

Democracy Wall, 1978–1979: The Xidan Wall, Wei Jingsheng and the Fifth Modernization

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1. The Question

For roughly a year from November 1978, citizens of the PRC (Mainland) pasted thousands of handwritten posters on a long brick wall on Xidan Street in Beijing. Out of that wall came the post-Mao democratic expression's most famous single text — Wei Jingsheng's "The Fifth Modernization." What was said, who said it, what happened to them, and why does it still matter? This archive family requires the archive to distinguish original texts and contemporaneous evidence from later recollection and editorial interpretation; that discipline structures everything below.

2. The Archive's Position, Cited

This page's archive scope is defined as: "A source-based archive of the Democracy Wall movement, independent publications, petitions, debates, organizations, arrests and the people connecting post-Mao democratic expression to later movements," with the governing method: "Records will distinguish original texts and contemporaneous evidence from later recollection and editorial interpretation."

3. Evidence: The Wall, the Journals, the Arrests

3.1 The setting: post-Mao Beijing

The movement belongs to the **Beijing Spring**, the brief political liberalization that began as the Democracy Wall movement in 1978–79, right after the Cultural Revolution (Beijing Spring), against the backdrop of *boluan fanzheng* — "bringing order out of chaos" (1989 Tiananmen Square protests and massacre). Two precedents matter: Li Yizhe's 67-page November 1974 Guangzhou poster "On Democracy and Legality under Socialism," and the April 5th 1976 Tiananmen gathering — some four thousand arrested (Democracy Wall).

3.2 The wall itself

From **November 1978 to December 1979**, thousands of people put up big-character posters on a long brick wall on Xidan Street in Beijing's Xicheng District — the

Democracy Wall of Xidan — and, under the government's initial acquiescence, unofficial journals, petitions, and demonstrations spread in other major cities. The movement is counted as the beginning of the Chinese Democracy Movement (Democracy Wall).

The early posters set the themes. On **23 November 1978**, Lü Pu posted a critique of Mao Zedong arguing that the April 5th Movement's real causes were a backward economy, rigid thought control, and poor living conditions — the poster remembered as the "**Fire Lighter of Democracy Wall**" (Democracy Wall). On **25 November**, Ren Wanding and eight others formed the **Democracy Assembly Group**; two days later they led a march from the wall to Tiananmen Square in which over **10,000 participants** demanded democracy and human rights (Democracy Wall). Petitioner posters — accounts of Cultural Revolution suffering and local corruption — were mostly torn down and survive only where unofficial journals reprinted them (Democracy Wall).

3.3 Deng's two phases

Deng Xiaoping's attitude passed through two documented phases. At first he found the movement politically useful: many early posters attacked the "little Gang of Four" — Politburo members backing Hua Guofeng, Deng's rival — and on **26 November 1978** he told Japanese delegates that, under the Constitution, the Democracy Wall activities were legal (Democracy Wall).

The turn came in **March 1979**: Deng stated the **Four Cardinal Principles** at a CCP conference — the four issues on which debate was not permitted — and the tolerance ended (Four Cardinal Principles). From constitutional legality (November) to forbidden debate (March): the wall's suppression was a policy reversal, not the enforcement of a consistent line.

3.4 "The Fifth Modernization"

On **5 December 1978**, writer and activist **Wei Jingsheng** posted the wall's most famous text: "**The Fifth Modernization: Democracy and Others**" — a direct response to Deng Xiaoping's Four Modernizations (industry, agriculture, science and technology, national defense), arguing that democracy must be added as a fifth. The histories of Germany, Russia, and China proved, the essay argued, that anti-democracy caused the people's poor living conditions (Democracy Wall; Wei Jingsheng).

Two things made the essay exceptional. First, Wei signed it with his **real name and address** — the only essay to name Deng Xiaoping, calling him a dictator (Wei Jingsheng). Second, where the mainstream framed the conflict as the bureaucratic class versus the people, Wei argued that the **totalitarian political system itself** was the source of grievances — one of the few activists to argue explicitly against Marxism

and the leadership of a Marxist party (Wei Jingsheng). The essay's peroration states the demand in its own words:

"We want to be the masters of our own destiny. We need no gods or emperors and we don't believe in saviors of any kind ... we do not want to serve as mere tools of dictators with personal ambitions for carrying out modernization. We want to modernize the lives of the people. Democracy, freedom, and happiness for all are our sole objectives." (Wei Jingsheng)

3.5 The unofficial journals

The wall's second medium was print. From the winter of 1978 to the spring of 1981, **over 50 unofficial journals** appeared in Beijing alone (Democracy Wall): *Enlightenment* (启蒙, Guiyang, November 1978); *April Fifth Forum* (四五论坛, Xu Wenli/Liu Qing/Zhao Nan, December 1978); Wei Jingsheng's *Explorations* (探索); *Beijing Spring* (北京之春) (Democracy Wall). Circulation was small — typically **200 to 500 copies per issue** — but readers hand-copied and re-sent the journals across the country (Democracy Wall). The most complete surviving collection is the 20-volume *Collection of Underground Publications Circulated on Chinese Mainland*, edited by a Taiwanese research institution between 1980 and 1985 (Democracy Wall).

