

THE MAY 13 HUNGER STRIKE DECLARATION (1989)

Introduction

In 1989, China's reforms seemed to have turned sour. The economy was in a downturn. Inflation reduced the buying power of workers' and intellectuals' fixed state salaries. Corruption from the lowest to the highest levels of the Communist Party, and the spectacle of "prince-lings" (children of high-ranking Party leaders) using their connections to amass business fortunes sickened idealistic intellectuals and ordinary people.

Former Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang (b. 1915) died on April 15, 1989. Hu had a reputation for honesty and integrity. Also, his somewhat sympathetic attitude toward intellectuals and student protesters had lost him the Party Secretary position after the student demonstrations of 1986. Thus, the occasion of public mourning for Hu Yaobang quickly turned into an occasion for students and citizens of Beijing to protest against corruption and in favor of democracy. The fact that the world press was in Beijing to cover the historic visit of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev provided further incentive for the protesters.

As protesters took over Tiananmen Square in the heart of the city during the latter part of April, the government attempted to bring the situation under control and published an editorial in the Party newspaper, *People's Daily*, which labeled the protesters as counter-revolutionary conspirators. The editorial inflamed the students' passions and simply brought more people into the demonstrators' ranks. The government was unable to respond clearly in any way to the students at this time: divisions had appeared within the Party leadership, with Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang (1919-2005) arguing for a more conciliatory approach and dialogue with the students, while Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) and other Party leaders favored taking a hard line.

As the Party leadership failed to respond to student demands, some of the more radical students organized a hunger strike. The following document is their declaration of purpose.

Selected Document with Questions

The May 13 Hunger Strike Declaration (1989)

In these bright and beautiful days of May, we are beginning a hunger strike. We are young, but we are ready to give up our lives. We cherish life: we do not want to die.

But this nation is in a critical state. It suffers from skyrocketing inflation, growing crime rates, official profiteering, and other forms of bureaucratic corruption, concentration of power in a few people's hands, and the loss of a large number of intellectuals who would now rather stay overseas. At this life-and-death moment of the nation's fate, countrymen, please listen to us!

China is our motherland.
We are the people.
The government should be our government.
Who should speak out, if we should not?
Who should act, if we should not?

Although our bones are still forming, although we are too young for death, we are ready to leave you. We must go; we are answering the call of Chinese history.

Our honest feelings of patriotism and loyalty to the nation were distorted as “turmoil,” and we were accused of being the tools of a “handful” who have “ulterior motives.”

We ask of every Chinese citizen — every worker, peasant, soldier, civilian, celebrity, every government official, policeman, and our accusers — that you place your hand on your heart and ask yourself: What wrong have we done? What “turmoil” have we created? What causes have led us to protest, to demonstrate, to boycott classes, to fast, to hide ourselves? Why did this happen? Our words were not heard in good faith. We were beaten by police when we marched, though we were only hungry for the truth. Our representatives knelt for hours, presenting our petition, only to be ignored by the government. Our request for dialogue has been put off again and again. The safety of our student leaders is now uncertain.

What shall we do?

Democracy is supposed to be the highest of human aspirations and freedom a sacred human right, granted at birth. Today these must be bought with our lives.

We say to our dear mothers and fathers, do not feel sorry for us when we are hungry. To our uncles and aunts, do not feel sad when we leave this life. We have one wish, that the lives of everyone we leave be better. We have one request, that you remember this: our pursuit is life, not death. Democracy is not a task for a few; it takes generations.

May this declaration, written with our lives, break up the clouds that cast their shadows on the People’s Republic of China. We are doing this:

1. To protest the government’s indifference to the student demonstrations;
2. To protest the government’s failure to enter into a dialogue with students;
3. To protest the government’s unfair characterization of the student democratic movement as “turmoil” and the further distortion of it in newspaper coverage.

We request:

- a. An immediate dialogue between the government and the students on substantial topics with equal status;
- b. An acknowledgement by the government of the legitimacy of the student democratic movement.

Time of the hunger strike: Begins at 2:00 P.M., May 13, 1989.

Place of the hunger strike: Tiananmen Square.

Questions:

1. What are the students' main concerns?
2. In what ways do the students seek to appeal to common people and to win their support?
3. From reading this declaration, can you derive any idea of what the students mean by "democracy"?