



Old Question Revisited: Towards a Holistic Understanding of 1989

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Abstract

This paper provides analyses for the reasons behind the different fates of 1989 movements in Eastern Europe and in China. Many Sinologists have suggested that the cultural peculiarities of China necessitate the disentanglement of Tiananmen Democracy Movement from broader 1989 narrative. This paper demonstrates the epistemological constraints resulting from the academic disentanglement between Chinese and Eastern European revolutions of 1989 and argues that many of the so-called Chinese peculiarities within Tiananmen Movement were prevalent in Eastern European revolutions of 1989. Hence, neither students' mobilization nor their failure can be explained through an exotic quest for Confucian values or Asiatic despotism. Instead of making far-stretched speculations on the impacts of distant Confucian past, I will suggest one has to consider the structure of People Liberation Army, China's post-1978 integration to world capitalism, and the subsequent shift in the subjectivity among the new urban youth in the so-called post-modern era.

Keywords: *Tiananmen Square, 1989 movements, neoculturalism, People's Liberation Army, global culture*

JEL classification: *A14, H12, P16, Z13*





1. Introduction

We are living in the post-1989 era.

Although the repressive nature of Communist regimes in China and Eastern Europe was hardly a secret before 1989, total moral and ideological collapse of “actually existing socialism” signified the demise of the revolutionary Left as a universal alternative to global capitalism. Everything that twentieth-century communism represented, from Lenin to Mao, from radical redistribution of wealth to the collective (or state) ownership of the means of production, became obsolete. While right-wing fundamentalism and neo-liberal economic policies gained currency at a global level, “class politics”, once the core principle of international Left, became increasingly irrelevant for the mainstream political scene. Yet even after almost twenty-five years, it is surprising to see that there have been few attempts to understand the global meanings of the year “1989”. Scholars working on the collapse or persistence of totalitarian regimes in Europe and China largely focus only on one side of the story (East European or Chinese) with very limited reference to success or failure of communisms in other parts of the world. The old question of why the 1989 the revolutions succeeded in Eastern Europe but not in China seems to be forgotten.

In Sinology, in particular, there have been conscious attempts to disentangle Tiananmen Square from the broader 1989 narrative. Marie-Claire Bergeré, for instance, suggests that since “China has its own idiosyncrasies, its own political culture, its own geographical characteristics and its own historical and demographic peculiarities,” the disentanglement of the 1989 stories of Eastern Europe and China is necessary. (Bergeré, 2003: 241) Similarly, Elizabeth Perry emphasizes the importance of “deeper reality that is essentially Chinese” (i.e. Confucian intellectual elitism), while Lucian Pye notes the repressive characteristics of Chinese state tradition. (Perry, 1992: 148; Pye, 1990) In other words, these scholars suggest that China’s peculiar cultural norms played crucial role in the beginning and the end of Tiananmen Democracy Movement and this peculiarity requires us to approach China’s 1989 separately from the East European revolutions.





This paper aims to demonstrate the epistemological constraints resulting from academic disentanglement between Tiananmen and European stories of 1989. First, I will discuss so-called Chinese peculiarities, which Sinologists often emphasize for explaining the emergence and demise of Tiananmen Movement. I will argue these so-called Chinese features cannot be considered as “peculiarity” because they were prevalent in Eastern Europe as well. Hence, neither students’ mobilization nor their failure can be explained through an exotic quest for Confucian values or Asiatic despotism. Instead of making far-stretched speculations on the impacts of distant Confucian past, I will suggest, one has to consider the structure of People Liberation Army, China’s post-1978 integration to world capitalism, and the subsequent shift in the subjectivity among the new urban youth in the so-called post-modern era.

2. “Confucian” Tiananmen and “European” 1989?

The emergence of neoculturalism as a paradigm for explaining the recent history of China is in close relationship to what the death of Mao and the year 1989 represented in the global history. As the so-called “actually existing socialisms” were declared dead, many historians of China began to deny the historicity of revolution and conceptualize it rather as an aberration. (Dirlik, 1996) In other words, as China integrated into global capitalist economy, it became more traditional or “Confucian” in the field.

