

Changing memory of the Tiananmen Incident in Taiwan: From patriotism to universal values (1989–2019)

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Abstract

This article examines the three-decade evolution of remembering the Tiananmen Incident in Taiwan by looking at annual commemorative activities. There is a decisive shift from a patriotic understanding to a cosmopolitan perspective grounded in universal values. The earlier memory was based on an ethnic nationalism that stressed consanguinity among Taiwanese and mainland Chinese and a narrative of the Chinese Republican Revolution. However, such framing lost its persuasiveness and the memory of Tiananmen faded as Taiwanese, particularly the younger generation, embraced an indigenous identity. China's rapid economic growth and its ascendancy as a new world power neutralized the potency of the earlier memory because it demonstrated the possibility of nationalistic aspirations without democracy. Since 2011, commemorative rallies have revived and proceeded with a newer understanding of the Tiananmen Incident in terms of human rights, civil society, and youth activism. This article argues that this 'mnemonic change' reflects Taiwan's democratization and the indigenization of Taiwanese society, enabling young organizers to articulate their own Tiananmen memory by referencing global civil-society activism. Mnemonic change in Taiwan is examined with a comparative reference to the parallel development in Hong Kong.

Keywords

Tiananmen Incident, Taiwan, Chinese nationalism, universal values, commemoration

The crackdown on the Beijing student pro-democracy movement was a critical watershed; Chinese intellectuals who were vocally pro-West and critical of the regime in the 1980s turned inward and became stridently nationalistic.¹ The Chinese government made

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efforts to eradicate the memories of the massacre, both by silencing dissidents and proactively fostering pro-regime chauvinistic sentiments.² There were some conscientious voices, both inside and outside China, which persisted in calling on the communist regime to confront its ugly past. But they remained largely powerless in effecting meaningful responses.³

Hong Kong remains the only city within the People's Republic of China (PRC) that continues to commemorate the Tiananmen Incident.⁴ Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement was traditionally motivated by a strong Chinese identity, and it positioned itself as an integral part of a nationwide campaign. The city's decolonization was subsumed under a broader project of democratizing China. While the Tiananmen Incident shattered any rosy expectations of a peaceful evolution in the mainland, the annual commemorative rituals of 4 June since 1990 have popularized a particular 'liberal patriotism' that combined Chinese nationalism and Western liberalism.⁵

This article looks at transmutations of the memory of Tiananmen in Taiwan through an examination of annual commemorative activities. There is a shift from a patriotic understanding to a more cosmopolitan perspective grounded in universal values. The Tiananmen Incident was seen in Taiwan as a tragic defeat of democratic aspirations. This perspective, anchored in a narrative of Chinese nationalism crafted by the Kuomintang, emphasized the inseparable bonds of the 'Chinese nation' (中華民族). Inspired by contemporary social movements in Taiwan and abroad, later organizers instead evoked the themes of human rights, youth activism, and civil society.

The mnemonic shift in Taiwan reflected profound changes on many fronts in the island. Democratization brought about indigenization in which Chinese identity has become increasingly marginal. Pro-unification preferences have grown weaker and their justification has shifted from an idealistic insistence on democratic nationhood towards a materialistic calculation of economic benefits. Tiananmen was viewed through the domestic lens of transitional justice in that the incident belonged to the same category of human rights violations that included the 28 February Incident and the White Terror. The perceived 'China factor' and its pernicious effects on Taiwan's democracy have helped to consolidate a Taiwan-centred understanding.

I will examine Taiwan's development while keeping Hong Kong as a constant reference for heuristic purposes. Hongkongers' activities turned out to be entirely bottom-up, defiant against the local regimes both before and after the 1997 transition, more persistent and unified in their leadership, and more institutionalized and ritualized (the famed candlelight vigil at Victoria Park). By comparison, Taiwan's events were smaller in scale, decentralized, isolated, and marked by a prolonged caesura.

Annual events constitute a vehicle of commemoration, alongside writing, music composition, monuments, and shrines.⁶ Because of their periodic recurrence, annual events provide a privileged site to understand how a remembered past event gradually takes on different meanings – a key question for collective memory studies concerned with 'the creation, transformation, and maintenance of memory over time'.⁷

Theory and research data

Maurice Halbwachs defines collective memory as a 'reconstructed image of the past which is in accordance, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society'.⁸

Shared memories fulfil a critical function because a community is bound together not only by the same values, laws, and institutions, but also because its members embrace similar remembrances of their past. Although Halbwachs was deemed to be the founder of memory studies, who astutely recognized the discrepancy between the remembered past and the 'actual' past, he appeared more interested in the correspondences between the mental images and morphological aspects of a society, paying insufficient attention to the process of reconstructing past experiences.⁹ What was missing in classical texts was 'a politics of interpretation',¹⁰ or the selective process of how past experiences were filtered, singled out for remembrance, or slated for oblivion.¹¹ Given the decline of Durkheimian functionalism, more recent scholarly focus consists in how memories are made, rather than what their social functions are.

