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Chinese Student Protests: Explaining the Student Movements of the 1980s and the Lack of Protests Since 1989

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Chapter I

Introduction

“In sharp contrast with the strict socialization methods, ideological control, and cultural isolation of the Maoist era, Chinese youth of the 1970s and 1980s became increasingly exposed to a broad range of new ideas and have experienced opportunities for upward mobility which go far beyond those offered by the party-state. Even compared with their May Fourth predecessors, young people today are growing up in the context of monumental socioeconomic change. The results, in terms of future development, may prove to be even more profound” (Nesbitt-Larking, 1997, p. 151).

Chinese youth today are growing up in an era significantly different from their parents’ generation, as well as their student predecessors of the 1980s. Since the Chinese Communist Party abandoned communist ideology and embraced capitalism, China has reaped significant economic success. Today’s college students, born in the late 1980s, live in a capitalistic society chatting on MSN, watching American shows like Grey’s Anatomy, and aspiring to work for multinational companies. In light of such developments, some may wonder if the days of pro-democracy student protests are over. Have current students become too uninterested in politics and satisfied with their economic situations to spearhead protests like their predecessors? Or are today’s students *really* different from the students of the 1980s? What factors initiated student protests in the past, and why have there not been any anti-regime or pro-democracy protests since 1989? This paper will attempt to address these questions by comparing the attitudes and the situation of students in the 1980s to the post-1989 students, and by examining several key factors that often must be present for protests to occur in China.

I argue that current students, in fact, do not vastly differ from their protesting predecessors. Compared to the students of the 1980s, they undeniably enjoy a higher standard of living and better economic opportunity after graduation. However, evidence shows that the two groups share similar characteristics of pragmatism, materialism, and lack of interest in politics, as well as similar political grievances. Therefore, the lack of protests since 1989 cannot be attributed to a decline in political interest or the appeasement of political grievances.

If students themselves remain largely unchanged, what factors sparked student protests throughout the 1980s? Three key factors seem to be crucial for a student protest to occur in China. First and most important, political opening by the government “awakens” and prompts students to protest. Second, progressive elites inspire students. Third, a salient event, such as an important anniversary or

the death of a leader, often serves as the final catalyzing force for a protest by providing students with a reason to gather. I argue that the lack of protests since 1989 is not a consequence of changing student attitudes and situations, but is rather due to the limited degree of political opening post-1989. Most liberal political developments have either been irrelevant to urban-dwelling students, or strictly orchestrated by the Party to prevent any threat to its monopoly of power. As a result, students, as well as progressive elites, have not received cues to call for change and have remained dormant since 1989. Therefore, salient events and important anniversaries have passed without catalyzing student movements. I conclude that although the Chinese government has done a noteworthy job of improving living standards and economic opportunities, Chinese students today still harbor political grievances similar to those of the 1980s generation. Perhaps if the government sends signals of political relaxation in the future, the incumbent generation of students may rise up to protest like its predecessors.

Why Research Chinese Students Movements?

Students have played an important political role throughout history in many parts of the world. Lipset (1971, p. 14) writes that students have traditionally served as the “vanguard of political change” as they have “invariably been more responsive to political trends, to changes in mood, to opportunities for social change, than any other group in the population, except possibly intellectuals.” Students not only exhibit fast response to the political atmosphere, but their actions tend to have a broadcasting effect that mobilizes other sectors of the public (Lipset, 1971, p. 14). Therefore it is vital for us, and especially for political leaders, to understand the inclinations of students, and the “dynamics” of their movements that have “threatened and even toppled regimes” in the past (Altbach, 1989, p. 1).

According to Altbach (1989), students of Third World nations and authoritarian societies play a particularly significant role in politics. Students in such countries often form one of the “best-organized and most articulate groups,” and enjoy greater freedom of expression relative to the rest of society (Altbach, 1989, p. 11). Thus, these students often see themselves as the elite, privileged members of society and take seriously their duty to be the “conscience of their societies,” and to act as “spokespersons for a broader population” that is less educated and less organized (Altbach, 1989, p. 13-14).

Chinese students, in particular, are well-known for acting as the conscience of their nation, and as a force for political change since the early twentieth century. Rosen (1989, p. 76) writes that in China, the “modern student” has taken the place of the “traditional Confucian scholar” who sees it as his duty to critique the government. Since the early 1900s, students have equated their exercise of oversight to a form of nationalism. China’s modern tradition of student protests

began in 1919 with the May Fourth Movement, in which students famously protested against the Chinese government for failing to prevent Japan from gaining control over Shandong Province through the Treaty of Versailles. At that time, students rose up out of nationalism, protesting against a government that had failed to secure the interests of their country. Wasserstrom (2005, p. 2) writes that the May Fourth Movement gained a “celebrated place in the revolutionary mythologies” of both the Nationalist Party and the CCP, and students have been encouraged ever since to “emulate the heroes and heroines of 1919.” Since the original May Fourth Movement, students have indeed emulated their predecessors and periodically risen to act as the conscience of their nation.

Chinese student movements are also powerful in that they often do not stay contained in a specific campus, but spread rapidly to the outside and to other schools. Liu (1996, p. 143) writes that students are very skilled in transmitting their message and uniting with counterparts in other parts of the country. Furthermore, student movements in China have often attracted other groups of society to join in, such as workers. As students command such influence, Chinese leaders have often faced difficulty in deciding how to respond to their movements.

Because students have played such a significant role in Chinese history, their movements are not only interesting, but also critical in determining the future stability of the regime. Rosen (1989, p.76) notes that the Nationalists lost student support in the early 1900s because they were viewed as “insufficiently nationalistic....personally corrupt, and highly authoritarian.” The Nationalists were soon defeated and replaced by the CCP. Rosen, writing in 1989, (p. 76) remarked that “students often criticize the Communists for rather similar faults” as the Nationalists, and that they “will no longer blindly follow the lead of the CCP.” Students waged protests against the Party in the 1980s to be brutally suppressed in 1989. Today, almost 20 years later, the CCP has yet to stamp out corruption or significantly open up the political sphere. But at the same time, the CCP has gained the approval of many with its successful economic reforms. In order to gauge the prospective stability of the CCP regime, it is crucial to explore the dynamics of student protests in the 1980s to determine whether Chinese students may rise up again in the future.

Explanations of Why Chinese Students Protested in the 1980s

Scholars have advanced various explanations of why Chinese students protested throughout the 1980s. Some have pointed to students’ desire for greater democracy and frustration with the lack of freedom of speech as motivating factors of the protests.¹ Others have pinpointed the disdain for official corruption as the

¹ For example, see (Rosen, 1989).

driving force behind the movements.² Some explain the presence of protests in the 1980s and the lack today by characterizing the 1980s generation as a group of political activists, and the current generation as materialistic, politically-uninterested pragmatists.³ On the contrary, a few scholars have argued that “pro-democracy” protests were simply students’ expression of anger at poor campus conditions, inflation, and economic hardship.⁴

As I will address in the coming chapters, although these explanations all have some validity, they fail to adequately explain either why students protested in the 1980s, or why they do not today. For example, if students were mobilized by the desire for greater freedom of speech in the 1980s, why have they not protested since 1989 although speech remains restricted today? If official corruption drove students to protest in the 1980s, why have students not protested in recent years despite persistently high levels of corruption? I will also show that contrary to the idealization of the 1980s generation as a group of ardent democracy fighters by some, there is evidence that they were just as pragmatic and politically uninterested like the students today. Then why is it that one generation protested while the other has not? Perhaps the most convincing explanation is that improved economic situations have assuaged students. While an economic prosperity has undoubtedly satisfied many students, one cannot ignore the fact that the protests of the 1980s were more than just about personal economic situations. Economic satisfaction can only partly explain why students have not protested since 1989.

Instead of pointing to students’ characteristics or grievances as the determining factors of student protests, this paper will examine factors *external* to students that explain both the presence of protests in the 1980s, and the absence of protests today.

Time Frame

In this paper I will compare the Chinese college students of the 1980s to the post-1989 students, or those who attended school in the 1990s and 2000s.⁵ I draw the line at 1989 for several reasons. First of all, after the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989, students have never again waged large-scale anti-regime or pro-democracy protests. Therefore, the students of the 1990s and 2000s differ from the older group in that they lack this experience. Furthermore, these two groups differ

² See (Sun, 1991).

³ For example, see (Yan, 2006).

⁴ For example, see (Kwong, 1988).

⁵ From here on, I will use terms such as the “current generation” or “current students,” to refer to the generation of students from the 1990s and 2000s.

in terms of their childhood backgrounds. Students who attended college in the 1980s were generally born in the 1960s and early 1970s during the Cultural Revolution. Many who entered college in the late 1970s and early 1980s had been deprived of an education and “sent down” to the countryside by Mao to learn from the peasants. Also, this group was the first generation of students to gain access to higher education with the restoration of college entrance examinations after Mao’s death. In contrast, those who attended college in the 1990s and 2000s were generally born in the late 1970s or 1980s, and were the first generation to live free of Maoist socialism. These students have grown up in a society in which economic advancement, not ideological fervor, is stressed (Yan, 2006, p.256). Especially those born in the late 1980s have experienced China’s rapid globalization and economic development. Due to all of these differences, I divide and compare the two generations.

As for the time frame of student protests, I will look at protests occurring between 1980 and 1989. I primarily focus on the 1980 protest at Hunan Teachers College, the 1986-7 protest initiated by students at the Chinese University of Science and Technology in Hefei, and the famous 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests. I focus on these three protests because they were all initiated by students, and had similar pro-democracy, anti-regime overtones.