The weigh of tradition in Chinese historiography becomes apparent when it is compared to historiography of late socialism in Europe. There is virtually no serious attempt to explain any event in post-war history of European socialism by attributing importance to – say pre-1917 – cultural values of Europe. In the literature on the collapse of European communism, there have been two main positions for explaining the sudden collapse of the twentieth-century communisms. The first one highlights the structural weaknesses of the Eastern bloc regimes in 1989: the chronic problems of central planning in a command economy, the arms race with the US-led NATO, bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption,





the Gorbachev factor etc. (Kotkin, 2009) The second “ideas-matter” position emphasizes the role of civil society, the call for freedom of the people and the devastating critique and activism of public intellectuals against the socialist states. (Falk, 2003)

Meanwhile in the historiography of the Tiananmen Square Protest, the influence of Chinese culture overshadows the structural and/or idealist explanations. The peculiarities of “Chinese-ness” are emphasized not only to explain the brutal suppression of the Democracy movement by the armed forces but also the mobilization of the students and their weaknesses. Elizabeth Perry, an important exponent of this approach, writes:

To explain the weaknesses of China’s 1989 protests, one must not stop with the country’s revolutionary heritage or peasant population. Rather, the very people who launched the Tiananmen protest – urban intellectuals – were perhaps the greatest fetter on its further development. The seemingly cosmopolitan and contemporary style of the demonstrations masked a deeper reality that was essentially Chinese.

(Perry, 1992: 148)

There are two main interrelated “essentially Chinese features” offered in order to explain the peculiarities of the Tiananmen Square uprising and its eventual failure: traditional elitism of the Chinese intelligentsia and the authoritarian characteristics of Chinese state tradition. In addition to economic reasons such as high inflation, unemployment, and corruption, these two “Chinese” features are emphasized (to a varying degree) for explaining both causes and the failure of student mobilization in Beijing 1989. First, the so-called neoculturalist school portrays the Chinese students and intellectuals as traditionally elitist, and due to this elitism, they were unable to mobilize the large segments of the society in 1989. Perry openly blames students and dissident intellectuals for “their style of *remonstrance* (presenting petitions and banners and demanding dialogue with the authorities), and their search for political patrons emphasizing the need for state strengthening and switching quickly from one ‘hero’ to the next.” (Perry,



1992: 158) She conceptualizes the sympathy of students for certain reform-minded party members as a sign of their elite factionalism and Confucian intellectual traditionalism. Moreover, she argues, since the students were tainted by Confucian elitism, they were exclusionary towards workers and peasants in the formation of their movement. For these reasons, she suggests that students were protesting for regaining their traditional role in the Chinese political scene rather than challenging the very authority of the party. This extremely patronizing explanation ignores the mass participation of Beijing residents in the movement, and it does not offer an explanation for the fact that the great majority of the people, who resisted and died during this –supposedly elitist – movement on the night of June 4, were not students but workers. In the words of Tim Brook, “it was the workers who were fodders for PLA guns, not the students.” (Brook, 1992: 168) Furthermore, Perry completely ignores the similarity between Eastern European and Chinese citizens in their so-called elite factionalism, a supposedly Confucian phenomenon in which protestors sought the patronage of a reform-minded party leader rather than carrying on their own political agenda in a more radical way. One cannot help wondering whether East German students were also showing their Confucian heritage when they enthusiastically welcomed Gorbachev, the grand chief of European communism, and famously chanted “Gorby help us! Gorby save us!” during the Soviet Chairman’s visit to Berlin in 1989.

In addition, urban-intellectual elitism towards the less educated rural people was not an “essentially-Chinese” phenomenon either. With the possible exception of Poland, where the working class held the leadership of the opposition, this kind of elitism was common among the university students and intelligentsia in Eastern Europe as well. During my oral history research in Slovakia, my respondents often blamed Communist Party officials for being crude, supported only by uneducated people with peasant origins. *Sedlak*, the derogatory term for “uncivilized” peasant, is used to describe the supporters of the Party. In fact during the heyday of the Velvet Revolution, one of the most satirized moments happened when Karel Urbánek, then the prime minister of socialist Czechoslovakia, made some grammar mistakes (a



clear indication of his peasant/uneducated background) in his speech on television, “people remarked ... Masaryk spoke seven languages. Can anybody be found here who can at least speak good Czech or Slovak?” (Wheaton and Kavan, 1992: 83)

