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HIS 286: Student Protests in China

“Turmoil” in Tiananmen, 1989: Student Motivations Against the Chinese Communist Party’s Political Framing

Many people gathered on the eastern side of the Monument to the People’s Heroes hand in hand, singing the national anthem. A voice on the loudspeaker said, “Fellow students! Do not withdraw. We aren’t doing anything wrong. Long live the students! Long live the people of Beijing! Down with the bureaucracy! Down with corruption!” Later the speaker was shot and the loudspeaker went silent. One unlucky person was injured by a bullet and fell at the base of the Monument to the People’s Heroes, where he was losing blood fast. A dense mass of troops started taking down the tents and, as if herding prisoners of war, surrounded us.[[1]](#footnote-2)

When Beijing university students began their movement against perceived inequities resulting from the Chinese State’s rapid economic reforms and systemic corruption, few people expected the bloodshed that would follow. In the early hours of May 20, 1989, the top leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (C.C.P.) declared martial law, effectively mobilizing between 180,000 to 250,000 troops. On June 3, troops surrounded and entered Tiananmen Square where a massacre ensued. On April 8, 1989, Hu Yaobang—former Chairman of the C.C.P. from 1981 to 1982 and General Secretary from 1982 to 1987—died. Hu’s death presented a window of opportunity that ignited resistance against the C.C.P.’s oppression in a fashion akin to the April Fifth incident of 1976, when students and residents congregated in Tiananmen Square to mourn Zhou Enlai’s death and were disbanded by troops.[[2]](#footnote-3) Tiananmen Square was the center of the 1989 movement. University students spearheaded a series of protests that would impact and mobilize various groups of society, including workers and ordinary citizens, who would assist in their cause. The C.C.P. assumed a position of stark opposition and framed the movement as orchestrated by a small group of hooligans manipulating the public towards social chaos and instability. The motivations of the student leaders, however, differed greatly from the C.C.P.’s descriptions, but would consequently be redefined through the Party’s evolving characterizations. This process of redefining student protestors strongly influenced public interpretations of the greater protests as well as public participation. The student leaders were inspired by a desire for democracy, freedom, and the targeting of corruption and lawlessness, although the C.C.P. officially characterized the motivations of the students in a series of evolving labels, from “hooligans” to “rioters,” until finally solidifying the label of “counterrevolutionary.” These increasingly accusatory and contradictory designations infuriated the students and influenced their goals and actions throughout the course of the movement.

This paper examines how the political rhetoric employed by the C.C.P. in framing the student protesters of Tiananmen Square influenced the actions of the protestors during the height of the movement. How did the motivations of the students change throughout the movement as the Party developed its depictions? How did the groups’ rhetoric impact the progression of the overall movement? I argue that the Chinese Communist Party’s negative framing of the student protesters in the 1989 Tiananmen Movement effectively caused student leaders to renegotiate their perceived role as champions of democracy, freedom, and crucial Party reform. In renegotiating their role, students responded to Party accusations by intensifying protest efforts, a process that would impact several social groups throughout the movement as well as alter future Party depictions of the student leaders and influence the C.C.P.’s decision to pursue militant action around Tiananmen Square.

Previous scholarship has focused on several aspects of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Movement rather extensively, although few scholars have closely analyzed the relationship between students’ developing motivations and the C.C.P.’s increasingly critical framing, particularly centering on this dynamic’s influence on the student leaders’ renegotiation of their role in the movement. Much scholarship has critically analyzed the historical context of the Tiananmen Movement, explaining how it developed into a massacre and examining the events through various lenses. This paper largely builds off of scholars who analyzed the Tiananmen Incident with close attention to the C.C.P.’s response to the protesters, including political and media framing as well as governmental actions.[[3]](#footnote-4) Similarly relevant to this paper’s topic are scholarly investigations into the Tiananmen Movement through a contextualization and analysis of the political environment of 1989, as well as reevaluations of the protests through new historical lenses.[[4]](#footnote-5) This paper will expand upon the historical interpretations of the Tiananmen Movement utilizing politically-centered evaluations, explanations of the media’s critical role, and analyses of the students’ overall organization and rhetoric. In doing so, this paper places these scholarly works in conversation and highlights how the political and rhetorical framing of the C.C.P. and media roused the student protesters and influenced their ideals.

