The trend toward democracy around the world also affected China to a limited degree. A political reform movement arose in the late 1980s. It built on economic reforms begun earlier in the decade. China’s Communist government clamped down on the reformers, however, and maintained a firm grip on power.

Mao’s Unexpected Legacy

After the Communists came to power in China in 1949, Mao Zedong set out to transform China. Mao believed that peasant equality, revolutionary spirit, and hard work were all that was needed to improve the Chinese economy. For example, intensive labor could make up for the lack of tractors on the huge agricultural cooperatives that the government had created.

However, lack of modern technology damaged Chinese efforts to increase agricultural and industrial output. In addition, Mao’s policies stifled economic growth. He eliminated incentives for higher production. He tried to replace family life with life in the communes. These policies took away the peasants’ motive to work for the good of themselves and their families.

Facing economic disaster, some Chinese Communists talked of modernizing the economy. Accusing them of “taking the capitalist road,” Mao began the Cultural Revolution to cleanse China of anti-revolutionary influences. The movement proved so destructive, however, that it caused many Chinese to distrust party leadership. Instead of saving radical communism, the Cultural Revolution turned many people against it. In the early 1970s, China entered another moderate period under Zhou Enlai (joh ehn-ly). Zhou had been premiere since 1949. During the Cultural Revolution, he had tried to restrain the radicals.

China and the West

Throughout the Cultural Revolution, China played almost no role in world affairs. In the early 1960s, China had split with the Soviet Union over the leadership of world communism. In addition, China displayed hostility toward the United States because of U.S. support for the government on Taiwan and memories of the Korean War.

China Opened Its Doors China’s isolation worried Zhou. He began to send out signals that he was willing to form ties to the West. In 1971, Zhou startled the world by...
inviting an American table tennis team to tour China. It was the first visit by an American group to China since 1949.

The visit began a new era in Chinese-American relations. In 1971, the United States reversed its policy and endorsed UN membership for the People’s Republic of China. The next year President Nixon made a state visit to China. He met with Mao and Zhou. The three leaders agreed to begin cultural exchanges and a limited amount of trade. In 1979, the United States and China established formal diplomatic relations.

**Economic Reform** Both Mao and Zhou died in 1976. Shortly afterward, moderates took control of the Communist Party. They jailed several of the radicals who had led the Cultural Revolution. By 1980, Deng Xiaoping (duhng shuh-pihng) had emerged as the most powerful leader in China. Like Mao and Zhou, Deng had survived the Long March. He was the last of the “old revolutionaries” who had ruled China since 1949.

Although a lifelong Communist, Deng boldly supported moderate economic policies. Unlike Mao, he was willing to use capitalist ideas to help China’s economy. He embraced a set of goals known as the **Four Modernizations.** These called for progress in agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology. Deng launched an ambitious program of economic reforms, which he called the “Second Revolution.”

First, Deng eliminated Mao’s unpopular communes and leased the land to individual farmers. The farmers paid rent by delivering a fixed quota of food to the government. They could then grow any crops they wished and sell them for a profit. Under this system, food production increased by 50 percent in the years 1978 to 1984.

Deng then extended his program to industry. The government permitted small private businesses to operate. It gave the managers of large state-owned industries more freedom to set production goals. Deng also welcomed some foreign technology and investment.

Deng’s economic policies produced striking changes in Chinese life. As incomes increased, people began to buy appliances and televisions. Chinese youths now wore stylish clothes and listened to Western music. Gleaming hotels filled with foreign tourists symbolized China’s new policy of openness.

**Tiananmen Square**

Deng’s economic reforms produced a number of unexpected problems. As living standards improved, the gap between the rich and poor widened. Increasingly, the public believed that party officials took advantage of their positions by accepting bribes and enjoying privileges denied to others.

Furthermore, the new policies admitted not only Western investments and tourists but also Western political ideas. Increasing numbers of Chinese students studied abroad and learned about the West. Warned by hard-line officials that Communist values were at risk, Deng replied, “If you open the window, some flies naturally get in.” In his view, the benefits of opening the economy exceeded the risks. Nevertheless, as Chinese students learned more about democracy, they began to question China’s lack of political freedom.

**Students Demand Democracy** In 1989, students sparked a popular uprising that stunned China’s leaders. Beginning in April of that year, more than 100,000 students occupied Tiananmen (tyahn-mehn) Square. This square is a huge public space in the heart of Beijing. The students mounted a protest for democracy by chanting, “Down with corruption!” “Down with dictatorship!” and “Long live democracy!”
The student protest won widespread popular support. When several thousand students began a hunger strike to highlight their cause, perhaps a million people poured into Tiananmen Square to support them. Many students now boldly called for Deng Xiaoping to resign.

**Deng Orders a Crackdown** Instead of considering political reform, Deng declared martial law. He ordered more than 250,000 troops to surround Beijing. One student recalled the mood at the time:

> A VOICE FROM THE PAST
> It would be a lie to say that we were not afraid, but we were mentally prepared and very determined. Some students could not believe that the army really would use deadly force. But most of all, we were motivated by a powerful sense of purpose. We believed that it would be worth sacrificing our lives for the sake of progress and democracy in China.
> ANONYMOUS STUDENT, San Francisco Examiner

Although many students left the square after martial law was declared, about 3,000 chose to remain and continue their protest. The students revived their spirits by defiantly erecting a 33-foot statue that they named the “Goddess of Democracy.” It resembled the American Statue of Liberty.