Esherick and Wasserstrom go even one step further than Perry and suggest an almost ontological difference between European and Chinese conceptions of democracy. They claim that the Chinese equivalent of the word democracy, *minzhu* 民主, values “the principle of unity above that of majority rule” and protesting students, tainted by elitist pre-revolutionary Chinese political culture, perceived it “in a limited sense to refer not to the populace at large but mainly or exclusively to the educated elite of which they are part.” (Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1992: 31) Again, for this account not only Chinese political culture lacked the Western pluralist understanding of democracy, but also students were elitist and dictatorial in their own ways. Esherick and Wasserstrom regarded the discourse of Wu'er Kaixi – one of the prominent student leaders of the Tiananmen Student movement – during his televised negotiation with the party elders as an example of non-democratic elements within the Chinese student movement:

... Wu'er Kaixi explained what it would take to get students to leave Tiananmen Square: ‘If one fasting classmate refuses to leave the square, the other thousands of fasting students on the square will not leave.’ He was explicit about the principle behind this decision: ‘On the square, it is not a matter of the minority obeying the majority, but of 99.9 percent obeying 0.1 percent.’ This may have been good politics – and Wuer Kaixi made powerful theater – but it was not a democracy.

(Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1992: 30)

The problem here is that Esherick and Wasserstrom do not discuss the context of the speech, nor the apparent will of the negotiating student committee to be recognized by the party as a legitimate representative of the thousands in the square. In addition, they do not provide an explanation for how Kaixi was different than Eastern European “pro-democracy” movement leaders as Lech Wałęsa or Václav Havel, who





represented and negotiated in the name of thousands of people without being elected. Nevertheless, while European dissidents appear as the champions of democracy, young student leaders of Tiananmen Square remain elitist Confucians.

The accounts of the Tiananmen Square movement tend to cite the “essential characteristics of Chinese culture” for explaining not only the weakness of the movement but also the ability of the state to use armed forces to crush the movement. In other words, Chinese political elites could suppress the Tiananmen Square protests thanks to authoritarian Chinese political culture, in which use of violence by the authority is habitual and considered legitimate. “As for the actions of the leaders,” Lucian Pye remarks “what more is there to say, except to shake our heads sadly and curse, ‘There go those Chinese leaders again – so typical of them.’” (Pye, 1990: 331) In fact, simplistic as it may seem, this sentence effectively summarizes the common position for explaining the decisions of Chinese Communist Party officials in the early summer of 1989. Even in Dingxin Zhao’s self-described non-culturalist account, China emerges as an underdeveloped nation and the Chinese state, having inherited pre-modern characteristics from its Imperial predecessors, played a more active role in the economic and social affairs and held a stronger grip over society than its Western counterparts. For him, students failed because the gaps in state control were not big enough for the movement to disturb elite cohesion. (Zhao, 2001) Unfortunately Zhao does not provide explicit criteria for measuring the difference between developed and underdeveloped nations, nor does he explain what impact Chinese state tradition had on the course of events during the Tiananmen Square incident. The fundamental question remains unanswered: What was the difference between Eastern European (e.g Romanian) and Chinese state traditions, which made difference on the course of events in 1989? Nor are we offered an explanation for how (the actions of) East European communist leaders were different when they were deciding for the bloody suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968, martial law in Poland in 1981 or *Securitate* massacre of hundreds of protestors in Romania in 1989. In fact, as I will argue, the political elites of the East European





Communist Parties gave up their power in 1989 not because they were less authoritarian or ruthless than their Chinese counterparts, but because they realized that there was no force that could uphold their political position in the politics.

The problem here is the conceptualization of the East European story of 1989 as a Weberian “ideal type”, in which European “democracy” activists created a civil society outside of state control and eventually could topple the Party rule through their civil rights movements; meanwhile in China, not only the activists were not democrats in a “Western” sense but also the party punished their transgression by violence thanks to the state tradition in China. However, this projection of Europe is exclusively based on the Polish experience and disregards the complexities and differences between East European revolutions. It is completely silent about the fact that there was no organized opposition group nor meaningful “civil society” outside of party control in any other central European countries prior to 1989; and the dissidents, who later received wide acclaim in Western media, were rather unknown figures for the majority of population. Apart from small and isolated circles of radical individuals, there was no popular, politically active “civil society” anywhere else in the region. (Kotkin, 2009) The successful Solidarity of Poland surely triggered a series of uprisings in the Eastern bloc, yet there would have been no “domino effect” if other Eastern European regimes had maintained effective security force still loyal to them.