Sources

In this paper I rely on survey data from the 1980s to understand students from that era. But first, it is important to note that survey and interview data from the 1980s are relatively scarce and difficult to access; available data must be scrutinized with care for several reasons. Because survey research only began to appear in 1979 after the onset of reforms by Deng Xiaoping, research on Chinese students is relatively scant. Time series data is often unavailable, and question design, as well as sampling can be problematic. The scarcity of information accounts for my use of indirect data at times. Also, survey research in the 1980s, and perhaps even today, is often conducted with an “implied political agenda” by state-affiliated organizations (Rosen, 1992, p. 187). Furthermore, Chinese students may not provide candid answers in surveys and interviews out of fear of punishment for political incorrectness. Because of all these limitations, one must exercise care when using Chinese survey data. Finally, many of the surveys presented here are translated from Chinese state-affiliated academic journals that are circulated internally and unavailable to the general public. Therefore, I can only present whatever information the translator decided to provide, and the reader may find that some of the surveys presented in this paper may lack information on details such as the total number of people surveyed, or the specific schools included in the survey. Having pointed out the limitations, it is important to note that surveys published in internally circulated academic journals tend to be more

reliable than those that are widely published (Rosen, 1992, p. 188). So despite its flaws, the data presented here still merits consideration and provides important insight we might otherwise not have.

I also rely on survey and interview data from various sources to examine the students of the 1990s and 2000s. In addition, I use interview data gathered specifically for this project. Between December 2007 and March of 2008, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews with current Chinese college students through Skype, an internet phone system. The student interviewees ranged from age 18-25, with an average age of 22. All of the students were either undergraduate or graduate students at primarily top universities in Beijing and Shanghai, with a few from universities located in other major Chinese cities. Most of the students interviewed were majoring in economics or business, while a few majored in subjects as diverse as clinical medicine and geography. Seven out of 20 students are members of the Chinese Communist Party, and 14 out of 20 students have either one or both parents in the Party. Because the students were promised complete anonymity, I will refer to the speakers as “interviewees” when using quotes from the interviews. Finally, because these 20 students were not selected randomly, but were referred to me by either acquaintances or other interviewees, the findings from the interviews can be thought of as anecdotal evidence and support for other scholarly works cited in this paper, as opposed to representative data.

Roadmap

In the next chapter, I test three common hypotheses that attempt to explain why students protested in the 1980s and/or why they have not protested since 1989. I conclude that these explanations are deficient in that they cannot account for both the presence and lack of protests. I also note that the students of the 1980s actually share similar characteristics with the current generation. Then in Chapter 3, I explore what factors are necessary for student protest to occur, and point to the absence of government led political opening as the underlying reason for the lack of protests since 1989. Finally, I conclude the paper with a discussion of what these findings mean for the future of China.

Chapter II

Why Have Chinese Students Not Protested Since 1989?

“It was easy to allow yourself to be swallowed by mass political movements during a time when we had so little to call our own. Then, we needed a spiritual--or political--crutch to give meaning to our lives. But these days no one can persuade the Chinese people to trade their search for a better life with a political cause” (Huang, 2002).

Overview of Chapter

Almost twenty years have passed since the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989. Chinese college students, once famous for protesting against official corruption and calling for democracy throughout the 1980s, are commonly characterized today as apolitical pragmatists who are unlikely forces for political change.⁶ With China’s recent economic boom, high levels of popular support for the regime⁷, and Chinese surveys boasting “80% of China’s urban residents satisfied with their life” (People's Daily, 2007), student discontent and protest may seem unlikely.⁸ Several student protests have occurred in China since the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989. However, a vast majority of these have been either against a foreign nation, such as Japan or the US, or against a specific university for reasons such as limiting outside access to the school Bulletin Board System (BBS), or making false promises regarding diplomas. None of the protests have carried significant anti-regime or pro-democracy overtones, like the protests of the 1980s.

This chapter will question whether the attitudes and situation of current students have changed significantly from their predecessors of the 1980s. I will test three hypotheses as to why current students no longer spearhead such protests⁹ by comparing the political, economic, and social situations of students in both the 1980s and post-1989. First, I will address the hypothesis that students no longer protest today because they have become pragmatic, materialistic, and consequently uninterested in politics. Next, I will test the hypothesis that students have not protested post-1989 because they have become politically content. Finally, I will

⁶ For example, see Wang (2002, p. 7-11) and Yan (2006).

⁷ For example, see Chen (2004).

⁸ From here on after, “students” and “college students” will be used interchangeably unless otherwise specified.

⁹ From here on after, “protests” will refer to student protests against the Chinese government and/or for political reform. The term “protests” will not include protests that have been against other entities, such as foreign nations or universities.

examine the hypothesis that students no longer protest due to economic satisfaction.

I. Have Pragmatism and Materialism Overridden Political Interest?

Since the initiation of the “Reform and Opening Up” policy by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China has dramatically transformed itself into an economic powerhouse. Consequently, Chinese youth,¹⁰ those born between 1980 and 1995, have grown up in an era significantly different from their parents, and even college students from a decade or two ago. Born after the launch of economic reform and too young to remember the student turmoil of the 1980s, today’s youth live in a capitalistic society that encourages them to enter prestigious universities and land high paying jobs. Both foreign and Chinese media use words such as “pragmatic,” “individualistic,” and “spoiled” to characterize the current generation.¹¹ Students are no longer encouraged to look up to selfless, Communist models like Lei Feng. Rather, the Chinese media closely follows the lives of the new rich, and bestselling books like *Harvard Girl Liu Yiting* provide ambitious parents and students with strategies to enter top universities (Rosen, 2003).

In light of such developments, many claim the post-1989 cohort of Chinese college students have become too pragmatic and materialistic, and consequently, less interested in politics.¹² For example, UCLA anthropologist Yunxiang Yan states, “It is well known that the current generation of Chinese youth is apolitical—indifferent towards both official ideology and the prospects of political reform. This distinguishes them from the young people of the 1980s, who gathered in Tiananmen Square demanding democracy and political freedom in 1989” (Yan, 2006, p. 258). Yan’s claim is certainly well known and commonly alluded to. However, it is questionable if pragmatism, materialism, and lack of political interest among students are such recent developments. As the evidence I have gathered shows, these characteristics have been found among students since at least the 1980s, and therefore do not necessarily preclude protest.

A. Pragmatism

Student Pragmatism Reflected in Choice of Schooling and Career

Labeling Chinese students today as “pragmatists” typically alludes to the fact that they carefully engineer their career and academic choices solely to advance their economic and social status. Bai (1998) cites various Chinese surveys that

¹⁰ From here on after, “youth” will be used interchangeably with “college students,” unless specified.

¹¹ For example, see (Lee, 2007) and (Shan, 2005).

¹²For example, see (Rosen, 2003) (Wang Y. , 2006) (Yan, 2006) (Liu J. , 2006) (Liu J. , 2006).

reflect the pragmatic nature of current college students through their choice of workplace. For example, he cites a study conducted in 1993 by Wu (1995) that reveals a majority of 548 students from eight universities, or 68.1%, desire to work in a “coastal open economic zone.” He explains working in a coastal area ensures one will receive a high income. Furthermore, as illustrated in Table 1, 49.6% of the students polled desire to work for a *sanzi* enterprise, a company owned fully, or at least partly by foreigners, while only 5.2% of students seek to work for a state-owned enterprise (SOE). Bai notes that this huge disparity in popularity is unsurprising considering the high wages paid by *sanzi* enterprises, and the increasingly bleak prospects of SOEs. Since the initiation of privatization in the 1990s, SOEs can no longer provide employees with the once coveted “iron rice bowl.” Rather, students now seek the “golden rice bowl” of high income and opportunity for personal advancement at *sanzi* enterprises (Bai, 1998, pp. 528-530). In support of Bai’s findings, many students interviewed for this project expressed their desire to work for a foreign company because they offered higher salaries than domestic companies. Furthermore, several of the student interviewees revealed they had chosen their major, such as business or English, out of the knowledge that they could easily find a high-paying job with these degrees. Statistics on college students from the early 1990s, as well as interviews with students today illustrate the pragmatic nature of the post-1989 cohort of students who strategically choose job sectors and majors that will yield the most personal benefit.

Table 1

Preferences of Workplace: Responses of Master’s Degree Postgraduates at Eight Universities

Work Place	Percentage
<i>Sanzi</i> enterprises	49.6%
University and research institutes	17.5%
Government organizations	9.3%
Private enterprises	7.3%
State-owned enterprises	5.2%
Collectively run enterprises	0.6%
Others	3.8%

Note: N=548

Note: Universities polled include Wuhan University, Central China Institute of Technology, Central China Teachers University, Central China University of Agriculture, South Central University of Finance and Economics, Wuhan University of Hydraulics and Electric Power, Tongji Medical University, and Hubei Medical University

Source: (Wu, 1995)

While current Chinese students tend to be very pragmatic, there is evidence that such pragmatism is not a recent development. For instance, Cherrington (1997) reports that students she interviewed in the 1980s often mentioned “instrumental motivations” for entering college. Many pointed to the good prospects for “social position, material rewards, status and influence,” as well as the purpose of “obtaining secure employment, higher salaries, [and] a good standard of living...” as reasons for entering university (Cherrington, 1997, p. 76). Furthermore, Israel (1992, p. 100) writes that most students who entered school by the mid-1980s were “academic overachievers” who “aspired to nothing less than graduate study abroad and a secure future in a government or private job.” He adds that these students “scarcely seemed a generation likely to rush to the barricades” (Israel, 1992, p. 100). Contrary to the idealization of the 1980s generation as “political activists,” they were just as concerned about finding high paying jobs and saw college as a strategic step in reaching their career goals.