We share certain memories not simply because events have happened in the past, but because we continue to commemorate those events or persons. Students of memory are interested in 'the mnemonic practices' that transmit, preserve, and even alter our understanding of the past over time, rather than in the historical precedents themselves.¹² What happened before continues to influence current actors even though they are not personally involved. For instance, the Holocaust atrocities emerged as a powerful cultural taboo that constrained German political leaders for many decades in the post-war era,¹³ which highlights the potency of mnemonic practices that are capable of shaping the future trajectory by dint of evoking a certain memory of the past. However, this insight does not endorse an Orwellian distortion or fabrication of history for the present purposes. True, we do not inherit a monolithic legacy that dictates our choices, and this does not mean that the past is entirely malleable at will. Between these two extremes, researchers are interested in the 'ongoing dialogue in which earlier images shape and constrain what can be done with them'.¹⁴

An event or a person is remembered not only because of its memorable characteristics, but also due to the fact that participants possess the 'mnemonic capacity' to create an acceptable narrative. For instance, contrary to popular belief that the Stonewall Riot of 1969 sparked off the American gay liberation movement, police harassment and the ensuing violent reactions from sexual minorities were then already quite prevalent. But what made the Stonewall Incident distinct was the rare combination of 'commemorability' (a courageous resistance in a neighbourhood with a high concentration of journalists) and mnemonic capacity (radicalized local activists intent on spreading the news).¹⁵ Once such commemorative effort was successful, the incident acquired a mythical quality to inspire LGBT activism elsewhere in the world. Social movements make memories, and with effective commemoration, memories stimulate more movement participation in the years that follow.

For this analysis, I borrow theoretical concepts from the field of social movement studies. Social movements enjoy an intimate relationship with collective memory in that movements often emerge when the memory of a previous injustice is activated and a successful movement tends to result in a novel way of remembering the past.¹⁶ *Frame*, defined as 'an interpretative schemata' to make sense of the world out there,¹⁷ is a fundamental component of social movements as they seek to proffer a newer understanding. Social movements are conveyors of new messages because their framings, such as civil rights and environmental justice, are no less than attempts to promote a new look at the

social realities. A commemorative event can be seen to be anchored in a dominant frame that organizes speeches, singing, and other performances coherently. Social movement scholars employ the term *repertoire* to refer to the range of possible actions available to protesters at a specific time.¹⁸ With its origins in the theatre, the concept of repertoire suggests that protests are interactive and that scripted actions are designed to elicit certain anticipated results. In commemorative events, which tend to be spatially and temporarily concentrated, the range of the repertoire is typically more narrowed, and often focused on the choice of slogans, speakers, songs, and other programme items. Our understanding of the world and ourselves is often expressed in storytelling, rather than a choice among fixed categories.¹⁹ *Narratives*, in other words, are a repository of meanings and value judgments expressed in how we tell and retell past experiences. When it comes to the significance of a major historical event, its meaning is often made easier to understand through storytelling. Frame, repertoire, and narrative have long been established as the basic vocabulary in social movement studies, and they are analytically useful in operationalizing the already mentioned mnemonic capacity. Such memory-forming ability is successful to the extent that it offers a widely accepted understanding of bygones. And these concepts help us understand why a certain version of a historical account gains currency while others fail.

The research data are primarily based on newspaper reports from the *Central Daily* (中央日報, 1989–2004), *United Daily News* (聯合報, 1989–2019), *China Times* (中國時報, 1989–2019), *Liberty Times* (自由時報, 1989–2019), and *Apple Daily* (蘋果日報, 2003–19). Since there is not a single digital database that includes the full-text coverage of these newspapers, the journalistic data are compiled from different sources, both digital and non-digital. For the more recent commemorative activities, their announcements, programmes, and news releases can be accessed from a number of websites including Facebook event pages. From 2016 to 2019, I also conducted in-depth interviews with seven participants involved in the annual commemorative events in Taiwan.