3.6 Arrests, trial, and the long afterlife

The crackdown began in the spring of 1979. Hearing that arrests were imminent, Wei and his colleagues rushed out a special edition of *Explorations* titled "Do We Want Democracy or a New Dictatorship?"; some thirty activists were then rounded up (Wei Jingsheng). In **October 1979**, Wei was tried — accused of supplying military intelligence on the PRC (Mainland)'s war with Vietnam to a foreigner and of agitating to overthrow the government — and sentenced to **15 years** (Wei Jingsheng).

Wei spent **18 years total** in PRC (Mainland) prisons (1979–1993, then 1994–1997), was deported to the United States on **16 November 1997** on medical parole, and received the 1996 **Sakharov Prize** (Wei Jingsheng).

The documentary lineage is explicit. **Charter 08** — the 2008 manifesto signed by 303 Chinese intellectuals and modeled on Charter 77 — opens by naming "the 30th anniversary of the birth of the Democracy Wall" among the milestones it commemorates, and its published references include the Fifth Modernization (Charter 08). From poster to manifesto in thirty years: the form changed, but the demand did not.

4. Comparative Options: Written Dissent Under Party Rule

Charter 77 (Czechoslovakia, 1977): the signature model. Where the Democracy Wall was anonymous crowds and hand-copied journals, Charter 77 was 242 named

signatories on a single text, published on 6 January 1977. In October 1979 six leaders of its support group VONS — including Václav Havel — were tried for subversion and sentenced to up to five years (Charter 77). The comparison isolates what mattered: the wall's anonymity protected participants but diffused responsibility, while Charter 77's signatures concentrated risk.

Charter 08 (China, 2008): the lineage. Published on 10 December 2008 by 303 Chinese dissident intellectuals, Charter 08 adopted Charter 77's name and style and explicitly commemorated the Democracy Wall's 30th anniversary (Charter 08). Its author Liu Xiaobo was sentenced to 11 years in 2009 and awarded the **2010 Nobel Peace Prize** (Charter 08). For this archive, Charter 08 proves that the wall's "people connecting post-Mao democratic expression to later movements" clause is documentable, not aspirational.

5. Recommended Design: Numbered Provisions

1. **Original texts first.** Where a poster or journal text survives — the Fifth Modernization, the "Fire Lighter" poster, the January 1979 journals' joint statement — this family leads with the text and dates it; commentary is subordinate. 2. **Separate contemporaneous evidence from recollection.** The wall's dates, the journals' mastheads, and the trial record are contemporaneous; memoirs and later histories are marked as such and never silently merged. 3. **Quote Wei from a verified text.** The Fifth Modernization peroration above is documented in the published record of the essay; translations are noted as translations, and the signed original is distinguished from later reprints (Wei Jingsheng). 4. **Attribute anonymous posters by grade.** Signed posters (Wei, Lü Pu, Ren Wandong) are distinguished from anonymous or petition posters; unattributed authorship claims are flagged, not filed as fact (Democracy Wall). 5. **Use the journal inventory as the spine.** The 20-volume *Collection of Underground Publications* and the named journals (*Enlightenment*, *April Fifth Forum*, *Explorations*, *Beijing Spring*) anchor the record where posters were torn down (Democracy Wall). 6. **Record the state's reversal as a fact.** The November 1978 legality statement and the March 1979 Four Cardinal Principles are both on the record — a documented reversal, not a contradiction to explain away (Democracy Wall; Four Cardinal Principles). 7. **Link later movements by document, not by theme.** The Democracy Wall → Charter 08 connection rests on Charter 08's own text citing the wall's 30th anniversary; other claimed linkages (to 1986, to 1989) need the same documentary footing before the archive carries them (Charter 08). 8. **Version the archive.** New poster texts, journal issues, or trial documents entering the record are published with acquisition dates — this family grows by accession, not by reinterpretation.

6. Open Questions and Risks

How many people read the wall? "Thousands" posted; readership is uncounted. The 10,000-strong 27 November march gives one attendance figure, but the wall's daily audience — and the journals' hand-copied multiplier — cannot be reconstructed.

Deng's motives. Why tolerate the wall in November and criminalize its speech in March? The standard account — utility against Hua Guofeng, then closure once power was secured — is plausible but unproven. It stays a leading hypothesis, not a finding.

What the petitioners wanted. Their posters (Cultural Revolution redress, local corruption) were mostly torn down and survive only through journal reprints. The "democracy" texts are over-represented in the surviving record — a preservation bias the archive must disclose.

The collection's completeness. The 20-volume *Collection of Underground Publications* is the most complete known source, but not complete. Provenance work on what was excluded — and why — is an open task for this family.

7. Cross-Links

- This paper's family page: Democracy Wall, 1978–1979
- Series hub: ROC (Taiwan) and Mainland Democratic Transition Research
- Companion paper: The 1986 Student Movement: Campus Protest and the Road to 1989 — the next documented episode in the post-Mao democratic-expression lineage
- Companion series paper: The Rights Defense Network Issue Reports as a Source: Method and Limits — its source-grading protocol applies to the memoir and press materials cited above

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