Student Pragmatism Reflected in Aspirations for CCP Membership

Rising demand for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership also reflects the pragmatic nature of current Chinese students. Most students today have grown up relatively free of communist indoctrination and lack interest party politics (Yan, 2006). However, after a sharp drop in membership during the early post-Tiananmen years, student demand for CCP membership has increased each year (Rosen, 2004). Most students today aspire to join the CCP not out of true belief in Communism or support for the Party, but rather to increase their career prospects (Chan, 2000). To students, “political beliefs are useless, but Party membership remains valuable in today’s China” (Yan, 2006, p. 256). In a series of interviews conducted in 2006 with 13 student CCP members,¹³ two of the top reasons mentioned for joining the Party included “economic benefit,” and the “prestige” of membership. Interviewees commented that CCP membership increased one’s chances for promotions and leadership positions, and opened doors to government jobs. Students also indicated that they strove for CCP membership because membership proved one’s “elite” status. One student also mentioned that he heard foreign companies looked favorably upon CCP members because only “excellent” students are admitted into the Party. The overall results of the interviews generally confirmed the pragmatic attitudes of students in joining the Party. A survey mentioned in Rosen’s work indicated that 93.9% of newly graduated students thought CCP membership was of importance in landing a job (2004, p. 169). Another survey showed that 75.4% of students desire to join the party for pragmatic, self-serving reasons, as seen in Table 2 (Guo, 2007, p. 384). The

¹³ In-depth interviews conducted in 2006 at Fudan University by three UC teammates and I for research paper titled, “The Effects of Globalization on the Mentality of CCP Members.”

dominance of calculative reasons for joining the CCP further demonstrates the current generation's pragmatic nature.

Table 2
College Student's Motives to Join the Party

Motives	Percent
To make it easier to find a job in the future	44.16%
Political belief and pursuit	13.19%
To prove my own ability in school	11.12%
To follow the general trend or others	10.07%

Source: Gong Huixiang, Wang Zhiqiang and Shen Wenhua, "Zhejiang gaoxiao xuesheng sixiang daode zhuangkuang de diaocha yu fenxi" ("Survey and analysis of students' ideological and moral status at institutions of higher education in Zhejiang"), *Dangdai qingnian yanjiu (Contemporary Youth Study)*, no. 5, (2002), p. 20.¹⁴

Although the proportion of students with CCP membership was much smaller during the 1980s, students displayed similar pragmatic motivations for joining the Party. Rosen writes that with the launch of a campaign in 1984 to recruit more college students into the Party, student membership began to increase slowly, with up to 20-25% of students being recruited at prestigious universities like Beijing University (1990, p. 277). As Table 3 indicates, with a rather close resemblance to Table 2, most students in the 1980s felt that their fellow classmates were joining the Party for pragmatic reasons. In an interview conducted in 2006, Fudan University professor, who had joined the CCP as a 21 year old student in 1985, further confirmed the pragmatism of his generation by frankly admitting he had joined in order to gain "greater opportunities for personal development." He remarked that because the CCP is the ruling party of China, membership is crucial to land "important jobs" and to secure promotions.¹⁵ This anecdote and the survey data discussed above demonstrates that at least some students from the 1980s were just as calculative and career-minded as their counterparts today.

¹⁴ This table is as appeared in Guo (2007).

¹⁵ In-depth interview also conducted in 2006 at Fudan University by for aforementioned research project, "The Effects of Globalization on the Mentality of CCP Members."

TABLE 3

Question: Some of Your Friends Have Joined the Party, Others Are Striving To Do So,
What Is Your Observation and Understanding of This?

Response Choice	Percent
In reality they want a “Party Card” which they can use as capital to receive future benefits	59%
They think the Party is good and are joining in order to be further educated	10%
They believe in Communism and want to make a contribution	4%
Other responses	Omitted

Note: N=2,063

Source: Zhao Yicheng, “Jiazhide chongtu” (Value Conflict), *Weidinggao*, no. 8, April 25, 1988, 19.¹⁶

Student Pragmatism Reflected in Avoiding Politically Sensitive Situations

Finally, student pragmatism is reflected in their avoidance of discussing politically sensitive issues. Yan writes that the current generation reflects a pragmatism that belongs to a “more experienced and somewhat cynical older people” (2006, p. 257). He gives the example of a Chun Shu, a high-school dropout famous for writing blunt accounts of her life, who never discusses political subjects like freedom and democracy. Yan explains that Chun does not evade such topics out of fear of imprisonment, now that the political sphere is relaxed compared to the days of Mao, but because she is simply exercising her generation’s pragmatism in avoiding any complicating situations.

Some may point to the recent rise in internet contention as evidence that Chinese youth do in fact engage in vigorous political discussion. However, as Yang (forthcoming) points out in “Contention in Cyberspace,” much of this discussion revolves around issues such as rural poverty, nationalism, and corruption that “partly overlap with state agenda” and do not directly challenge the Party’s rule (p. 233). Students interviewed for this paper generally expressed that although they talked freely amongst friends, they would keep “a code in mind” and “avoid crossing the line” or discussing “sensitive issues” when writing in forums on the internet. Most of the interviewees indicated they had never heard of any classmates getting in trouble for discussing “sensitive issues” online, and were generally not worried about getting into trouble themselves. And yet, they maintained that they would be

¹⁶ This table is as appeared in Bahry and Moses (1990).

“polite and careful” anyways, just in case. This careful evasion of possible political complications further illustrates the pragmatic nature of current students.

Similar pragmatic behavior is found among students of the 1980s as well. Cherrington (1997) documents “economic and political” pragmatism through her interviews by asking students in the 1980s why they chose their major. She gives an example of a student named Qiu, who decided to major in dentistry not out of interest for the subject, but because he felt medical specialization would be “less likely to result in personal trouble” (p. 80). He reasoned that if a movement similar to the Cultural Revolution occurred in the future he would be “relatively immune from criticism” as a scientist (p. 80). Cherrington writes about another interviewee who explained her parents had encouraged her to pursue the sciences because “people in the arts were tortured more” during the Cultural Revolution (1997, p. 81). Choosing majors to avoid political complications is a strong indicator that students in the 1980s were just as pragmatic as their counterparts today.

Clearly, pragmatism is not a recent phenomenon. It is manifested in both generations’ career and academic choices, reasons for joining the CCP, and strategic evasion of politically sensitive situations. As Cherrington notes, “by the early 1980s, instrumentalism was more prevalent than socialist ideology” (1997, p. 78). Therefore, it is unlikely pragmatism precludes today’s students from protesting, as their protesting predecessors were just as pragmatic.

B. Materialism

China watchers note a rise in materialism and “money worship” among the Chinese youth today. As discussed above, materialism is reflected in most students’ criterion for job selection. Several other studies document the rise of materialism as well. For example, in Wu’s survey of 584 postgraduates at eight universities (1995, p. 80), 81.9% of students felt “money is everything” and that salary is “the first criterion in job selection.” Rosen (2003, p. 7) cites a survey conducted in 2000 that asked 1,780 students to describe their ideal aspiration. Becoming a billionaire ranked first, followed by becoming a boss of a multinational corporation or a leader of a province or municipality. As indicated by these surveys, materialism is indeed prevalent in Chinese youth culture.

Despite the fact that China’s level of economic development is much higher today, students in the 1980s were just as concerned about material goods as their current counterparts. In 1989, secondary school students what made a country successful; 88.7% chose a “high standard of living,” as seen in Table 4. More “political” criteria, less associated with material benefit, such as “fully guaranteed individual rights and freedoms” and “widespread acceptance of a common belief system,” ranked comparatively low at 34.8% and 2.2%, respectively. Furthermore,

Liu (1984, p. 983) notes that two surveys of high school students conducted in Guangxi in 1981 and in Shanghai in 1982 reflect that white collar professions, such as “scientist,” “engineer,” and “doctor,” ranked the highest as ideal jobs. Students were less interested in becoming a “worker,” despite all of the state propaganda on the virtues of workers. Rather, these youth preferred high-paying, high-status professions as well. Rosen (1990, p. 290) quotes a youth worker who remarked that students were no longer concerned with contributing to the country, but rather looked to “obtain (and not sacrifice) all that they are entitled to...”

Materialism is not a new development in today’s student society. Thus, one cannot argue that current students are unlikely to protest because of their personal pursuits for money. Despite their materialistic tendencies, students were able to put aside such concerns and take considerable risks during the 1980s to call for change.

Table 4
Criteria That Make a Country Successful

Criteria	Percent	Rank
High standard of living	88.7%	1
Social stability	66.7%	2
Power	42.0%	3
High international status	38.5%	4
Fully guaranteed individual rights and freedoms	34.8%	5
Highly developed system of	18.3%	6
Small gap between rich and poor	5.5%	7
Widespread acceptance of a common belief system	2.2%	8

Note: *N*=1,508

Source: Wang Zhixiong, Liang Feng, Wu Xiaoping, and Zhang Bin, “Guangzhou qingnian zhengzhi wenhua tedian tantao” (An inquiry into the special characteristics of the political culture of Guangzhou youth), *Qingnian tansuo* (Inquiries into youth) no. 6, 1989, p. 16¹⁷.

C. Lack of Interest in Politics

Many, like Yan (2006), characterize the current generation of Chinese students as uninterested in politics unlike their protesting predecessors. Yan writes that students today “seek freedom and individuality” in the sphere of their

¹⁷ This table is as appeared in Rosenbaum (1992).

private lives, but are unwilling to assert themselves in the public (p. 257). For example, 16 out of 20 students interviewed for this project directly expressed that they were “uninterested in politics” and that they were “too busy making money,” or preparing themselves to land high-paying jobs after graduation to care about politics. One interviewee noted that most “ordinary” students did not have an interest in politics, except perhaps those who want a political career in the future.