An analysis of the Party’s developing rhetoric and increasingly negative framing throughout the Tiananmen Movement illustrates how the C.C.P.’s depictions of the protesters impacted the students’ actions and ideals. Especially salient in tracing the C.C.P.’s changing characterizations of the protesters is the evolution of the label “hooligan,” to that of “counterrevolutionary.” In an article published in *The People’s Daily* on April 26, 1989, the author firmly demonstrated the C.C.P.’s official stance on the protesters and influenced the course of the movement. Following the convening of tens of thousands of students from universities and training institutes for demonstrations in Tiananmen Square beginning on April 18th, the state assumed a cautious stance on the protests. Within three days of Hu Yaobang’s death, the protests that had transitioned from a reaction to Hu’s death to three students kneeling and petitioning for a dialogue with the C.C.P. leaders on the steps of the Great Hall (April 22). The enormous degree of organization in the political heart of Beijing alerted C.C.P. leaders and led to the publication of the *People’s Daily* article, which was edited and reviewed by Li Peng and Deng Xiaoping, effectively establishing the viewpoint of the article as official state rhetoric.

The article presents the Party’s description of the demonstrations, which was entirely detached from the proclaimed goals of the students and the reality of the movement’s orchestration. The article stated that “[a] tiny handful of people took this opportunity to fabricate rumors and openly attack Party and government leaders,” which consequently led to “rioters us[ing] the occasion to engage in serious instances of assault, vandalism, looting, and arson” in other cities with corresponding protests.[[5]](#footnote-6) While framing the protests as resulting from a small group of conspiring students seeking to create a disturbance, the Party and government are described as having “adopted a tolerant and restrained attitude.”[[6]](#footnote-7) Aside from the labeling of the protesters as conspirators, rioters, and hooligans, a critical aspect of the article is in the referencing of the protests as “turmoil” that could develop into “a serious and chaotic situation.”[[7]](#footnote-8) Instead of the protesters desiring “to promote the process of socialist democracy in China,” the demonstrators are framed as seeking to “sow dissension in people’s minds, to disrupt the entire nation, and to ruin an orderly and united political situation.”[[8]](#footnote-9) The article, “We Must Unequivocally Oppose Unrest,” establishes the Party’s firm opposition to the mass organization and demonstrations within Tiananmen Square, invalidating the purported goals of the student leaders and characterizing them as controlled by a handful of ill-intentioned conspirators. The article’s description of the Tiananmen situation as turmoil, and the small organizing group as anti-government, justified the future use of military force, as the chaos was perceived by the C.C.P. as potentially detrimental to social stability and government authority. By invalidating the students’ motives and portraying them as dangerous hooligans, tensions rose within the Square and led to a renewed wave of demonstrations that drew more than one million Beijing residents—including workers and ordinary citizens—to the streets to support the students against the C.C.P.’s defamation.[[9]](#footnote-10) Because of the April 26 article, demonstration participation increased significantly as the article forced students to renegotiate their role as protesters in a state where they were discredited, effectively illustrating how the C.C.P.’s negative framing of the student protesters intensified the movement.

