Was the May 17<sup>th</sup> meeting at Deng Xiaoping's home held in the morning or in the afternoon?

a. *Tiananmen Papers*

*On the 17th in the morning, the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the Communist Party of China convened at Deng Xiaoping's home, attended by Deng Xiaoping, Yang Shangkun, Bo Yibo, Zhao Ziyang, Li Peng, Qiao Shi, Hu Qili, and Yao Yilin. Now, according to the meeting records, I will summarize." (Page 440)*

b. *The Secret Journey of Zhao Ziyang* by Zhao Ziyang (in Chinese, New Century Press, 2009):

*I had no other choice but to present my views on amending the editorial in person to Deng. On the 17th of May, I called to request a meeting with Deng. Subsequently, Deng's office informed me to attend a meeting at his place in the afternoon, with both the Standing Committee and Shangkun present (at that time Wan Li was abroad, but he usually attended the Standing Committee meetings)." (Page 47)*

c. *Li Peng's June 4th Diary*

*May 17th... At 4 p.m., Comrade Xiaoping convened a meeting to discuss the current situation. Zhao, Li, Qiao, Hu, Yao, and Shangkun attended, and Wang Ruilin was also present. This was a crucial meeting that determined China's fate.*

在此紧要关头，赵紫阳不是站在党中央制止动乱的立场，而是站在支持动乱的立场。5月19日凌晨，赵紫阳在天安门广场对学生讲话，暴露了党中央内部的分歧，使动乱进一步升级。为了避免流血冲突，戒严部队在北京市郊区进行了一段时间的休整，耐心地向市民说明来意，以争取广大市民的理解和支持。但是戒严部队未能按期到达预期的目标，天安门仍被动乱分子盘据。北京和全国局势更加混乱，西方政府和反华舆论对中国的动乱公开表示支持，“美国之音”作了大量歪曲事实的报道，充当反华的最先锋，起到推波助澜的作用。

决定中国命运的一次会议

5月17日

下午4时，小平同志召集会议，讨论当前局势。赵、李、乔、胡、姚和尚昆参加，王瑞林也在。这是决定中国命运的一次会议。

赵讲，目前惟一办法是否定4月26日社论，与学生妥协，缓和下来。

我讲，26日社论是正确的，本来形势已逐步好转，但紫阳同志5月4日跟中央调子不一样，又重新点起火，以致发展到今天这种地步。惟一办法是旗帜鲜明反对动乱。

乔石认为4月26日社论是正确的。

依林说，这场动乱是赵的错误造成，能完全赞成李的意见。

胡对局势感到忧虑。他说，我们想的与广大群众想的差得太远。

杨尚昆认为不能从《社论》中后退，现在目标是邓，只有旗帜鲜明反对动乱。

邓讲话，问题出在党内。紫阳5月4日讲话是转折，制止动乱惟一办法是戒严。

邓说，你们的办公室有奸细，看看是谁走漏出去。

晚8时，常委再次碰头，定了戒严时间为5月21日，19日晚开动员大会。赵说，我的时间已结束，已写好信向常委请假。

5月16日晚召开的中央政治局常委会继续开到今天凌晨，总算达成一项决定：由赵紫阳代表政治局常委公开发表书面谈话，实际上是一封公开信。信中说，“现在我代表中央政治局常委李鹏、乔石、胡启立、姚依林同志向同学们讲几句话。”信中首先把常委的名字都列出来，这在过去是绝无仅有的。信中肯定了同学们的“爱国热情”是可贵的，“希望同学们保重身体，停止绝食”，要求学生“顾全大局，维护安定团结的局面”。

上午，我接到小平同志办公室的通知，小平同志邀请全体常委于下午4时到小平同志处开会。这是一次正式的中央政治局常委会，全体常委：赵紫阳、李鹏、乔石、胡启立、姚依林同志出席，杨尚昆同志列席，王瑞林同志担任记录。这是一次

(3) Did Bo Yibo participate in the decision-making process within the party regarding the student movement before June 1989?

In 1987, during all the operations that led to the ousting of Hu Yaobang, Bo Yibo and Yang Shangkun played emissaries between Deng Xiaoping and the party elders, engaging frequently and prominently. Deng Xiaoping employed unconventional means to force the General Secretary to step down, causing dissatisfaction within the party. The question is, two years later, during the internal high-level operations surrounding June 4th 1989, did Bo Yibo, like Yang Shangkun, remain an important and active emissary on behalf of Deng Xiaoping?