3. Suppressing Masses

In 1989, the communist parties from Beijing to Berlin had one common political as well as moral problem: How to deal with the great number of protesting individuals, who gathered every day on the main squares of the major cities and demanded democratic rights? Before Gorbachev came to power and announced his non-interventionism policy, East European local party hardliners could rely on the Soviet army – or its threat of intervention – in their battles against party reformers or non-communist dissidents. Red Army intervention in Hungary (1956) and



Czechoslovakia (1968) gave further legitimacy to the authoritarian practices of the local regimes; as these army interventions assured the citizens that any deviation from the Soviet line would face a violent reaction from Moscow. Yet in 1989, as Gorbachev had already broken away from Brezhnev's interventionist policy, communist parties of Eastern Europe could rely only on their own security forces. On the other hand, although Gorbachev's non-interventionist doctrine was very important for the fate of East European movements, the crucial moment of their success came when the party bosses recognized their inability to mobilize their own security forces for suppressing the protestors without risking civil war. As public activism became stronger, more and more members of the security forces became increasingly reluctant to intervene in the masses' peaceful demonstrations. In Czechoslovakia, for instance, the massive number of protestors turned police officers into passive state party officials, stating that they would be in the squares for the protection of the general order, but not to intervene against the protestors. As a result, on November 20, 1989 the party called People's Militia, paramilitary irregulars of the regime, to Prague's Old Town Square to secure the party's order. Members of the militia were coming from small towns in northern Bohemia, and when they arrived in Prague, in the heat of political turmoil, they realized that the party simply had not arranged any place for them to spend the night. They had to stay in their buses in freezing temperatures and were grateful to receive constant supplies of soup and hot drinks delivered by students, occupying the nearby university faculties. Within a few days, members of the militia participated in a public meeting of the workers of the Kolben-Daněk factories and supported the declaration demanding the Party to end censorship and "open dialogue involving all society." (Wheaton and Kavan, 1992; 71,209) A few days later, various People's Militia units began to vote themselves out of existence. With the army in the barracks, a passive police, and disintegrating People's Militia, the party did not have any option but to bargain with the opposition.

The only exception to this non-violent transformation in Eastern Europe was Romania, where the army not only rejected attacks on protestors but also actively participated in the revolution. When Nicolae



Ceauşescu's secret police, the infamous *Securitate*, began to use live ammunition against protestors, Romanian soldiers intervened to help bring down the regime. Everywhere else in the region, the political elites of the Communist Parties gave up their power not because they were more democratic or felt a moral crisis in their countries, but because they realized that there was no force to uphold their political position. In other words, the reason why East German or Czechoslovak communists did not use soldiers against the protestors was simply because the army was unavailable or unwilling to perform such a task.

Hence, the decisive difference between the European and Chinese experience of 1989 was the People's Liberation Army's loyal obedience to party. The political and historical independence of the Chinese communism from Soviet Union (and hence the Gorbachev factor) may explain the loyalty of Chinese generals, who were mostly the veterans of civil war; but it does not explain the obedience of ordinary soldiers and low-level officers' in shooting against the civilians in Beijing in July 1989. During the initial stages of revolution in Romania, for instance, when the party ordered army platoons to open fire against the protestors in the city of Timișoara, "individual soldiers refused to carry out orders to fire on protesters; some joined in the demonstration and others abandoned their positions. By the evening several T-55 tanks were in the possession of protestors." (Rady, 1992: 96) Elsewhere in the region, the top leaderships in the army and political leaders of East European communism knew that any forceful military intervention would risk a civil war; which, as Ceauşescu's case showed, they were destined to lose.

In China, both government and students were aware that the fate of the movement almost entirely depended on the army's loyalty to the party. A year after Tiananmen Square events, Deng Xiaoping told former Canadian Minister Pierre Trudeau that he had feared the dissolution of the army into opposing camps and a consequent civil war in the country (cited in Miles, 1996:22-23). During the heyday of the democracy movement, rumours about the reluctance of the Beijing-based 38th Army to fight against the protestors and their replacement with the troops from remote areas (Inner Mongolia) circulated in the square (Calhoun, 1994).