As the demonstrations continued uninterrupted over the next month, bringing millions to the streets, the students staged a hunger strike during Mikhail SergeyevichGorbachev’s meeting with Deng Xiaoping. Gorbachev, leader of the Soviet Union from 1985 to the state’s dissolution in 1991, instituted drastic reforms to the Soviet Union’s Communist policies throughout his tenure in office. The meeting between Gorbachev and Deng held a highly significant meaning for C.C.P. leaders as the younger Communist China was beginning to associate with the Soviet giant. By May 20, the C.C.P. finally acted on their threats included in “We Must Unequivocally Oppose Unrest” and declared martial law. In the Martial Law Command, “Letter to Beijing Citizens,” published on May 22, the chaotic state of the capital is emphasized as well as the presence of a “tiny minority of criminal elements.”[[10]](#footnote-11) More importantly, the actions of the People’s Liberation Army were justified by the directives of the C.C.P. to “ensure security and to restore order in the capital,” and the resolution of the P.L.A. is identified as supporting the demands of the broad masses for the punishment of “official profiteering, [and] corruption,” and the promotion “of socialist democracy and the rule of law.”[[11]](#footnote-12) In this deceleration, the C.C.P. further reinforces the depiction of the demonstrations as chaotic and requiring of law and order, and positions the P.L.A. and C.C.P. on the side of justice, attempting to bolster social stability for the sake of the people. Similar to the April 26 article, this declaration greatly provoked students and general protesters, and by June 3, the C.C.P. considered the situation too volatile and mobilized troops to target and disperse protesters. Participants in the movement responded in varying ways, retrenching their position in Tiananmen believing the P.L.A. would not actually harm protesters, or responding in anger, preparing to fight back against the encroaching troops. In a Politburo Committee Standing meeting on June 3, before the C.C.P. mobilization, Li Peng, the premier of the P.R.C., defined the movement in Tiananmen as a “counterrevolutionary riot,” and the organizing students as “small handful of counterrevolutionaries.”[[12]](#footnote-13) In solidifying the counterrevolutionary framing of the protesters and movements, the C.C.P. achieved rhetorical approval for utilizing military force as the characterization positioned demonstrators as immediate threats to China’s stability, progress, and future goals.

Contrary to the C.C.P.’s negative framing of the student protesters and demonstrations, the students’ goals and ideals demonstrated a strong resolution to oppose the perceived flaws of the Party, including political corruption and economic inequality. This steadfast position worried Party officials as the students’ declared motivations threatened Party leaders’ political authority. Similar to how the April 26 article proved a milestone moment in the development of the demonstrations, the Beijing Students’ Autonomous Federation’s (A.F.S.) “Declaration of a Hunger Strike” and “Manifesto for a Hunger Strike” (May 13, 1989) served as critical documents demonstrating the motives and ideals of the student organizers of the Tiananmen Movement. The extreme resolution exemplified by the students in the documents alerted the C.C.P. and incentivized the Party’s decision to crack down through military force. Acquiescing to student demands was off the table, so military force was the only option to halt the “chaos” surrounding the protests.

In their declaration, the A.F.S. established their concerns: “The nation is in crisis—beset by rapid inflation, illegal dealing by profiteering officials, abuses of power, corrupt bureaucrats, the flight of good people to other countries, and deterioration of law and order.”[[13]](#footnote-14)￼ In this excerpt, the students importantly establish their concern over the loss of law and order, which directly contradicts the C.C.P.’s framing. It is understandable then, why the students became enraged by the April 26 article condemning their movement as obstructive of law and order. The students also state ideals of democracy and freedom in their declaration, explaining “[d]emocracy is the noblest human aspiration; freedom is a sacred human right, granted at birth. Today both must be fought with our lives.”[[14]](#footnote-15) As opposed to a desire to disrupt social stability, students show their resolve—even willing to stake their young lives—to peacefully protest for the values they find unattainable in their state yet innate to all humans.

