

Sunflower and Tiananmen protests

Written by Ming-yeh Rawnsley 吳明益
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It has been 25 years since the tanks of the People's Liberation Army rolled into Beijing's Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. Western media often portrayed the 1989 protest as a pro-democracy movement and it was eventually framed in a "man versus tank" Cold War ideology with an "end of history" rhetoric. While democratization was an important appeal for students and intellectuals who were involved in the Tiananmen protest, a central concern for Chinese workers and other urban dwellers was the demand for social equality and justice.

On the surface, the values of democracy, freedom and social security all seem interconnected in the context of the neoliberal expansion of marketization and commercialization. However, upon closer examination, Chinese society was highly uneven and serious divisions existed within the movement as the increasingly aggressive pursuit of market economy since the 1980s intensified the problems of political corruption, social inequality and cultural contradictions. Therefore, although brutal state oppression was the direct cause of the demise of activism in 1989, "new left" intellectual Wang Hui (王慧) believed that "the indirect cause lay in the movement's inability to bridge the gap between its demands for political democracy and the demands for social equality that had been its mobilizing force."

Some similarities and many differences can be observed between the Tiananmen protest of 1989 and the Sunflower movement. The major similarity lies in the multiple characters of both movements: various social forces pursuing different political and social agendas came under one umbrella — democratization — and formed a massive student-led civic movement. As they consisted of a wide range of social groups and issues, it was inevitable that the opposing camps would attempt to present a counter argument against the activists' demands.

On the other hand, different stakeholders within the movements also ventured competing narratives to cultivate social support for their individual causes. For this reason, each time various political and social actors tried to redefine the purposes of the Sunflower movement during the occupation of the Legislative Yuan from March 18 to April 10, I worried that the movement might be hijacked or lose focus. Nevertheless, the Sunflower movement was able to maintain its key platform throughout — its opposition to the "black box cross-strait service trade agreement" — highlighting not only the fundamental disparity between the socio-political environments in which the Tiananmen and Sunflower movements were situated, but also the differences in how democratization is framed in Taiwan and China.

As Zhao Yuezhi (趙越智), an academic who focuses on Chinese media, has said, whether it was the notion of socialist democracy as expressed by Democracy Wall activists, the social equality

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and justice dimension of the 1989 movement, or the complex articulations of the social and cultural ideals by the Falun Gong movement, the social dimension of democracy has always been there in China; it was not, and thus should not be framed as a demand for the premature importation of Western-inspired notions of democracy.

In contrast, Taiwan has been a democracy since martial law was lifted in 1987 and the introduction of constitutional reforms in 1990. However, democratization is an endless process. The unresolved questions of the nation's "first wave" of democratization have left many problems that have yet to be dealt with. The Sunflower movement's opposition to the service trade pact brings to attention several structural challenges facing Taiwan.

First, how can the government be entrusted to conduct trade negotiations with Beijing in a more transparent and productive manner when such negotiations might have profound economic, social and political consequences for Taiwanese? Second, what mechanisms can enhance the accountability, quality and efficiency of political debates? Third, how can society's concerns be properly addressed and given a space to engage with the process without being misrepresented in the overly simplistic "independence versus unification," "blue versus green" or "anti-China versus pro-China" discourses?

The Sunflower movement was able to galvanize public sympathy because it struck a chord with what already exists within the society — a deep dissatisfaction with polarized party politics, an ineffective representative democracy and widening social inequality. In other words, while the Tiananmen movement failed to bridge the gap between its demands for political democracy and the demands for social equality, the success of the Sunflower movement resides in its ability to connect the political with the social; it acknowledges that Taiwan is in need of further democratization to re-establish a more responsive, not merely reactive, political system that is conducive to greater societal transformation and progression.

Interestingly, Taiwan and China share another similarity; along with the explosion of social movements, ecological issues have also come to the fore.

While the mounting environmental crisis in China led to a surge in mass incidents relating to the environment over the past few years, opposition to the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant in New Taipei City's Gongliao District (公寮) also continues to generate momentum.

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The environment is no longer just a scientific debate or a lifestyle choice, but for many it is a combination of social, economic and political issues and even a life-and-death matter. The Taiwanese and Chinese media and the blogosphere are key drivers of the nascent environmental movements in both societies.

While I am less confident in predicting what environmental movements may lead to in China, it is highly likely that environment-related issues will constitute future battle grounds for social movements and the framing of further democratization in Taiwan.

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