Unfortunately, although there were defectors and passive resisters, especially among the junior and medium level officers, neither did the 38th have to be replaced nor did the great majority of foot soldiers hesitate to carry out the orders (Brook, 1992). There were individual cases of defection, but not mutiny.

Then, the key question remains: why did PLA officers and soldiers remain loyal to the party? Part of the answer lies in the way the Communist Party of China came to power. Unlike in east central Europe, where communist parties made bloodless coup d'états in close coordination with Moscow, the Chinese communists took over power after winning a long and bitter civil war largely independent of Soviet Union. This explains the unity and determination among the majority of higher-level military and party officials, many of whom were comrades-in-arms during the war. Deng Xiaoping remarked on the importance of this for their "success" in suppressing the Tiananmen movement in his famous June 9 speech, which was given only three days after the crackdown of the movement:

This storm was bound to happen sooner or later. As determined by international and domestic climate, it was bound to happen and was independent of man's will. It was just a matter of time and scale. It has turned out in our favor, for we still have a group of veterans who have experienced many storms and have a thorough understanding of things ... we still have a group of core cadres who took part in the revolution at various times. That is why it has been relatively easy for us to handle the present matter.

(Deng, 2009: 67-68)

Yet again, this does not explain the obedience of young rank and file soldiers. This is crucial as it was – arguably – the main advantage of the Chinese military and political elite over their East European counterparts. In order to understand this obedience, instead of placing emphasis on Chinese traditional authoritarianism and Asiatic despotism, I suggest that one needs to stress the essential difference between the rank and file soldiers in China and Eastern Europe. Unlike Warsaw Pact armies, the People's Liberation Army was not comprised of conscript





soldiers. In other words, the Chinese army was (and is) staffed by professional soldiers, whom the party preferred to call “volunteers”. Especially in rural China, joining the army was the only career move to obtain social mobility for many young people. Hence, the majority of the soldiers who faced demonstrators in Beijing in May and June 1989 did not have much in common with urban residents and students. This was certainly one of the crucial reasons for the relative immunity of the People’s Liberation Army towards the party’s legitimacy crisis, which was felt especially in urban setting in China.

On the other hand, the professional character of the PLA was surely not the sole factor for the defeat of the Tiananmen movement. Although the loyalty of soldiers gave party elites a necessary self-confidence to crush the protestors violently, it does not explain the inability of democracy activists to form a strong counter-hegemonic position after the military crackdown in 1989. In other words, the persecution of protestors may explain their tactical defeat, but not the strategic one. In order to understand the reasons for the long-term weakness of the opposition and the longevity of party rule in the country, one needs to focus on the global meanings of the year 1989 and its relation to the culture of late capitalism.

4. The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism and 1989 Uprisings

Instead of negotiating between the structural reasons (corruption, economic problems, shortcomings of economic reforms, increasing inequalities etc.) and ideo-culturalist characteristics (Confucianism as student elitism or traditional state authoritarianism) in a “chicken and egg” fashion, my emphasis goes to the rooster; a different, foreign and charming factor, if you will, contributing as much as the chicken to the genes of the egg. My basic conviction is that the rooster was, in Fredric Jameson’s term, the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson, 1991). In other words, the 1989 uprisings cannot be explained by focusing a magnifying glass on the inner dynamics of Eastern European and Chinese politics or culture, while ignoring the post-war transformation in the global capitalism, which gained an ability to spread its ideology with





the help of mass media technologies. The West, not only with its humanism and democratic values, but also with its life-style – blue jeans, the Beatles, clean streets and fashionable cars – appeared, as the only way to have a decent life. The wide range of cultural products – such as rock’n’roll, Hollywood, and Coca Cola – served this change in one way or another. Consequently, as Jameson argues the new cultural logic of capitalism gained a “tremendously powerful force, which in sheer gravitational attraction and capability of diffusion, is known, or used to be known, as cultural imperialism. Nothing like a global socialist culture exists as a distinct oppositional force and style to this.” (Stephanson and Jameson, 1989: 16)

Mass media, especially television, played an essential role in the diffusion of this new transnational culture. As Tony Judt writes,

... television was a medium of social subversion. It contributed hugely to ending the isolation and ignorance of far-flung communities, by providing everyone *with the same experience and a common visual culture*. Being ‘French’, or ‘German’ or ‘Dutch’ was now something shaped less by primary education of public festivities than by one’s understanding of the country as gleaned from the images thrust into each home.