The Tiananmen Incident in Taiwan's political evolution

When Beijing students took to the street in the spring of 1989, Taiwan's transition from one-party authoritarian rule was already under way. Restrictions on opposition parties, demonstrations, and press freedom were partially removed with the end of 38 years of martial law in 1987. The late 1980s witnessed the surge of street protests by a plethora of civil-society actors including students, workers, farmers, and women as well as opposition politicians who agitated for broader and speedier political reforms. At that time, advocacy for the independent sovereignty of Taiwan was still persecuted as a crime of high treason, and the opposition movement largely refrained from openly raising such provocative demands, but instead promoted the idea of self-determination. That Taiwan and mainland China belonged to an indivisible nation remained the official narrative, even though many dissident voices have long been circulating.

As the confrontation between Beijing students and the government grew intense in late May 1989, there emerged a number of activities to demonstrate support. On the evening of 3 June, a mass rally called 'Connection of Blood Veins and Singing Across the Strait' (血脈相連兩岸對歌) was held in the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall. The

highlight was a telephone call connecting music performers in Taipei and Beijing. Around midnight, the news that People's Liberation Army soldiers had opened fire on demonstrators was instantly broadcast over the telephone, and the communication was abruptly terminated. The event quickly turned into a mass mourning, lasting until the next morning.²⁰

Before the suppression, Kuomintang politicians were active in sponsoring these solidarity campaigns, and students in high schools and colleges were 'encouraged' to take part. Afterwards, the ruling party decided to host a series of large-scale rallies. The sponsored events were in many ways modelled after the patriotic assemblies of the martial-law era. Participants sang patriotic songs, such as 'Ode to the Republic of China' (中華民國頌) and 'Nation' (國家), and they waved national flags to show their loyalty. The organizers reinforced a message of national unity, as indicated in the theme of the 10 June rally, 'Blood Vein to One Heart and Rising Up with Tears to Save China' (血脈一條心含淚奮起救中國). While the Beijing student movement raised political demands concerning press freedom, official corruption, and the treatment of intellectuals, Taiwan's organizers highlighted nationalistic aspirations and deliberately ignored the fact that Beijing student participants emphasized their 'patriotism' by professing allegiance to the communist leadership.

The Kuomintang played an active role in staging these events: its Youth Work Committee coordinated student rallies, and affiliated organizations, such as the China Youth Corps (中國青年救國團), were among the event co-sponsors. Because the 4 June Incident took place during the Kuomintang's party convention, more than 100 delegates took part in these events. Among senior party leaders, one could hardly miss the sense of belated vindication in their ideological beliefs. The Kuomintang's official message to mainland compatriots stated that the brutalities in Tiananmen Square were the beginning of a joint 'struggle for a free, democratic, and equally prosperous new China' on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.²¹ The Chinese pro-democracy movement was seen as evidence of popular support for the Kuomintang's professed goals. The then premier Lee Huan reverted to the previous bellicose discourse of 'recovery of the mainland' by promising to aid the uprisings if a civil war were to break out.²²

The Kuomintang's responses served to buttress its legitimacy which was under challenge domestically. With the political turmoil, Taiwan's ruling party contended that mainland compatriots were no longer supportive of the communist regime. The international condemnation of Beijing appeared to lend credibility to the Kuomintang's outdated claim as the sole legitimate government of China. The widespread sympathy for Tiananmen victims seemingly pointed to the psychological bonds between Taiwanese and mainland compatriots – a strong rebuttal to the independence-leaning opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

The outburst of patriotic fervour forced the political opposition into a defensive position. DPP politicians reminded the government to take the lesson of Tiananmen seriously by expediting domestic reforms; otherwise they would not have legitimate grounds to support the Chinese democratic movement. At that time, the DPP did not adopt the Taiwan independence clause in its party charter, meaning that the opposition party had not formally renounced ties with mainland Chinese. The DPP found it difficult to articulate a clear stand immediately after the Tiananmen Incident. The embarrassing question

was about the moral grounds to mourn for the defeat of Beijing pro-democracy movement if the party no longer regarded themselves as Chinese. While the DPP moderates struggled to find a justification, its radical wing contended that the repression strengthened the cause for political independence.

Student movement activists found themselves in an awkward situation amid the outpouring of nationalistic sentiments. Student dissidents boycotted the signature campaign launched by party-state cells in schools, and held parallel activities that insisted on treating the student movements in Korea and Burma equally.²³ Student activists held their independent 'democracy wall' activities on campus.²⁴ A student dissident maintained that the seemingly spontaneous enthusiasm for Kuomintang-organized activities was a result of long-term educational indoctrination. The student ended by proclaiming that remembering the Tiananmen Incident meant remembering in the same light as 'we shall not forget Budapest of 1956, Prague of 1968, and in particular, Taiwan of 28 February 1947'.²⁵ There was an incipient, albeit then marginalized, attempt to frame the Tiananmen Incident from a native perspective.