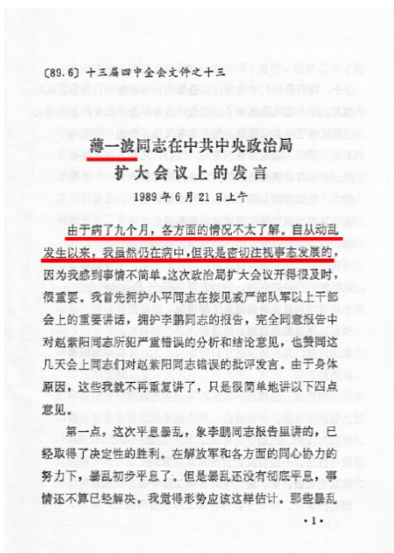
### a. *The Tiananmen Papers*

Bo Yibo's name appears a total of 46 times in the *Tiananmen Papers*; his actions and statements during the party's decision-making process regarding the student movement are as follows:

- April 27th: Bo Yibo, Song Renqiong, and other CCP elders inquired about the situation to Li Peng and others.
- April 28th: Bo Yibo attended the expanded meeting of the Political Bureau Standing Committee presided over by Li Peng; the content of his conversation was included.
- May 1st: Bo Yibo attended the meeting of the Political Bureau Standing Committee presided over by Zhao Ziyang.
- May 8th: Bo Yibo attended the meeting of the Political Bureau Standing Committee presided over by Zhao Ziyang; he spoke twice, the content of his conversation was included.
- May 14th: Bo Yibo met with Chen Yun in Beijing.
- May 16th: Bo Yibo attended the emergency meeting of the Political Bureau Standing Committee held in the evening. Other attendees included Zhao Ziyang, Li Peng, Qiao Shi, Hu Qili, Yao Yilin, and Yang Shangkun; he spoke twice, the content of his conversation was included.

### b. *The Last Secret* (2019)

Document Thirteen of the Fourth Plenary Session of the Thirteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party: "Comrade Bo Yibo's Speech at the Expanded Meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party" (June 21, 1989, morning):



*Due to having been ill for nine months, I do not understand all the various aspects of the situation. Although I have been sick since the unrest occurred, I have been closely observing the development of the situation.*

(4) Did the five members of the Politburo Standing Committee take a “formal vote” to impose martial law at the May 17<sup>th</sup> meeting?

a. *The Tiananmen Papers*

It is worth noting that according to the records of the Politburo Standing Committee meeting on May 17<sup>th</sup>, as recorded in *The Tiananmen Papers*, a vote was taken:

*At the suggestion of Bo Yibo, the five members of the Politburo Standing Committee voted formally on the issue of martial law. The result was: Li Peng and Yao Yilin supported martial law, Zhao Ziyang and Hu Qili opposed martial law; Qiao Shi abstained.*

b. *Prisoner of the State* by Zhao Ziyang (English version, Simon & Schuster, 2009)

For Zhao Ziyang, whether or not there was a "formal vote" by the Standing Committee was not a trivial matter. Therefore, Zhao made a clarification regarding the "foreign media rumors" in his secret recordings, published as *Prisoner of the State*:

*Here I would like to clarify something about this meeting called by Deng that resolved to impose martial law and suppress the students. There has been public hearsay that the Politburo Standing Committee meeting resulted in a vote of three against two, but in fact, there was no “three versus two” vote. There were only a few people in attendance. Among the members of the Standing Committee, it was two against two: Hu Qili and I were for revising the editorial, Yao Yilin and Li Peng were ardently opposed, and Qiao Shi remained neutral by not expressing any clear view. There was no such thing as a “three versus two” vote. Of course, if the opinions of Deng and Yang, who were not members of the Standing Committee, were added, in the overall count of all the people who attended that meeting, they were certainly a majority. However, in fact, the Standing Committee held no formal vote. (page 30)*

#### IV. June Fourth Thirty-Five Years On

There are some stories, such as about Chen Xitong's misleading report to Deng Xiaoping that were circulating in April and May 1989 around Tiananmen Square. *The Tiananmen Papers* largely confirms those narratives as they were formulated in the public arena in the days of the mass movement.

*The Tiananmen Papers* leaves the following impression about June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989:

The student movement developed rapidly, influencing the entire society and even the Party internally. There were differences among the CCP leaders on how to handle the student movement; influenced by Party members advocating the suppression of the student movement (such as Li Peng and Chen Xitong), Deng Xiaoping, who wielded actual power, ultimately had to intervene by deciding to impose martial law, that is, to use the military to suppress the student movement. In order to achieve ideological unity within the Party, it was necessary to remove the General Secretary Zhao Ziyang who opposed the decision to crack down.

To date, an alternative version has not emerged, and this narrative still stands. Whether the above narrative will stand into the future remains unpredictable.

While the fact that CCP leaders mobilized the national defense forces to suppress their own people is unquestioned, with hindsight, we can already see that this narrative neglects the origins of the 1989 student movement: whether it was the civil student movement that led to the internal divisions of the CCP leadership, or whether existing divisions within the CCP spread to the public and ultimately ignited the student movement.

If the latter is true, it challenges the standard view that, in 1989 China, strong public sentiment amounted to concrete political forces powerful enough to create a crack in the CCP leadership.

To study this question further, more historical documents may be needed. Regardless, any future re-examination of June Fourth will depend on the authenticity of the original historical materials. Thus, it is still necessary to make a clear distinction between *The Tiananmen Papers*, the book, and the “top secret CCP documents” which exist as a phantom in the book.