On June 4, 1989, the standoff came to an end. Thousands of heavily armed soldiers stormed Tiananmen Square. Tanks smashed through barricades and crushed the Goddess of Democracy. Soldiers sprayed gunfire into crowds of frightened students. They also attacked protesters elsewhere in Beijing. The assault killed hundreds and wounded thousands.

The attack on Tiananmen Square marked the beginning of a massive government campaign to stamp out protest. Police arrested an estimated 10,000 people. The state used the media to announce that reports of a massacre were untrue. Officials claimed that a small group of criminals had plotted against the government. After showing great restraint, officials said, the army was forced to crush a riot. Television news, however, had already broadcast the truth to the world.

**China in the 1990s**

The brutal repression of the pro-democracy movement left Deng firmly in control of China. During the final years of his life, Deng continued his program of economic reforms. By the mid-1990s, China’s booming economy was producing extraordinary changes:

> A VOICE FROM THE PAST
> The country today is an endless series of jolting surprises. Streets are clogged with traffic. There is construction everywhere. Indoor malls with glittering new department stores surge with customers for whom shopping is rapidly becoming the recreational pastime of choice. At night, restaurants are packed with China’s new urban middle class, raucously eating, drinking, and chain-smoking until the air inside turns gray.
> ORVILLE SCHELL, “China—the End of an Era”

Although Deng moved out of the limelight in 1995, he remained China’s unquestioned leader. In February 1997, after a long illness, Deng died. Communist Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin (ji-eh-lung zheh-meen) assumed the presidency.

**China After Deng** Many questions arose after Deng’s death. What kind of leader would Jiang be? Would he be able to hold onto power and ensure political stability? A highly intelligent and educated man, Jiang had served as mayor of Shanghai. He was considered skilled, flexible, and practical. However, he had no military experience.
Capturing Historical Moments

From the earliest days of photography, magazines and newspapers have used photographs to convey the news. Photojournalists have to respond quickly to recognize the history-making moment and record it before the moment has passed. As the photographs on this page demonstrate, photojournalists have done much to capture the history of Communist China.

February 21, 1972
During his historic visit to China, President Richard Nixon raises a toast with Premier Zhou Enlai in a pledge of U.S.-Chinese friendship.

October 1, 1950
Workers, marching on the first anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, carry posters to honor Mao Zedong.

June 5, 1989
A single Chinese man blocks tanks on their way to crush pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square. Bystanders pulled the man to safety.

Drawing Conclusions
Which of these photographs seems to have been taken spontaneously when the photojournalist spotted an important historical moment? Which of these photographs seems to have been arranged ahead of time? Explain.

See Skillbuilder Handbook, Page R17

Connect to Today
Compare Look through newspapers or news magazines to find a news photograph that you find interesting. Bring it to class and explain how it compares with the photographs shown here in spontaneity, drama, and historical importance.
Therefore, Jiang had few allies among the generals. He also faced challenges from rivals, including hard-line officials who favored a shift away from Deng’s economic policies.

Other questions following Deng’s death had to do with China’s poor human rights record and relations with the United States. During the 1990s, the United States pressured China to release political prisoners and ensure basic rights for political opponents. China remained hostile to such pressure. Its government continued to repress the pro-democracy movement.

Nevertheless, the desire for freedom still ran through Chinese society. If China remained economically open but politically closed, tensions seemed bound to surface. As Chinese writer Liu Binyan observed in 1995, “The government Deng Xiaoping leaves behind will be the weakest in China since Communist rule began in 1949. . . . At the same time, the populace has become more difficult to rule than any other in Chinese history.”

In late 1997, Jiang paid a state visit to the United States. During his visit, U.S. protesters demanded more democracy in China. Jiang admitted that China had made some mistakes but refused to promise that China’s policies would change.

**Transfer of Hong Kong** Another major issue for China was the status of Hong Kong. Hong Kong was a thriving business center and British colony on the southeastern coast of China. On July 1, 1997, Great Britain handed Hong Kong over to China, ending 155 years of colonial rule.

As part of the negotiated transfer, China promised to respect Hong Kong’s economic system and political liberties for 50 years. Many Hong Kong citizens worried about Chinese rule and feared the loss of their freedoms. Others, however, saw the transfer as a way to reconnect with their Chinese heritage.

The case of China demonstrates that the creation of democracy can be a slow, fitful, and incomplete process. Liberal reforms in the economy, may not lead immediately to political reforms. Even so, people around the world have a desire for more political freedom. As economic and social conditions improve—for example, as the middle class expands and educational opportunities grow—the prospects for democracy also may improve. And, as countries are increasingly linked through technology and trade, they may influence each other politically. In 2000, for example, the U.S. Congress voted to normalize trade with China. Supporters argue that the best way to prompt political change in China is through greater engagement rather than isolation.