In the A.F.S.’ “Manifesto for a Hunger Strike,” the students directly list their reasoning for staging the hunger strike and in protesting further. Their motives are as follows: “To protest the government’s indifference toward our boycott of classes,” and “[t]o protest the government’s labeling of our patriotic, democratic student movement as ‘turmoil’, and many distorted press reports.”[[15]](#footnote-16) This excerpt from the A.F.S. manifesto chiefly demonstrates how the students reacted to the rhetorical framing of the C.C.P., as by the time of the hunger strike, they were significantly motivated by the government’s response to the demonstrations. The specific labels espoused by the C.C.P. are particularly targeted as incorrect, “distorted” descriptions of the protesters and demonstrations, and the Party’s characterization of Beijing Spring-related student organizations within universities as illegal and disruptive is identified as unacceptable conduct under a supposably increasingly democratic state. This manifesto illustrates the impact of the C.C.P.’s negative political framing of demonstrators, as the hunger strike—which intensified the movement and eventually led to a military crackdown—directly resulted from the Party’s portrayal of the student leaders and overall movement (as it frustrated students that their earnest, patriotic requests were being turned against them). Also apparent is the diametrical opposition between the C.C.P. and students’ framing of their motivations. While the Party depicted protesters as seeking to destabilize society, the student leaders contrarily framed their actions as a necessary move to better their beloved country, citing history as a driving force in their motivations. The students challenged the counterrevolutionary label and instead described themselves as patriotic and loyal. The publishing of this manifesto by the students and the declaration of their hunger strike demonstrates their need to renegotiate their role as champions of democracy. Encountering the resistance of the C.C.P. challenged the earnest patriotism of the students and positioned them in stark opposition to the authoritarian control of the Party. This state of opposition would largely contribute to the bloodshed that would ensue on June 3-4.

Throughout the Tiananmen Movement’s development and up till the massacre, student protesters and the Party’s motivations would intersect frequently. Demonstrators would continually champion for reformation of the Party’s faults, while the C.C.P. would interpret students’ ideals as counter to social and political stability. As Lucian Pye contextualizes the methodology of the student protesters through a political framework, he explains that “[the students] played the classic Chinese game of usurping the role and the pretensions of state power by out-moralizing the leadership… By trying to capture the moral high ground, they were asserting that they were the ones who most deserved to govern.”[[16]](#footnote-17) As the students championed morally righteous ideals of democracy and freedom with patriotic intent (referencing previous protests throughout Chinese history), they attempted to reform the government by establishing their ideals as integral to a better society. Pye notably states though, that “[t]hey were not, however, calling for a revolution or for the destruction of the system. They only wanted a more righteous, a more moral and purer leadership.”[[17]](#footnote-18) The students protested corruption, a crumbling bureaucracy, and a lack of democratic freedoms, exemplifying their desire for a purer, more moral leadership. In using political rhetoric to examine the C.C.P.’s motivations in the Tiananmen Movement, the military action assumed on June 3 as well as the deposition of Zhao Ziyang are indicative of a political coup that employed “state violence against the Chinese momentum of democratic transition.”[[18]](#footnote-19) The employment of political rhetoric to understand the motivations behind the C.C.P. and student leaders throughout the Tiananmen Movement chiefly illustrates how demonstrators’ desire for a more morally righteous and fair government incited Party leaders to crack down on the potentially threatening reformation of their administration.

When students from Beijing’s prominent universities began a demonstration in the Spring of 1989, seeking to morally purify and structurally reform the deficiencies of the government in the tradition of prior protests, Party leaders seized the opportunity to suppress mass organization and public government opposition through the most convincing means, the military. Any future dissent from both citizenry and within the Party itself relating to the Tiananmen Movement was effectively quelled after military deployment. In order to justify the use of the military, the Party increasingly framed the student protesters in a threatening light until the label of counterrevolutionary officially legitimized the employment of force. The Party’s increasingly negative framing of the demonstrators incited the student leaders, who were offended by the false depictions of their motives, to retrench their beliefs and act according to their ideals to further demonstrate their resolve. This resolute response by the demonstrators in opposition to the Party’s demeaning characterizations of the movement and protesters indirectly led to the C.C.P.’s massacre of protesters as demonstrations continued throughout the imposition of martial law, further threatening the Party’s authority.

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