(Judt, 2005: 345-346)

In Eastern Europe the cultural transformation took place almost simultaneously with the West thanks to the increasing availability of TV and radio sets together with ham radios and black market trade of certain cultural products from the West. Stephen Kotkin describes how the communication revolution brought a feeling of relative deprivation in the Eastern bloc:

... (despite the Wall) East Germans could continue to make direct comparisons with life in West Germany from their own living rooms – just by watching West German television. In Albania the populace could watch Italian TV and in Estonia Finish TV – rare windows. But in GDR, Western TV was accessible in the inhabitants’ native tongue (except in a poor reception area around Dresden, dubbed ‘the valley of clueless.’) North Koreans have never had anything like this vis-à-





vis South Korea. West German TV offered East Germans a ‘nightly emigration’ – and a frustrating tease.

(Kotkin, 2009: 38)

Consequently, despite the party’s fruitless counter propaganda, long hair, short skirts, denim jackets and jeans formed a distinctive fashion through the Eastern bloc countries as well.

While European societies (both capitalist and socialist) were undergoing this radical cultural transformation in the 1960s, Mao’s cultural revolution was heading in a completely different direction in China. In other words, while the 1960s represented youth rebellion, consumerism and increasing political diversification in North America and Europe, during the so-called cultural revolution in China “any transgression of the stringent limits on personal or political expression could have the direst of consequences, and most urban residents had to be constantly on guard against giving offense to the defenders of revolutionary orthodoxy.”(Esherick, Pickowicz and Walder, 2006: 27) Until the death of Mao, there was simply no free cultural space for the dissemination of the cultural logic of late capitalism in China.¹

The similar cultural sea change could take place only during Deng Xiaoping’s post-1978 reform period. In addition to accelerated urbanization and more visible inequality, the reforms brought an increase in living standards and relatively liberal cultural policies, which – in fact – far exceeded Eastern European countries. For instance, the Voice of America, which was still illegal in Eastern Europe, was permitted to broadcast from inside the country and became one of the most popular radio stations in the entire China (Zhao, 1996:3).² Meanwhile TV ownership rose from three million to 149 million in ten years, and Chinese TV channels began to import American shows such as “Falcon Crest, Knot’s Landing, Hunter, Alf, and animated shows such as Thundercats and Silverhawks” (Hong, 1998: 61). TOEFL and “going abroad” became part of the so called “cultural fevers” in late 1980s alongside with “jeans”, brand name, Hong Kong/Taiwanese pop music, Western food and holiday fevers (Zhao, 2001: 44-45). In short, within ten years time, a new generation of Chinese youth came an age; and their subjectivity and aspirations were almost completely different than the





ones who formed the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution a decade earlier. This radical change in Chinese society felt especially during the airing of the controversial yet immensely popular documentary series named *River Elegy* (*Heshang* 河殇) on China Central Television in 1988. The episode on the Cultural Revolution with raw footage of the Red Guards' marching and chanting of socialist slogans while holding Mao's Little Red Book seemed surreal for many people under roughly thirty years of age. A letter from a fifteen-year-old girl in Beijing clearly reflects the radical change in the subjectivity of many Chinese:

... when I saw in Heshang some scenes reflecting the conditions of that time, I urgently wanted to know what the China of that time was like. When I saw some of those scenes on TV, such as: young people waving the little red book and yelling 'Long Life!' upon seeing Chairman Mao, so moved that hot tears filled their eyes; or the 'fervor' of people at a criticism meeting; or the situation during the 'Great Leap Forward' – I felt I did not understand them at all, didn't understand why they were that way.

(cited in Calhoun, 1994: 235)

Rapid economic liberalizations, opening of the borders, increasing commercialization and alleviation of restrictions created a relatively free cultural atmosphere, within which neither Mao's ascetism, nor Deng's neo-authoritarianism had place. Wu'er Kaixi, a student leader of the Tiananmen Democracy Movement, explains the generational gap and this new subjectivity eloquently:

There has never been a generation like ours. We mock the state, we mock the government, we mock the leaders. And there has never been a generation that had seen the outside world. It is so beautiful... Does our generation have anything? We don't have the goals that our parents had. We don't have the fanatical idealism of our older brothers and sisters once had. So what do we want? (After a brief pause) Nike shoes, lots of free time to take our girlfriends to a bar, the freedom to discuss an issue with someone, and to get a little bit of respect from the society ...