Although Yan correctly asserts that the current generation of students lacks interest in politics, he overlooks the fact that Chinese youth in the 1980s were most likely just as uninterested. For example, Liu (1984, p. 981) analyzes a survey conducted in 1981 that reveals secondary school students’ lack of interest in studying politics. As shown in Table 5, when 829 students in Guangxi province were asked to indicate their favorite subject in school, only 0.37% of junior high school students, and 2.49% of high school students chose politics as their favorite subject. Rosen (1990, p. 287) presents a survey conducted in 1987 among Beijing students that revealed students most frequently discussed topics regarding “one’s income and life,” followed by literary and art works, personal relations, sports, and world affairs.” Notably, domestic political issues, assuming they were included in the questionnaire, did not even rank in this survey. Rosen (1990, p. 287) also cites a survey conducted in 1988, just one year before the Tiananmen Square Incident, which asked 30,000 university students in Beijing about their favorite activities. Similar to the findings of the other surveys discussed above, political study ranked the lowest, with 51.1% students not interested. The Youth League ranked the second lowest, with 44.4% not interested. Finally, Rosen quotes a reformer named Yang Dongping, who wrote in 1985 about a “transformation of youth attitudes from the “strongly political,” when “one billion people (were) all great critics,” to the more personal and self-focused. Yang reasons that this trend may be a “normal phenomenon of a society of peace and prosperity focused on economic construction” (1990, p. 290). Apparently the “transformation” of Chinese youth into apolitical, self-focused actors had already occurred in 1985. However, this transformation did not stop pro-democracy, pro-reform protests from occurring throughout the 1980s. Therefore, the lack of political interest does not explain why the current generation of students has not engaged in large-scale protests since 1989.

Table 5
School Subjects of Greatest Interest

Junior High	Percentage	Senior High	Percentage
Mathematics	29.21%	Mathematics	33.27%
Physics	13.86%	Physics	16.19%
Language/Literature	12.36%	Chemistry	11.74%
English	7.87%	Language/Literature	8.01%
Physical Education	5.62%	English	7.30%
History	3.00%	Physical Education	3.38%
Chemistry	3.00%	Biology	2.85%
Music	3.00%	Politics	2.49%
Geography	0.75%	Music	2.31%
Art	0.75%	Art	1.96%
Biology	0.75%	History	0.71%
Politics	0.37%	Geography	0.18%

Note: N= 921

Source: Tung Nian, Zhao Ruiqiang, and Yeng Xinyi, "An Investigation on the Minds of High School Pupils Today," *Jiaoyu Yanji*, no. 4, 1981, pp. 36-40¹⁸.

In summary, contrary to the common assumption that Chinese college students are different from their protesting predecessors in that they are pragmatic, materialistic, and consequently, uninterested in politics, this paper has found that if one carefully examines survey and interview data from the 1980s, there is ample evidence that the older generation of students were quite similar to today's generation. The students of the 1980s were not strikingly politically conscious. In fact, just like college students today, their conversations revolved around topics like job hunting, not politically sensitive issues. Students in the 1980s, like their counterparts today, aspired to join the CCP for material benefit, and carefully engineered their academic and career choices to assure material success. However, despite these characteristics, the apolitical, pragmatic, materialistic students still rose to protest throughout the 1980s, and even risked their lives to call for reform in 1989. Thus, the first hypothesis is not a reasonable explanation as to why students have not protested since 1989.

¹⁸ This table is as appeared in Liu (1984)

II. What is the Role of Political Grievances in Mobilizing Student Protests

This section advances two arguments in regards to political grievances. First, I address the question whether students have not protested since 1989 because they are satisfied with China's political situation. I establish that students today still harbor similar grievances as their protesting predecessors. Therefore, political contentment cannot explain the recent lack of protests. Second, I argue that the mere existence of political grievances is not enough to mobilize student protests since one discontented generation protested, but the other has not.

A. Political Grievances in the 1980s and Today

Corruption

China experienced a stark rise in official corruption with the economic opening and marketization in the early 1980s. Academic merit no longer seemed to matter in a society in which all one needed were high-level connections to obtain lucrative jobs and contracts (Mason, 1994, p. 416). Min Qi's (1989) nationwide survey from 1986-1987 indicates only 28.2% of respondents 25 years old or younger were satisfied with the "efficiency of the government," and only 25.7% believed there was no need for "reforms of the political system at present".¹⁹ Liu (1996, p. 167) writes that in the 1980s, Chinese students resented political corruption, felt alienated, and felt a sense of "shame over national backwardness." As Table 6 shows, in 1984 students at seventeen universities in Beijing, Tianjin, Shengyang, and Dalian indicated that correcting the "style of the work of the party" and improving the "honesty and integrity of officials" should be the nation's first priority (Liu, 1996, p. 168). Mason (1994, p. 416) adds that students were especially upset that admissions to universities, as well as university staff positions were awarded to "unqualified and incompetent" people with official connections. The lack of respect for academic achievement vexed students whose hard work amounted to very little compared to those who used corrupt channels for personal advancement. A student leader's speech at Tiananmen Square on May 4, 1989 aptly summarizes the general student sentiment: "At present, our country is plagued with problems such as bloated government bureaucracy, serious corruption, the devaluation of intellectual work...all which severely impede us from intensifying the reforms and carrying out modernization" (Han, 1990, p. 136). Corruption clearly bothered the students of the 1980s.

¹⁹ These quotes are as translated in (Nesbitt-Larking, 1997).

Table 6
Students' Views on Political Priorities

Criteria	Percent
Rectify the style of work of the Party	32.5%
Carry out structural reform	20.3%
Improve national finances	15.1%
Reform the cadre system	8.3%
Make full use of the functions of intellectuals	7.9%
Change social morality	6.6%
Develop democracy and rule of law fully	6.2%
Punish economic crimes	3.1%

Note: N=1,508

Source: Zhao Zhixiang, Wu Yan, Liu Dixin, and Lu Chao, "Guanyudaxueshengde Renshengguan Zhuangkuang He Tediande Yanjiu" *Shehuikexue Chanxian*, no. 1 (1984): 117-122.²⁰

There is ample evidence that corruption remains an issue of great concern to students today. For example, a survey conducted at ten universities in Shanghai in 1996 showed that 81.46% of students felt corruption hampered stability, as shown in Table 7. Similarly, a study conducted at ten universities in Henan province in 1997 also confirmed students' belief that clean government should be the number one priority of political reform, as shown in Table 8. Finally, 12 out of 20 students interviewed for this project in 2008 pinpointed corruption as a grave political problem. Many of the students' complaints echoed the sentiments of students in the 1980s. For example, one interviewee reasoned corrupt officials were manipulating China's transition from a planned to market economy since the government had yet to enforce a thorough set of laws to govern the marketplace. Another interviewee lamented that the political system lacked "excellent people" because positions were filled with those with connections. Most interviewees expressed the general need for government action to crackdown on corruption. One student commented that perhaps one could expose cases of corruption on the internet, but added that "there's not much we can do, it depends on the government officials." One interviewee wondered if corruption could be ever solved and remarked sarcastically that "maybe it's a rule that every official is more or less corrupted."

As demonstrated above, corruption has been and remains a major political grievance for students. Therefore it is unlikely that political contentment, at least in the aspect of clean, functional government, precludes student protests today.

²⁰ This table is as appears in (Liu A. P., 1996).

Table 7
What Are the Factors Influencing Stability

Criteria	Percent
Degenerated party work style and widespread corruption	81.46%
Enlarging gap between rich and poor	48.19%
Serious inflation	46.08%
Difficulties of the state enterprise reform	29.93%
Worsening public security	27.82%
Intervention from foreign enemies	22.61%
Agricultural problems	15.45%
Influence of bourgeois liberalization values	11.96%
Separatist movements of nationalities	11.06%

Note: Students were allowed to choose three answers

Source: The Party Unit of the Shanghai City Educational Commission, Propaganda Department, 'Shanghai shi gaoxiao sixiang zhengzhi qingkuang diaocha' (The Investigation on the Condition of Political Thinking in Shanghai Universities), *Sixiang lilun jiaoyu (Education in Ideology and Theory)*, August 1996, 10-19.²¹

Table 8
Which Is the Most important Issue That Needs to Be Handled in the Area of Political Reform?

Criteria	Percent
To have a clean government	47%
To eliminate bureaucracy	20%
To establish a socialist political system with Chinese Characteristics	17%
To have civil liberty	6%

Source: Xu Kehang, "Daxue sushi xianzhuang de diaocha yanjiu" (The Investigation and Study on University Students' Existing Qualities), *Qingnian tansuo (Youth Exploration)* 70 (1997), 16.²²

Lack of Meaningful Elections

Since the beginning of the Reform Era, elections had become "a real issue" in the minds of Chinese students (Liu 1996, p. 171). In the early 1980s, students protested against unfair elections, and cried out for greater voting rights in 1989.

²¹ This table is as appears in (Chan, 2000), with slight modification in order.

²² As appears in (Chan, 2000).

Although the adoption of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees in 1987 granted rural residents the opportunity to participate in grassroots democracy, it did not bring such developments to the city. The scope of urban elections still remains largely unchanged today, and students remain unsatisfied with the lack of voting rights.

