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An Analysis on the Tiananmen Square Protest from the Social Movement Perspective

The Tiananmen Square Protest of 1989, including the June Fourth Incident, is still largely forbidden in Chinese History by the government. From the western perspective, some scholars believe that this protest is a social revolution and compare this protest with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. However, some scholars believe that this is a social movement. According to David Snow, a distinguished professor of Sociology at UC Irvine, “social movements are collective acting with some degree of organization and continuity, party outside of the institutional or organizational channels, for the purpose of challenging extant system of authority (2010)”. In this case, the students from different colleges were loosely organized by the Beijing University Students’ Government Association, with student leaders. Their appeals aimed to change the institutional structure of Chinese government at the time, rather than building up a new government. Therefore, it was recognized as a social movement, rather than a revolution. In this essay, I will analyze the background of the movement, the goals from students, collective identity of united students, the social resources of students’ union, and the results to show that this is a social movement.

Background and Goals

In the modern view, serious social problems, including the failure of economic reform, surging inflation rate, and political corruption, result in the movement. Deng Xiaoping became Mao’s successor in 1978 and then many economic reforms took place, leading a famous economic reform. Therefore, part of Chinese cities collected wealth while others

remained unchanged. What's more, bureaucrat capitalism favored the macro-economic policies at that time. As a result, the Chinese Communist Party became corrupt gradually, the gap between the rich and the poor widened and grievances in the middle and lower middle class, mostly intellectuals who could not take advantage of the reforms, became self-evident. The future of college students was undefined, or even bleak: they had tremendous difficulty finding a suitable job because most opportunities had been allocated to children from upper class family, even though these children received almost no advanced education.

Therefore, the goals from intellectuals were explicit: these students sought for social equality, a party in power against corruption, and freedom. First, they struggled for equally shared opportunities in the labor market: government, as the biggest employer, should employ civil servants based on individual's capability rather than his or her family background. Second, they appealed for the isonomy: anyone, including those who had sound family background, high ranks in the government or military, should be punished according to the law, if he or she broke the law. Third, the Chinese Communist Party, the ruling party at that time, should be free from serious corruption, especially in the urban construction and trade of coal and oil, and public security system. Fourth, publication both formal and informal should be freed: Chinese citizen should hold their rights to establish bookstores, start publishing companies and other social medias, while other informal publication, such as newspapers on campus, should not controlled by authority.

Evidently, grievance from students was great and then intellectuals hold deep belief to transform the social structure and political party. Therefore, they wanted the social wealth to be moved more favorably into their sides.

Frame and Collective Identity

According to the Social Movement Organization Theory, a social movement organization (SMO) is a complex organization identifying its goals with the preference of a social movement (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). There were many associations in this movement. In this case, the Beijing University Students' Government Association functioned as the headmaster of students' governments from many universities. In the climax, 9 students' governments from prestigious universities, such as Tsinghua University, Peiking University and China Renming Universities, were united. Supportive organizations are also part of the social movement organization structure (Kriesi, 1996). In this case, the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation, the organization as representatives of workers from different industrial fields, supported the students by joining their sit-in action and demonstration. The union of these two groups was based on the similarity of their social status.

It is true that these two groups did not have strong funding from themselves and that their ways of movements, such as hunger strikes, sit-ins, and the occupation of the square, did not need large amount of money to support. However, the two groups did need money to support their movement. Therefore, other supportive organizations provided money to support these two groups, such as oversea Chinese Students Scholars Association (CSSA) in many US universities and many democratic associations in Hong Kong (Zhao, 2010). The reason why these social associations were connected was that, traditionally and historically, Chinese nation has its native abhorrence to the corruption of the central government. In sum, the different social organizations in the cases share similar identity: seeking for freedom and sharing the traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, the social movement organizations are more ready to be moved, even without so much materially social resources and then the social movement industry is smoothly formed.

Recourses and Tactics

From April 15, 1989 to June 4, 1989, hundreds of thousands of college students from Beijing and other main cities in China accumulated into the Tiananmen Square. By hunger strike, sit-in, and the occupation of the square, these students sought for social equality, a communist party against corruption and freedom of speech, press.

In this social context, the central Chinese government was divided into two parts, the left-wing reformists with the representative of Zhao Ziyang, the President of China, and the right-wing conservativisms with the representative of Li Peng. These actions did attract the attention from the reformists who would like to reform the Chinese economics fabricates. For example, in the 4:50 am of May 19, 1989, President Zhao Ziyang lectured on the Tiananmen Square, persuading students stopping protesting and returning back to campus. However, the sympathy of Zhao was useless because he was under house arrest for the rest of life after this lecture and Jiang Zeming, with the support from Deng Xiaoping and Li Peng, took Zhao's position after that lecture immediately.

Students' protesting also attracted attention from media both national and international. When Mikhail Gorbachev, the President of The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, visited China on May 14, protesting students did not leave the Tiananmen Square and occupied half of the Square while leaving the other half for the ritual of welcome. When Gorbachev stranded on the half, these students even sang the song of the Internationale, a standard song of the socialist movement since the late nineteenth century. These actions were widely reported by overseas media, such as VOA and BBC. However, these actions made some moderates in the right-wing disgusted, eliminating the support from these political elites (Zhao, 2001).

In sum, money and other supporting elements, such as appearance on the media and alliance with the powerful people in the government, are called resources. Students in the Tiananmen Square used simple, traditional Chinese belief and their influences to gain these resources but they did not use these resources properly or successfully. For example, when students leaders received money, especially Hongkong dollars and US dollars from overseas organizations, they were always changing their minds on how to continue their protest in favor of the side who provided money. Besides, they wished to change their rules so often in using the loudspeaker, the only They largely overestimated their power and underestimated the power from the government.

Conclusion

The Tiananmen Square Protest of 1989 is the only social movement in modern China history from a western mainstream social movement perspective. It started when China had serious social problems unsolved; it continued when a major association, the Beijing University Students' Government Association, was supported by associations sharing similar identity; it became extensive when many social resources were put into the movement; but ended when students made many mistakes in using their resources. Chinese government until now learn a lot from this social movement and the control from central government becomes severe after this social movement, leading to the fact that there is no second social movement in China modern history.

Aaron,

This is a strong paper. I purposely left this major assignment "unstructured", leaving ample free time and room for freedom/creativity.

You responded by working diligently and creating a thorough, well-written paper. This type of initiative and time-management is rare and difficult to master.

Although there are still some lingering English-language hiccups you experience -- primarily errors in run-on sentences and plural confusion -- you have made tremendous progress during your time in StepUp.

I'm lucky that I got to meet you and learn from you during these few months, and I have full confidence that you will succeed in your studies both here at Lehigh and elsewhere.

This paper is an A. If you make the above changes and re-share the paper with me, I will move this assignment to a 100/100.

References

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