(Gordon and Hinton, 1995)





To summarize, in both Eastern Europe and China, a new, postmodern (alternatively, late modern, or late capitalist) subjectivity emerged and signified a radical break from the earlier, ascetic visions of communist leaders. While this process took place during 1960s in east central Europe, in China it began only after 1978. What then, was the decisive difference between Chinese and European 1989s if the same cultural logic, was the underlying factor in both geographies? As argued before, a part of the answer lies in the fact that unlike in Eastern Europe, the People's Liberation Army consisted of professional soldiers instead of conscripts. The more structural reason for the failure of the movement was the small percentage of urban population in China. Since the above mentioned cultural logic flourished first and foremost in urban centres around the globe and the 1989 movements were predominantly urban uprisings; the size and the proportion of the urban population with access to mass media technologies made a difference.

Surely this is not to suggest that the Chinese peasantry is essentially backwards, or indifferent towards social movements. Yet in 1989, the size of the urban population with access to mass media was important because it was the communication revolution that brought the phantasmagoria of the "good life" and embedded the idea of relative deprivation in socialist countries. Yet in 1989, only 26 per cent of the Chinese population was living in urban areas. In contrast, this was 65 per cent in Czechoslovakia, 66 per cent in Hungary and 61 per cent in Poland. (World Bank, 2013) Even in Romania, where the small-scale civil war had to take place to overthrow the regime, the number of people living in urban areas was 53 per cent of the total population. While in Eastern Europe, almost every household had TV; there were only 149 million TV sets in all China, a country with 1.1 billion people. (Cheng, 1990: 21) In such conditions, the Chinese peasants could compare their existing conditions only with the ones in their memories, and thinking of the horrors of famine and Cultural Revolution, they had every reason to be satisfied with their conditions. Consequently, the Communist Party of China enjoyed far greater performative legitimacy than their East European counterparts among large segments of society. As the majority of the Chinese rural population showed indifference





towards the movement, the party could confidently suppress the “active minority” by violent means.

5. Conclusion

Five months after the massacre in Tiananmen, massive demonstrations hit east central Europe and the socialist regimes fell one after another. The unease among the Chinese Communist Party elites became obvious when they put the security forces on high alert following the summary executions of the Ceaușescus in Romania. Arguably, the bigger shock came when the Soviet army failed in its coup attempt to prevent the collapse of communism in USSR. By 1992, China was the only major international power in the world ruled by Communist Party. Deng’s consequent 1992 reforms were primarily aimed at breaking away from the resentment of urban classes by increasing economic growth and reconciling with the new cultural and ideological predicament of the late capitalist era. It greatly increased the size and purchasing power of the Chinese middle class, and the above-mentioned post-modern culture flourished especially in Chinese urban settings while the party retained its political power through use of force and intimidation. Especially the big cities such as Shanghai and Beijing – with their vibrant business districts, familiar global brands, quick-pace music and street fashion – became almost indistinguishable from any other metropolis in the capitalist world. Under these circumstances, the majority of the protesting students of Tiananmen Square movement withdrew into middle-class conformism and political cynicism. In a disordered world, where the most successful exponents of corporate capitalism are card-carrying communists, this becomes hardly surprising.

Notes

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1. The political dissidents in Eastern Europe were surely persecuted as well. Yet the level and ferocity of this persecution was nowhere near the terror inflicted during the Cultural Revolution, which is comparable only to the Stalinist terror of late 1930s in its scope. Famous east central European dissidents, such as Václav Havel or Adam Michnik, who had both bourgeois background and political deviation, simply would not have survived the Cultural Revolution in China. In fact, the traumatization of the idea of dissidence during the Cultural Revolution could be the reason for the absence of any senior dissident intellectual with moral authority, who could potentially lead the movement in 1989.
2. Prior to the movement, the VOA claimed to have 18 million listeners in China, and during the movement in mid-1989 it claimed to attract 200 to 400 million listeners (Zhao, 1996: 3).

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