The first case of students protesting against hollow elections can be seen in 1980. A year after the Democracy Wall Movement of 1979, Deng implemented the Gengshen Reforms which granted citizens the right to directly elect representatives of local people's congresses. This reform was to make up for rescinding the people's constitutional right to the "four bigs" or *sida*, which included, "speaking out freely, airing views fully, holding great debates, and writing big-character posters" (Liu 1996, p. 171-2). New rules specified that county level elections, such as those conducted in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, had to have at least one and a half candidates per seat. Instead of simply confirming candidates nominated by the Party, citizens now had some choice in choosing their representatives. Also, the new reform provided that any group of four citizens could nominate a candidate (Nathan 1985, p. 193, 196). Students throughout China met the new electoral initiative with great enthusiasm. For example, in a pilot election at Shanghai's Fudan University, numerous student candidates organized elaborate campaigns, meeting with voters, giving speeches, and posting advertisements. In the end, three Fudan students were elected to the county congress.

Many other schools caught onto the enthusiasm, drafting laws, holding forums, and establishing journals that discussed the elections and other policy issues. Some saw the new developments as the beginning of democratization in China. However, the optimism began to fade as Party officials began restricting activities, accusing the elections of "treading on 'bourgeois' ground" (Nathan, 1985, p. 205-208). For example, at Peking University, Hu Ping, a staunch proponent of free speech, won the elections only to be denied his seat and unable to find a job after graduation. Although students did not take to the streets in Beijing, a huge protest broke out in the city of Changsha, led by the students of Hunan Teachers College who were outraged that the authorities had attempted to sabotage pro-democracy candidates. Students marched to the provincial party headquarters, shouting "Down with bureaucratism" and "We want democracy" (Nathan, 1985, p. 209-215). Over the next few days, students made speeches to the public, passed out handbills, and even began a hunger strike. The protest finally ended when Beijing promised to investigate the situation. In the end, however, reelections were never held, students were subjected to strict political studies, one pro-democracy candidate was sentenced to labor education, and the other left for the US (Nathan, 1985, p. 216-219).

Six years later in 1986, another protest broke out in Hefei at the Chinese University of Science and Technology when local officials failed to implement elections as promised through the Gengshen reforms. This movement spread across the country to up to twenty cities, and lasted from December 1986 to January 1987. Some estimate that up to 50,000 students protested in just Shanghai (Liu, 1996, p. 172).

Finally in 1989, among the cries for democracy, students specifically called for the right to vote. For example, a poster at Beijing University proclaimed, “It is not that our nation does not need a nucleus; what is crucial is that this nucleus be chosen by the people...In brief, everything must be chosen by the people” (Han, 1990, p. 148.)

Since 1989, the scope of elections and voting rights in the cities remain largely unchanged and very limited. Candidates are usually nominated by Party-affiliated groups and self-nominated candidates are disadvantaged compared to those supported by the Party (Wang 2002).²³ Yong, Cheng, and Ma discuss the recent development of direct elections of resident committees in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai (2006). However they note that these elections are merely a means to “reshuffle personnel,” with the entire process controlled by the Party, and no meaningful competition of policy proposals or debates (Yong et al., 2006, p. 7). Furthermore, the China Elections and Governance website, run by the Beijing Center for Policy Research, reports that the Organic Law of the Urban Residents Committees, although issued in 1990, remains “largely unrecognized” (China Elections and Governance, 2006).

Unsurprisingly, students today seem to be discontent with the lack of meaningful elections like their predecessors. For example, five out of 20 interviewees mentioned the issue of elections when asked to discuss some of China’s biggest political issues. A Sichuan University student interviewed for this project noted that although citizens have the right to vote, he had never voted because his university did not have representatives. Another interviewee lamented that although “we are supposed to have an open candidacy,” some local governments “skip these procedures.” She also noted that she never understood how representatives were selected. She only knew that every four years she is given a list of names and asked to choose three to four candidates without any other information. She stated that voting for someone she did not know was like “fake democracy.” The same interviewee also expressed that “my opinion is not heard, no one cares about what I think.” Another remarked that most university students took part in elections because “we have the right to vote.” But she sarcastically

²³ As cited in (Mei & Green, 2006)

added that because they lacked any knowledge on the candidates, students would often vote for people with the “most beautiful names.”

In summary, students today are not politically satisfied. They are just as critical of official corruption and hollow elections as their protesting predecessors. Therefore it is unlikely that political satisfaction of the current generation precludes protests today.

Are Political Grievances Alone Sufficient to Spark Protests?

Several observers of Chinese students have pointed to official corruption and the lack of meaningful elections as major, if not determining, factors behind student protests in the 1980s.²⁴ However, this claim fails to explain why the current generation of students has yet to take to the streets despite the fact that they harbor similar political grievances as their predecessors. Although political grievances feature as very important themes in protests, grievances alone are not enough to spark protests.

Two years after 1989, Sun (1991, p. 763) proposed that corruption was the “most salient and explosive ingredient” and “the key underlying cause of the uprising” in 1989. Sun’s analysis is not surprising considering the high level of students’ political dissatisfaction in the 1980s, as discussed above. Sun (1991, p. 763) asserted that unless the Party “addresses the roots of corruption, the social basis of ‘instability’ will persist despite its efforts to attack the influence of a minority of ‘instigators.’” Today, 17 years after his statement, the Party has yet to root out corruption. For example, *Xinhua* reports that 29 top CCP leaders have been dismissed in the past five years due to corruption charges (*Xinhua*, 2008). And yet, student instability has *not* persisted.

Furthermore, the CCP has yet to significantly expand voting rights for urban citizens and accordingly, students remain unsatisfied. But this discontent has not mobilized students to protest like their predecessors. There is, however, one key difference between the two generations. Students today seem generally more apathetic about elections than their predecessors of the 1980s. Of the interviewees who brought up the issue of voting, most wondered why they bothered to participate in meaningless elections. One student remarked, “I wonder myself why we go to vote if there is no meaning.” Another called elections “political games” that do not represent “normal people” but only “big factories,” and remarked that the government did not “respect our real thoughts.” Similarly, Yong et al. (2006) found that most Beijing residents were apathetic about the residential committee elections, and only participated in order to return a favor for the services residential

²⁴ For example see (Sun, 1991), (Mason, 1994), (Nesbitt-Larking, 1997), and (Chan, 2000).

committees provided, and to “save face” for candidates. This development of apathy further supports my argument that political grievances alone cannot initiate student movements. If electoral issues truly catalyzed protests the 1980s, they should catalyze protests today.

In summary, although both student generations share similar political grievances, one generation engaged in a decade of protests while the other has remained silent. This shows that political grievances alone are not enough to stimulate political protests in China.

III. Do Students No Longer Protest Due To Economic Satisfaction?

Looking back at the protests of the 1980s, some scholars have questioned whether students were truly protesting for democracy, and whether they understood the meaning of democracy. For example, Kwong (1988) has argued that by protesting for “democracy,” students were really protesting against poor cafeteria food and low salaries upon graduation. Kwong (1988, p. 979) writes, “In short, students were prompted [to protest] by concrete issues that inconvenienced and irked them in their campus lives.” Kwong’s claim has some truth. The 1980s were certainly not the best times for students in economic terms. As the government began to privatize different sectors of the economy, inflation ensued and students suffered as a result. Even school cafeterias were privatized, causing food prices to increase as quality decreased. Students who depended on government stipends were particularly strained as their stipend did not inflate with the rest of the market. Students saw themselves as the “victims” of economic liberalization. Furthermore, student opposition to corruption had not only political, but economic implications as well. Throughout the 1980s, university students were assigned jobs upon graduation. Many were upset that connections, not merit, determined access to lucrative job assignments (Mason, 1994, p. 416-419). In order to publically convey their economic grievances, Beijing graduate students even set up a shoe-shine stall in Tiananmen Square in 1988 (Liu, 1996, p. 168). Mason (1994, p. 419) writes that “inflation and corruption provided the final catalyst for collective action.”

After 1989, the Party “committed itself to the creation of a rich and powerful China” in efforts to boost its popular support (Rosen, 2004, p. 172). Today China has impressed the world with its high annual growth rates and fast-paced development. The CCP’s initiative has dramatically improved the lives of the urban youth living in coastal regions and created “an upwardly mobile white-collar stratum of yuppies...” (Rosen 2004, p. 172-173). Today, students are no longer assigned jobs in remote, underdeveloped regions where workers are needed (Bai, 1998, p. 528), but are free to find lucrative jobs with multinational companies. Eighteen out of the 20 students interviewed for this project were happy with

China's overall economic success. All but one of the interviewees considered themselves to be either middle or upper middle class, and many added that they enjoyed a very high standard of living compared to those living in the underdeveloped, inland regions of China. Furthermore, 15 out of 20 students expressed high confidence in finding a job after graduation, although some worried about finding one they liked. The interviewees who lived in big cities like Shanghai and Beijing indicated that there were plenty of jobs in their region. Also, a majority of students, especially those studying economics or business, reasoned that their major and/or school reputation would make their job search very easy. Overall it seems the CCP has succeeded in bringing material prosperity to urban college students.

In the midst of such economic optimism, some may reason that students have not protested since 1989 because they are materially content. Economic prosperity has undeniably satisfied many students who have always been pragmatic and concerned about their economic wellbeing. However, there is strong evidence that student protests in the 1980s were not just about poor food quality, low stipends, or bad job assignments. As Rosen (1989, p. 82) writes, although "localized" grievances, like poor food quality, were shared by students at all universities, student protestors "did not link these immediate concerns with larger issues." For example, as mentioned previously, students were concerned about corruption not only out of self-interest, but also because they felt a sense of shame at the nation's backwardness. Furthermore, non-economic issues, such as the desire for meaningful elections featured as central themes in the protests of the 1980s. For example, in 1986, protests at the Chinese University of Science and Technology spread to other cities and became a full-fledged movement focused not on local issues, but on larger themes such as democracy, freedom of speech, and freedom of press (Rosen, 1989, p.82-83). Similar themes ran through the late 1980s. For instance, in early 1989, Beijing University students started "democracy salons" on campus to hold debates on topics such as "neauthoritarianism" and "a breakthrough in the democratization of China." When local Party leaders tried to reign in the activity of these salons, students wrote an open letter to the university condemning censorship and demanding a right to hold such discussions (Cheng, 1990, p. 124). Finally, these calls for greater freedom escalated into a mass protest movement by May of 1989. Protesting students were clearly concerned not only with personal economic matters, but also with the "stifling political and intellectual atmosphere they faced" (Rosen, 1989, p. 82). In 1989, some even "sacrificed their lives for the cause of democracy," in order to wake China up from its "political slumber" (Chong, 1990, p. 115).

