

Authoritarian Discourses of China during Social Movements in the 1980s

Research Questions

In attempt to maintain social control, how do authoritarian states respond to emerging social movements? How do these reactions change over multiple social movement cycles? For years, these questions have attracted scholars working in social movement studies as well as political sociology broadly defined. For this project, we mainly focus on one of the authoritarian response strategies: discourse deployment. More specifically, we intend to examine changes of official discourses of Chinese authoritarian government in response to two emerging social movements in the 1980s, the 1986 Student Demonstration and the Tiananmen Square Protest in 1989. What discourses does the authoritarian government deploy before and after movement events? How do such authoritarian discourses change over time? Are there any patterns for the deployment of authoritarian discourses? By addressing these specific questions in the case of China during the late 1980s, we seek to advance current understanding of authoritarian state's response strategies for emerging social movements.

Literature Review

Three lines of research are relevant to our key research questions. They are studies of social movement cycle, evolution and death of social movement, and authoritarian discourse in social crisis. Here we briefly review the existing scholarship and then state how our project could possibly contribute to it.

The first strand of studies relevant to our project is research on social movement cycle.

As Tarrow (1998) notes, cycle of social movements refers to the cyclical rise and fall in the social movement activity. In China, multiple and cyclical movement events were witnessed in the 1980s. Earlier scholars, such as Taylor (1989), argue that some social movements falling in the same categories (*e.g.*, women movements) are interconnected with each other and that earlier social movements sustain key organizational resources, such as devoted individuals within professional social movement organizations (SMOs) for later movement emergence. Other scholars resort to macro-level social factors instead and note that later movements of the same types may arise after the earlier ones since that new political opportunities are created (Tarrow 1998) or that societal and policy changes occur at a later time period (Banaszak and Ondercin 2016). In addition to these organizational and macro-social factors, Xu (2013) adds a cultural dimension to the topic of cyclical movement emergence and argues that the rise of similar but new movement depends on whether earlier revolutionary vanguards preserve cultural meanings and groups ethos for later use. These lines of research illuminate multi-level factors underlying the cyclical recurrence of social movement, but few projects have shed light on how government behaviors such as repression strategies and discourses may play a role in movement cycles. In our project, we address this issue by providing evidence on the change of discourses of authoritarian state.

Another strand of relevant studies is sociology of movement evolution and death. If we zoom in and focus on single social movement, the question is how individual demonstrations in the 1980s proceed and die. Koopmans (1993) admits that evolution of movement after emergence is largely *terra incognita*. He proposes two lines of mechanisms that interact and jointly shape movement process. The first is a combination of external mechanisms, particularly government repression and facilitation. The second, in contrast, is a line of internal mechanisms and internal characteristics of movements, such as size, novelty, and violence level of the movement. Other internal features shaping the evolution of movements

include presence or absence of professional SMOs and informal movement organizations. Built upon Koopmans' arguments, Della Porta's theory (1995) adds cultural mechanisms to the explanations of movement evolution and death and contends that affective focusing (investment in identity of interpersonal egoistic network creating strong emotional affiliation), cognitive closure (disengagement between constructed reality in small groups and reality constructed by others), and other macro-level cultural mechanisms such as culture and religion legitimizing violence as an acceptable resistance repertoire are all determinants of movement trajectories. Given the abundant previous contributions, it is surprising to know that few studies have emphasized the importance of government discourse. Although numerous studies shed light on other government behaviors such as repression strategies, the role of government discourse in movement trajectory has been undervalued.

To date, one of the few studies that focus on the relationships between official discourse of authoritarian state and movement trajectory is Zhao (2000)'s illuminating article. Zhao argues that during the Tiananmen Square Protest in 1989 participants used discourses rooted deeply in traditional Confucius culture of China, partly because moral-based state legitimacy in the 1980s made movement participants receptive to culturally and morally charged movement activities. He further presents the connections between state legitimacy and movement trajectory in his following book (2001). Zhao argues that, influenced by societal needs, the legitimacy of Chinese government gradually shifted from ideology-based (*i.e.*, state legitimacy based on puristic Communist ideologies and individual ideological loyalty) to performance-based (*i.e.*, state legitimacy based on improvement of individual living standards and national economic performance) in the 1980s. Accordingly, during recurrent social movements in the 1980s, the authoritarian government deployed different official discourses to reflect different legitimacy bases and cater to new societal needs. Inspired by Zhao's work, our project aims to trace discourse change of Chinese authoritarian government

over a relative long period of time (see more details in the next section) and use computational methods to provide more accurate descriptions and dynamics of change.

Data and Research Methodology

As noted, this project studies how discourses of Chinese authoritarian government change in response to two emerging social movements in China during the 1980s, the 1986 Student Demonstration and the Tiananmen Square Protest in 1989. The 1986 Student Demonstrations took place in a number of Chinese cities from December 1986 until early January 1987. The demonstrations started in the city of Hefei in Anhui Province before spreading to other cities such as Shanghai and Nanjing. The movement participants were critical of the Chinese government's lack of political reforms. Street demonstrations started to occur in early December, but quickly dissipated under military repression of the state by early January before achieving any of its stated goals. The Tiananmen Square Protests in 1989 were also student-led demonstrations in Beijing in 1989. The movement arose from societal members' dissatisfaction with government's lack of political reforms as well, but it grew into large-scale protests across the country in April and May 1989, involving millions of people. The protests were forcibly suppressed after the government declared martial law in early June. In what became widely known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre, troops with assault rifles and tanks killed at least several hundred demonstrators trying to block the military's advance towards Tiananmen Square.

As for the dataset of this project, we plan to collect all reports in People's Daily, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, between January 1, 1986 to December 31, 1991. Given the transformation of legitimacy during the 1980s suggested by Zhao, we hypothesize that the party-state would adjust its discourse deployment against two social movements: the government tune down ideological criticism of the student protests, while

stressing more on social value, such as social order, stability as well as the performance-based legitimacy. To examine this hypothesis, we plan to investigate the discourse deployment of the government after each social movement from the perspective of term frequency and semantic analysis. First, we will classify certain terms into three categories: strong ideology (e.g. “counter-revolution”, “socialism”, “capitalism” and so on), weak ideology (e.g. “unity and stability”, “solidarity” and so on) and economic performance (e.g. “economic development”, “economic prosperity”, “Four Modernization” and so on). Counting the frequency of these terms in each day’s news reports and editorials enable us to measure the dynamic of discourse strategy of the government. Secondly, on a semantic level, we intend to analyze the topic change (by using dynamic topic models) and relevant narrative lines emerging after “crackdown” of each social movement (by using semi-supervised machine learning). We plan to measure and compare the longevity of narrative lines in the discourses against two social movements by the government. Thirdly, we attempt to examine whether there is relationship between the semantic analysis with the lexicon one. We are wondering whether the term frequency and semantic analysis could be complementary to each other.

To sum up, although the strategies of the authoritarian state encountering the social movements have been widely studied, the role of government discourse before and after movement have been rarely discussed in literatures. This study attempts to fill up this gap by conducting the computational method to analyze the discourses of People’s Daily from 1986 to 1992. In addition, through comparison two social movements in 1980s, we intend to examine the hypothesis proposed by Zhao (2001) on the legitimacy transformation of China.

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