Dissident intellectuals were no less critical of the ruling party's handling of the Chinese democratic movement. They maintained that solidarity with Beijing students could be equally justified without the assuming that Taiwanese and mainland Chinese belong to one nation.²⁶ A short documentary entitled *How History Became a Wound* (歷史如何成為傷口) was quickly produced. The film was a scathing exposé that juxtaposed the claim of China Central Television – that the student protesters on Tiananmen Square were ruffians – with Taiwanese official television's negative report on local social protests. The title was deliberately chosen as a riposte to the song 'Wound of History' (歷史的傷口), a collaboration among pro-government musicians at that time.

Despite these efforts, the alternative understanding of the Tiananmen Incident remained a minority voice, and the Kuomintang successfully popularized the patriotic frame. The Tiananmen tragedy as an unfulfilled dream of Chinese nationalism emerged as the dominant narrative. Taiwan's solidarity and mourning events in 1989 could hardly be characterized as 'a social movement' due to the heavy presence of the government and the ruling party. They appeared more like top-down sponsored activities that succeeded in drawing citizen participation, the nature of which was both spontaneous and mobilized.

The Tiananmen Incident left an unanticipated consequence in Taiwan. In March 1990, students launched a protest movement by assembling in the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall. With up to 6000 student participants, the Wild Lily Movement lasted a week and peacefully concluded when it extracted the government's promise to expedite political reforms including the full election of the legislature. Although the Wild Lily Movement was mostly spurred by domestic issues (the ruling party's infighting), it proceeded in the shadow of the Tiananmen Incident. Students were emboldened to take unconventional action because they knew that the government could not afford the cost of applying the Tiananmen solution which it vehemently condemned. Student leaders managed to avoid a prolonged and out-of-control stand-off by orchestrating an orderly and timely retreat as well as a proclamation of success.²⁷ The episode represented the culmination of student activism since the mid-1980s. Similar to what happened in

Beijing, Taiwan's students took to the stage in one moral and idealistic voice representing the whole nation and they confronted political leaders and their wrongdoings.²⁸ Since the Wild Lily Movement was generally thought as successful, it became an inspiring lesson for subsequent student protests, including the Wild Strawberry Movement and the Sunflower Movement (see further).

Annual commemorative events and their sponsors

Table 1 presents Taiwan's commemorative events from 1990 to 2019. It excludes minor episodes including television and radio programmes, book events, press conferences, and announcements.

Taiwanese attention ebbed quickly afterwards, as seen in the abrupt drop in the number of annual events after the second anniversary of 4 June in 1991. In the first decade (1990–9), there were 2.3 annual events on average, and the figure fell to 1.3 in the second decade (2000–9). Every 10th anniversary was seen as a milestone, encouraging more intensive effort in commemorating, which is evidenced in the spikes in 1999, 2009, and 2019. Outdoor activities typically addressed a larger audience and solicited their participation in the form of mourning in silence, singing together, or donations. Outdoor events underwent a precipitous decline after 1990 and only regained their momentum in 2009. The outdoor events in 1996, 1999, 2003, and 2005 were small-scale signature-collecting events and the like. There was not a single outdoor mass rally to mark the Tiananmen Incident between 1990 and 2009.

On the first anniversary in 1990, organizers faced some difficulties in staging a mass rally. Pop singers who showed patriotic fervour by co-producing 'Wound of History' became reluctant to participate for fear of displeasing Beijing. In the mass rally on 3 June 1990, the contrast between emotional and tearful speakers and the lukewarm response from the audience was particularly noticeable, and there was a complaint about the lack of solemnity.²⁹

The Blood Vein Connection Organization for Mainland Democratic Movement (血脈相連大陸民主運動後援會, hereafter Blood Vein Connection), an organization that sponsored 15 commemorative events from 1991 to 2009, was the main force in continuing this ritual. As its name suggests, it embraced a pronounced nationalistic orientation that emphasized racial unity between Taiwan and the mainland. The Blood Vein Connection activists were not resourceful and needed contributions from established government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), such as Grand Alliance for China's Reunification under the Three Principles of the People (三民主義統一中國大同盟). Since the government reduced subsidies for these organizations of the anti-communist era which had become obsolete, there was less money to finance the commemoration. The change reflected the ascendancy of the reformist coalition led by President Lee Teng-hui in the 1990s. Lee's seasoned remarks stood in striking contrast to his mainlander peers who jumped into bellicose anti-communist rhetoric. While condemning the massacre in Beijing, Lee maintained, 'We should expedite the democratization of politics and maintain economic prosperity. Only if we establish our firm footing in Taiwan, can we advance [進取] to the mainland.'³⁰ Lee was able to consolidate his leadership in the

Table 1. Commemorative events in Taiwan (1990–2019).