In summary, although economic hardships were part of student grievances in the 1980s, they were not the only factor that caused student protests. Students also protested for greater voting rights, clean government, freedom of speech, and

democratization. Today the economic situation has improved for many students since 1989, but the other grievances they championed, such as the lack of meaningful elections and corruption, have not. Therefore it is unlikely economic satisfaction alone precludes student protests today.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored several hypotheses of why Chinese students have not protested post-1989. I have shown that both the 1980s and current generation of students are pragmatic, materialistic, and uninterested in politics. Therefore, these characteristics are unlikely hindering factors of protests, since students were able to put aside their pragmatic interests to dissent throughout the 1980s. I have also shown that current students harbor the same political grievances as their protesting predecessors, particularly in their disdain for official corruption and the lack of meaningful elections. Thus, political satisfaction does not explain the lack of protests since 1989. I have also noted that political grievances alone are insufficient to motivate protests since one generation protested, while the other has not. Finally, I have reasoned that although students' living standards have improved, this does not necessarily preclude protests today. There is ample evidence that students protested for much more than just economic grievances in the 1980s; they also protested for greater democracy, freedom of speech, and voting rights—all issues that have yet to be significantly addressed by the Chinese government. After ruling out these hypotheses, one is left wondering why students have not protested since 1989, considering they harbor the same political grievances as their predecessors. In the next chapter, I discuss three factors that catalyzed the student movements in the 1980s.

Chapter III

What Factors Motivate Chinese Student Protests?

“The quiescence of American students during the 1950s suggests that student protests are by no means inevitable, even when a critical mass of interacting protest-prone students gathers in an institution providing leadership and issues. Something more is necessary, which might be termed a protest-prompting cultural climate...” (Keniston, 1970, pp. 178-179).

Overview of Chapter

In the previous chapter I tested various hypotheses as to why students have not protested since 1989. I have shown that students today share the same political grievances as their protesting predecessors, and that grievances alone do not motivate students to protest. In this chapter, I present three key factors that seem to be crucial in sparking student protests in China. First, an “opening up” of the political atmosphere by the government is the most important and necessary factor in initiating student protests. Political openings “awaken” students and provide them the necessary cue to rise up and air their grievances. Second, progressive elites play a crucial role in inspiring students to protest. Progressive elites, however, do not emerge on their own, but are also cued by government led political openings. Third, salient events are often essential in catalyzing student protests, as well as providing symbolic power. For example, in the 1980s, important anniversaries or a prominent leader’s death often served as an initial reason for students to gather together and protest. Finally, I argue that since 1989, the Chinese government has only allowed limited political opening, and restricted activities that may directly challenge its rule. Therefore, students, as well as progressive elites, have remained relatively dormant and passing salient events and anniversaries have not sparked protests.

I. Government-led Political Opening as a Necessary Factor for Student Protests in China

Mason and Clements (2002), in evaluating the future prospects for student protest in China, write that people will condition their decision to protest by gauging the likelihood of the state to crackdown on the movement. They argue a person will protest only if the state is unlikely to crackdown, or if there are so many people protesting that it is less likely for the actor to be singled out and punished. Although this claim sounds quite logical, it seems student protests in China are not only conditioned by potential government response, but more importantly, *initiated* by government-led political openings. By political opening, I refer to both the

relaxation of the political sphere, for example, by allowing open discussion of topics such as democratic reform, as well as the implementation of progressive policies, such as establishing direct elections. Political openings play a pivotal role in “awakening” Chinese students by directing their attention towards the political privileges they lack, such as voting rights, and by planting a notion in them that something can, and should be done to address these grievances.

Doug McAdam (1982), analyzing the black insurgency in the US, writes that the black movements of the 1950s developed from the context of an increasingly responsive federal government starting from the mid 1930s. He writes the government’s favorable policy towards blacks had “symbolic effects...that were to far outweigh the limited substantive benefits that flowed from it.” McAdam argues that this progressive shift in government policy “was responsible for nothing less than a cognitive revolution within the black population regarding the prospects for change in this country’s racial status quo” (McAdam, 1982, p. 108). And this “cognitive revolution,” in turn, gave rise to the protest movements of the 1950s.

Just as progressive government policies cued blacks to protest for greater rights during the mid 1900s in America, political opening by the Chinese government has cued Chinese students to protest for reform. For example, in the previous chapter, I discussed the protests that broke out in 1980 at the Hunan Teachers College when authorities tried to sabotage the campaigns of pro-democracy candidates. It is important to note that this incident was preceded by Deng’s implementation of the Gengshen Reforms in 1979 that established direct elections for local district congresses. Students’ call for greater voting rights did not emerge on their own. Rather, student protests came forth only after the Party initiated the progressive Gengshen Reforms that directed their attention to the issue of voting, which in turn, grew into an urge for students to protest against the lack of meaningful elections.

Political opening by the government served as a mobilizing factor for the 1986 student protests as well. As detailed in the previous chapter, students at Hefei Chinese University of Science and Technology, known as “Keda,” began to protest when authorities failed to implement direct elections as promised. Soon pro-democracy protests swept across the nation with students shouting for “government by the people.” But months before the initial spark at Hefei, in June of 1986, Rosen (1989, p. 82) writes that “with the blessings of Deng Xiaoping, the necessity of political reform had become a major topic of discussion in both newspapers and campus study groups.” Before the onset of the protests, the press ran many articles written by “Party-affiliated ideologues” that called for democracy (Liu, 1996, p. 172). In fact, *People’s Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the CCP, published several articles that praised the Keda for its “democratic innovations” (Rosen, 1989, p. 82). Even the Communist Youth League released a

paper in early December that proclaimed “democracy means that the people enjoy the free and equal right to vote, and freedom of speech, the press, assembly, association, procession and demonstration” and called for the establishment of democracy to avoid another “catastrophe” like the Cultural Revolution (Gargan, 1986). After numerous gestures of political opening from the top throughout the latter half of 1986, students in Hefei, and eventually students throughout the rest of China, rose to protest for democracy. Rosen (1989, p.82) writes that “it was not unnatural” for students to link “dissatisfaction with campus constraints to larger officially sponsored political reform discussions.” The period of open dialogue on free speech and democracy directed students’ attention towards these issues and prompted students to protest for greater rights. Such protests may have never occurred if the government had not highlighted the fact that reform was needed and was encouraged. Government opening of the political sphere clearly played a large role in catalyzing student protests in 1986.

Finally, as for 1989, Liu (1996, p. 174) writes the movement “differed from all previous movements...in that it was provoked by the perceived *closing*, and not the opening, of opportunity...” Although 1989 may serve as a very important exception, the other major student protests of the 1980s ensued only after students perceived a political relaxation initiated from the top. Furthermore, one could argue that 1989 is ultimately a product of government openings and unanswered student demands throughout the 1980s. In summary, students seem to be awakened and inspired to protest by progressive gestures from the top, as opposed to rising up independent of the government’s influence.

The Lack of Government-led Political Opening as an Explanation for the Absence of Protests Since 1989

Considering the importance of government-led political openings in prompting student movements, it seems likely that limited political relaxation since 1989 is the greatest precluding factor of student protests. For example, critics allege that under Hu Jintao’s leadership, the Party has increasingly tightened controls on the media. The Chinese government has developed elaborate controls and registration systems on internet users to crackdown on politically sensitive web dissent (French, China Tightens Restrictions on Bloggers and Web Owners, 2005). Many universities’ online bulletin boards (BBS) that often serve as forums for political debate have been closed to the public and restricted to on-campus users (French, 2008). Topics such as Falun Gong and the Tiananmen Square Incident are highly censored online and can only appear in “guerrilla form” to be deleted quickly by government monitors (Yang, forthcoming, p. 233).

Limited political relaxation is also evident in the fact that the Chinese government continues to repress famous dissidents. For example, most recently,

the government has imprisoned prominent dissidents like Hu Jia, a human rights activist, in attempts to silence “potential troublemakers” before the start of the Olympics (Yardley, 2008). Also the Party has not tolerated any voice that speaks out against unified rule. For example, the Chinese government is currently suppressing protests for Tibetan independence. Considering the Party’s intolerance of political discussion or contention that threatens its monopoly of power, it is not surprising Chinese students have not received cues to air their political grievances.

When I argue that the lack of political opening explains the lack of student protests, I do not mean that no political relaxation has occurred whatsoever since 1989. One must note that China has not reverted back to its Maoist days of strict political control since 1989. Rather, much of the opening that has ensued has been carefully controlled by the CCP to ensure that one-party rule is not threatened. As Pei (2000) writes, “despite the absence of dramatic political liberalization” since the Deng era, the Chinese government in recent years has allowed a “high degree of personal and economic freedom in exchange for a tacit acceptance of its rule” (Pei, 2000, pp. 75-76). For example, all of the students interviewed for this project indicated they felt free to discuss any topic amongst friends, and most stated that as long as they kept their views moderate in public they would not face any trouble. These days, average citizens do not live in fear political persecution, and the government only pursues high-profile dissidents who directly challenge its rule (Pei, 2000, p. 76).

Relative relaxation is also reflected in the fact that over 87,000 protests have occurred per year in recent years in China, and internet contention is also on the rise (O'Brien & Stern, forthcoming, p. 21). However, it is very important to note that many of these protests, whether actual or online, often deal with issues that do not directly threaten the Party’s monopoly of power. For example, prevalent protest themes include environmentalism, “nationalism, the rights of vulnerable individuals, and social injustices committed by the rich and the powerful,” which “partly overlap with state agenda” (Yang, forthcoming, pp. 232-233). The CCP leadership, for instance, openly discusses rural problems such as illegal land seizures (Yardley, 2006), and at times has allowed rural residents to protest against local governments for days without cracking down (Ford, 2007). Students have also spearheaded several anti-Japanese protests and anti-US protests. However, these government-led discussions, as well as grassroots protests often steer clear of calling for radical political change. Rather, the focus has been directed towards nationalism, and rooting out corrupt individuals, as opposed to the subject of Party rule.

Some may point to the rise of village elections as evidence of significant political opening and development towards democracy. However this phenomenon is less applicable to students, considering most schools are located in urban areas.

Also, as mentioned in the previous chapter, students remain relatively confused about local urban elections. Although the Organic Law of the Urban Resident Committees grants city dwellers the right to elect committee members, the law remains unenforced in many areas, and the elections that do take place are not very meaningful and incomparable to the vigorous elections that followed the Gengshen Reforms in the 1980s.

Finally, the Party has certainly discussed “democracy” since 1989, but in a very limited and controlled manner. For example, Hu Jintao mentioned the word “democracy” more than 60 times during his speech at the 17th Party Congress in 2007 (Xinhua, 2007). However, his speech strictly revolved around the notion of intra-party democracy and stressed the need to uphold the CCP’s monopoly of power (Kahn, 2007).

So generally speaking, although the Chinese political sphere has opened up to a certain extent, many of the progressive measures that have been introduced, and topics publically discussed have not involved the issue of wholesale change of the party government. There is a definite absence of editorials comparable to those run by the state press in 1986 that praised freedom of speech and assembly. The party has not encouraged independent candidates to campaign and discuss political issues like it did in the 1980s. Without such cues, Chinese students since 1989 have not experienced the “cognitive liberation” and awakening that prompted protests in the 1980s.

This lack of cognitive liberation clearly reflected throughout the interviews conducted for this project. When asked whether students should or should not have a role in changing the current political system, several interviewees replied students ideally should. However, these same interviewees expressed that students lacked the power to challenge the government or to change the status quo. One interviewee expressed that students are a “weak group” because they “have no relationships, no capital or other things to they can use to affect politics.” Another said that it is “impossible” for students to change the status quo and that “the government does not believe in us.” Two interviewees commented that students were not interested in participating in politics and blamed the “system” for creating such a generation of students. One of the two explained that the system “trained” students not to think about politics by providing political textbooks do not portray “reality.” She reasoned that students think the “political sphere is equal to the textbook” and so when they thought about politics, they “link it to the boring stuff in class.” The other interviewee remarked that according to Chinese tradition, “we are not a nation that is eager to protest.” Finally, another group of interviewees maintained that students should not have a role in changing the political system. One person reasoned that students are “naïve” and inexperienced so if “we change political things, it’ll bring disaster for our country.” Another interviewee similarly

said that “immature” students “will not contribute anything beneficial,” and that they would “mess up.” One interviewee’s line of reasoning sounded very similar to the official Party line. She indicated that there were too many students in the country, so if everyone expressed their opinions, it would be “difficult to make decisions,” instability would ensue, and development would be hampered. Lastly, one student remarked that the best thing one could do for the country was to “do your own stuff,” as in pursuing one’s “personal economic stability.” As reflected in these quotes, Chinese students today seem to lack either confidence in their ability to affect politics, or the will to bring about change. And not surprisingly, significant anti-regime or pro-democracy protests have not occurred in recent years. However, according to historical precedence, as argued above, if the government exhibits signs of political opening and encourages students to think about and participate in political reform, these students who seem like unlikely crusaders for change may very well rise up to protest like their predecessors.

II. The Role of Progressive Elites in Initiating Student Protests

Progressive elites, often senior Chinese intellectuals, also play a key role in inspiring and supporting student movements, as seen throughout the 1980s (Liu, 1996, p. 172). Arguably the most famous of these leaders was Fang Lizhi, a professor of astrophysics and vice president of Keda, who encouraged students to protest in the 1980s. Fang, along with many faculty members at Keda, regularly traveled to the West. As students learned about Western ideas and systems from these scholars, they came to lament China’s backwardness (Liu, 1996, p. 173). Fang often told students that China could only advance itself if it abandoned its backwards culture and embraced democracy. He also claimed that “the burden of establishing democracy was on the shoulders of the university student generation” (Liu, 1996, p. 173). As Liu (1996, p. 173) quotes Schell, Fang and his ideas were immensely popular among students who would transcribe and circulate his speeches to fellow students in different parts China. One month before protests broke out in 1986, Fang gave lectures at several top universities, “urging students to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors in the twentieth-century Chinese history by speaking out and acting as a progressive force for democracy” (Rosen, 1989, p. 83). He also stressed that democracy could only be “won through struggle” (Rosen, 1989, p. 83). Thousands of students answered Fang’s call by protesting in late 1986 and early 1987.

Although Fang was expelled from the Party in 1987 for “instigating” the student protests of 1986, he continued to speak to and inspire students throughout the late 1980s and played an important role in inspiring what ultimately led to the 1986 Tiananmen Square movement. For example, on May 5 1988, Fang addressed a crowd of 300 students at Beijing University, advocating human rights, and freedom of thought and speech (Gargan, 1988). Then in January of 1989, Fang sent

an open letter to Deng asking for the release of Wei Jingsheng, a pro-democracy dissident and leader of the Democracy Wall Movement of 1979. Following Fang's lead, many intellectuals and even longtime Party members sent petitions to the government calling for greater freedom of speech and less political repression at universities (Chong, 1990, p. 108). Zhao (2000, p. 47) writes that "Fang's continued criticism of the regime helped create the atmosphere for the spring 1989 movement." A survey conducted in 1988 of graduate students in Beijing revealed that 11.6% felt Fang's ideas "should be praised highly," 79% felt they were "worthy of serious study," and no student responded that his ideas "should be disdained" (Rosen, 1991, p. 302). Accordingly, on April 3, 1989, Beijing University students put up a big character poster that "echo[ed] Fang Lizhi's call to make the university into a special zone for promoting democratic politics" (Chong, 1990, p. 108). Soon after, the movement quickly escalated into the infamous Tiananmen Square Massacre.

As shown above, Fang Lizhi played a pivotal role in inspiring students to protest throughout the 1980s. Although I have only introduced one, and arguably the most important leader of students, there have been other leaders who called for democracy throughout the 1980s. For example, Su Shaozhi, the director of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought wrote articles advocating freedom of speech and demonstration during the height of political discussions in 1986. These progressive leaders all played an important role in rousing students to protest in the 1980s, who may have otherwise remained dormant despite harboring political grievances.

Why the Absence of Progressive Elites Since 1989?

Why has no one comparable to Fang Lizhi appeared in recent years to rally students to fight for change? Perhaps one reason is that many prominent elites were purged, jailed, or exiled in the aftermath of 1989. However, considering the fact that political grievances such as the lack of meaningful elections and corruption still exist, why have no new and younger progressive elites emerged to lead students? It seems just as students are motivated by political relaxations from the top to protest, Chinese intellectuals themselves are also cued by government openings to call for reform. And because the Party has carefully controlled post-1989 political openings to stir clear from areas that may lead to a challenge of one-party rule, intellectuals have not come forth to call for radical political change, unlike their counterparts in the 1980s.

The pattern of government-led political opening and elite response is evident in Chinese history even before the 1980s. As Goldman and Wagner (1987, p. 1) write, since the beginning of CCP rule, the Party's policy towards intellectuals has "oscillated between periods of repression and periods of relative relaxation." At

times, the Party will show signs of political relaxation and allow intellectuals to publicly discuss sensitive topics such as democracy and freedom of speech, and then crackdown when debates turn overtly critical of the Party. Time and time again, Chinese intellectuals have responded to government-led political openings with enthusiastic discussion. The earliest example of this pattern is seen in 1956, when Mao, in order to shift political power in his favor, launched the Hundred Flowers Movement calling intellectuals to criticize the regime. After a period of intense political debate, the movement was quickly brought to an end with a purging campaign because the criticism began to threaten Party rule.

The pattern of political opening and intellectual response, as well as the pivotal role of intellectuals in inspiring student movements is perhaps most clear in the years leading up to the 1986 protests. Goldman (1996, p. 36) writes that in 1978, Hu Yaobang, with the approval of Deng, reinstated all of the intellectuals who had been purged throughout Mao's rule. At the same time, the Party relaxed the political sphere and allowed relatively free discussion of ideology and culture. Soon this newly opened public space was flooded with "informal intellectual networks, salons, study groups and non-official journals and think-tanks" (Goldman, 1996, p. 36). In early 1986, liberal Party leaders reinforced the spirit of the Hundred Flowers Movement, which had just passed its 30th anniversary in May, making speeches that called for "further intellectual breakthrough in an atmosphere of intellectual tolerance and harmony" (Kelly, 1987, p. 11). Kelly (1987, p. 12) writes that intellectuals seized this moment of political opening to start discussing issues such as freedom of speech, democracy, and civil rights. It was these public discussions, as well as direct appeals by leader like Fang, that stimulated students to call for reform (Kelly, 1987, p. 14).

As history indicates, intellectuals, like students, are spurred to action by government-initiated political openings. Because political openings have been limited since 1989, generally speaking, intellectuals have not publically called for radical political change, nor has anyone comparable to Fang emerged to lead students in recent years. However, one brief period of political opening did occur after 1989. During a span of several months from 1997 to 1998, Chinese intellectuals and the western media began to speak of a new "Beijing Spring" that had arrived, in reference to the first Beijing Spring, or period of openness after Deng's rise to power that ultimately resulted in the Democracy Wall Movement of 1979. The political "thaw," Wright (2003, p. 908) details, began in March 1997 when the National People's Congress changed the Criminal Law so that "counter-revolution crimes" would be repealed and "replaced by a less political designation of offences regarding 'national security.'" Then in September 1997, the 15th Party Congress actually discussed the issues of rule of law and human rights, and the Chinese government signed the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights soon after. With the

apparent political relaxation, intellectuals, who had remained relatively quiet since 1989, began speaking publicly about political issues such as “promoting individual rights, expanding low-level direct elections, shrinking government, and scaling back the ubiquitous role of the Communist Party” (Mufson, 1998). Some dissidents who had been active during the protests of the 1980s began to reemerge and petitioned to create groups like “China Human Watch” and wrote open letters to the Chinese and US government about China’s dire human rights situation (Wright, 2003, p. 908-909). Then in the summer of 1998, several dissidents came together to form the China Democracy Party (CDP) whose mission as to “establish a constitutional democratic political system” (Wright, 2003, p. 910). However the “new Beijing Spring” did not last very long and turned “wintry” soon, with two leading members of the CDP being jailed in December of 1998 (Miles, 1998). It is unclear in hindsight whether the various groups that rose to prominence during the new Beijing Spring would have directly encouraged students to protest for change. However, this brief period of political relaxation and the flurry of political discussion and activity that followed, further confirms my argument that progressive elites are also awakened and stirred to action by political openings by the government.

I have argued in this section that progressive elites play an important role in initiating student movements because they are often the first to detect signs of political openings, and enthusiastically use these opportunities to unleash their thoughts and push students to think about reform. I have further shown that such progressive elites have not risen to rally students since 1989 because elites themselves are cued by government openings.

III. Salient Events as a Catalyst to Protests

Finally, salient events, such as anniversaries and historic events also seem to play a crucial role in initiating protests in China. These events often give students an initial reason to gather together to protest, and also provide legitimacy and symbolic power to their movements. For example, the mobilizing force of salient events can be seen in the 1986 protest that initially began in Hefei spread to an estimated 20 other cities throughout the nation. Wasserstrom (2005, p. 62) writes that the 1986 movement “gained momentum as the December 9 anniversary neared...” (On December 9, 1935, Chinese students famously protested against Japanese imperialism and the Nationalist government.) Although the 1986 protests had nothing to do with Japan, the anniversary provided symbolic power to the movement, with posters across campuses calling for the “new generation to take to the streets” like their predecessors of 1935 (Wasserstrom, 2005, p. 62).

Also in 1989, two salient events served as catalyzing forces for the student demonstrations. First, former Party Chief Hu Yaobang’s death on April 15 served as an initial opportunity for students to gather in Tiananmen Square. Hu had been

forced to resign in 1987 because Party conservatives alleged he had been too soft on the student protests of late 1986 and early 1987. Thousands of students marched through Beijing, mourning for Hu, and “chanting democratic slogans and singing revolutionary songs” (Cheng, 1990, p. 124). Only a few weeks after Hu’s death, the 70th anniversary of the May 4 movement further galvanized students to take up the role as the “New May Fourth Activists” to “save China from misrule” (Wasserstrom, 2005, p. 62). (On May 4, 1919, Chinese students protested against Japanese imperialism, official corruption, and the Versailles Treaty.) Again an important anniversary and a high profile death served as a spark to student protests.

In summary, both the 1986 and 1989 protests were catalyzed by either a significant anniversary or the death of a leader. These salient events gave students an initial reason to gather, provided symbolic power, and sparked movements that went beyond commemorating the salient event itself. However, it must be noted that these salient events serve as a sort of a “final ingredient” for movements that have already been brewing. Every year a May 4th and a December 9th passes, and various significant events have occurred since 1989. But because students have not been awakened with political openings from the top, nor provided inspiration by progressive elites, anniversaries and salient events have not sparked protests.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I introduced three key factors needed to catalyze students to protest. First and foremost, government-led political opening is necessary in prompting students to protest, as indicated in the 1980s. Second, progressive leaders are crucial in inspiring students to take action. And third, some salient event usually serves as a reason for students to gather together and initiate a movement. Finally I have argued that there have been no student protests since 1989 because the first key condition has not been met. The Chinese government has carefully controlled any limited political opening it has allowed over the past 18 years so that the Party is not directly threatened. Due to this lack of apparent political relaxation, students, as well as the elites that provide them inspiration, have not been stirred to protest. And because students and intellectuals have remained dormant over the years, important anniversaries and events have passed, but have yet to catalyze movements.

Conclusion

Chinese students have historically served as a powerful voice for change. Since the May Fourth Movement during the days of Japanese imperialism, students have acted as the conscience of the nation, checking the government when they felt it compromised the interests of the people. As China grows increasingly wealthier

and politically powerful, and with the recent high approval ratings of the CCP, some may wonder if the days of Chinese student protests are over. Several years back, Nesbitt-Larking and Chan (1997, p. 157) wrote “young people today are growing up in the context of monumental socioeconomic change. The results, in terms of future development, may prove to be even more profound.”

Have students “monumentally” changed since the 1980s? Have they served as the conscience of the nation as their May Fourth predecessors? If not, what has hindered them from protesting since the Tiananmen Square Movement in 1989? This paper has examined several hypotheses as to why the current generation of students has not protested unlike their predecessors. I have shown that contrary to the popular notion that students today are too pragmatic, materialistic, and uninterested in politics to protest, these seemingly “recent” trends were actually widespread among students of the 1980s. Since these characteristics did not hinder students from protesting in the past, they are unlikely hindering factors today. I have also argued that the lack of recent protests by no means indicates student satisfaction with the current political situation. Today’s students harbor similar political grievances as their predecessors, particularly in the areas of official corruption and the lack of meaningful elections. Thus, political satisfaction does not preclude student protests. But at the same time, political grievances are not enough to mobilize students to protest. Third, I have shown that although students may be materially well off today, economic satisfaction does not completely explain the lack of protests since students protested for more than just economic grievances in the 1980s. Rather, they also called for clean government, meaningful elections, and freedom of speech.

In the third chapter, I have identified three key catalyzing factors of student protests—government-led political opening, progressive elites, and salient events. I have argued that political opening by the government is crucial in awakening and planting in students the notion that reform is necessary. Furthermore, political opening also serves as a cue for progressive elites to rise up, promote discussion, and inspire students to take action. Because the Party has strictly limited the political opening that has occurred post-1989, students nor elites have not undergone the “cognitive revolution” needed to spur them into action. And because students and elites have remained relatively dormant, salient events and anniversaries have passed, but have not sparked protests.

What do these findings mean for China’s future? Are the days of student protests over? First of all, students today are not too “apolitical” or “materialistic” to carry on the May Fourth spirit of their protesters. The current generation of students is not “beyond hope” as factors external to students themselves play an important role in motivating protests. Given the presence of the three key factors mentioned above, especially government-led political opening, this generation of students, as well as future generations may very well rise up to protest again.

But is political relaxation likely to occur anytime soon? Judging by the general demeanor of the Chinese government since the “new Beijing Spring” in

1997-1998, the immediate prospects for significant political opening seem dim. For example, despite the fact that all eyes are on China as it prepares to open its door to the world for the Olympics in August, the Chinese government has stood firm in defending one-party rule, cracking down on the recent Tibetan uprisings and imprisoning several outspoken dissidents.

Also as in discussed in the previous chapter, the Chinese government has shifted the attention of its populace to issues, such as nationalism, that promote, or at least do not directly threaten, its monopoly of power. For example, many students interviewed for this project seemed to echo the Party line, saying Westerners should not impose their ideas on China, China would find its “own way” of governance, Tibetan independence should not be tolerated, and Falun Gong should not be given freedom of speech. The most recent protests involving students have actually occurred outside of China, with Chinese study abroad students protesting against the recent anti-China sentiment in countries like the US and South Korea.²⁵ Such nationalistic sentiment and staunch support for the Party seems to show that the government has done a good job of shifting the attention the students to matters that do not threaten its rule.

But at the same time, a government-led political opening in the near future is not entirely impossible. Since the founding of the PRC, the political sphere has unfailingly gone through cycles of opening and closing. And one reporter for the International Herald Tribune seems to be convinced that the time has come for the next opening as the Olympics, as well as the 30th anniversary of the implementation of the Opening and Reform Policy approach. Buckley (2008) writes that officials and intellectuals, especially in Guangdong, have recently started calling for democratic change, and that the media and even official meetings have been filled with “demands for loosening the Communist Party’s grip.” Buckley quotes Du Guang, a researcher at the Central Party School who remarks that “the discussion is certainly becoming livelier,” but is uncertain whether it will be “followed by substantial action.” Buckley also quotes Liu Suli, a bookstore owner in Beijing, who recently hosted a forum on freedom of the press with students and journalists, who says “these voices (for political change) have never entirely stopped, but since early this year they have grown markedly stronger. They’ve been waiting for an opening.” It remains to be seen if the Party will indeed allow for another Beijing Spring. But in the case that it does, students may very well begin airing their grievances and taking up once again their role as the conscience for the nation. And this time around, the Party may face an even greater threat from students who are now armed with the technological savvy for instant communication with one another and the outside world.

²⁵ For example, see (Dewan, 2008) and (Choe, 2008).

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