Year	Outdoor activities	Indoor activities	Total
1990	3	1	4
1991	0	4	4
1992	0	1	1
1993	0	0	0
1994	0	2	2
1995	0	3	3
1996	1	1	2
1997	0	1	1
1998	0	1	1
1999	1	4	5
2000	0	1	1
2001	0	1	1
2002	0	1	1
2003	1	1	2
2004	0	2	2
2005	1	1	2
2006	0	2	2
2007	0	0	0
2008	0	0	0
2009	2	1	3
2010	1	0	1
2011	2	1	3
2012	1	0	1
2013	1	1	2
2014	1	0	1
2015	1	0	1
2016	1	0	1
2017	1	0	1
2018	1	0	1
2019	1	4	5

Sources: *Central Daily* (中央日報, 1989–2004), *United Daily News* (聯合報, 1989–2019), *China Times* (中國時報, 1989–2019), *Liberty Times* (自由時報, 1989–2019), and *Apple Daily* (蘋果日報, 2003–19).

ruling party, partly due to the 1990 Wild Lily Movement; and once secured in power, he proceeded to implement his Taiwan-centred vision, which meant less governmental resources for the Tiananmen commemoration.

Ma Ying-jeou, who rose to political stardom in the Taipei City Mayor election in 1998, played an important interim role. Ma has been one of the few politicians who continuously talked about the Tiananmen Incident, something which bestowed an idealistic aura upon him. Ma's city government and his political foundation collaborated in five events from 2000 to 2005.

The 20th anniversary in 2009 marked a transition because it was the last year of participation by Blood Vein Connection, and it saw the emergence of a new generation of activists. In November 2008, a student campaign called the Wild Strawberry Movement emerged to protest human rights violations when the newly installed Ma Ying-jeou government rolled out the red carpet for a Chinese envoy. Student activists came onto the scene after a prolonged silence since the 1990 Wild Lily Movement, and they voiced their concern over the threat of a growing powerful China over Taiwan's democracy.³¹ On 4 June 2009, a group of Wild Strawberry activists held a candlelight vigil in a Taipei night market, and they also organized lectures and a film screening on campus about human rights issues in China.³²

There were other reasons for the revival. Wang Dan, one of the iconic leaders of the Beijing student movement, moved to Taiwan in 2009, and in his 10-year sojourn he attracted students who were interested in contemporary China through his lectures, speeches, and publications. Some of Wang Dan's students became active organizers of commemorative events. In addition, as the 20th anniversary approached, Hong Kong activists launched a campaign to encourage the participation of young people, and a wave of support spread to Hong Kong students in Taiwan. There were some Hong Kong students who collaborated with Taiwanese university student unions to hold a Hong Kong-style candlelight vigil on campus.

In 2011, young participants formed the Taiwanese Student Working Group for Democratization in China (台灣學生促進中國民主化工作會, hereafter Student Working Group) and held a rally in Liberty Square (formerly known as the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall Square), resuming the commemoration of the annual Tiananmen mass rally. Initially, there were internal disagreements as to how the events would proceed. Debates over whether to use the term Chinese nation in the announcement, whether to recognize the role of overseas Chinese by using the term 'four places on two sides' (兩岸四地) (meaning Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, and the mainland), and whether to sing the song 'Wound of History' were particularly intense, reflecting ideological conflicts among these young activists. Gradually, the organizers opted to highlight human rights and universal values as the justification for holding annual rituals

Subsequent events witnessed a different line-up of co-sponsoring organizations. Gone were the Cold War-era GONGOs, and newer collaborators were mostly advocacy groups, such as the New School for Democracy, Taiwan Association for Human Rights, and so on. Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Falun Gong members were frequently present at the scene, and their leaders took to the stage, alongside advocates for Taiwan independence. Annual commemorative rallies not only moved away from the mooring of Kuomintang-style nationalism, but also challenged the PRC's 'assertive nationalism', identified by Allen Whiting as merely foreign policy rhetoric in the early 1980s³³ but which has blossomed into a palpable threat to neighbouring democracies.

The patriotic frame

The first anniversary commemorative event of 1990 best exemplified the patriotic frame in many ways. The rally 'Blood and Tears of the Begonia and Wound of June Fourth' (海棠血淚六四傷口)³⁴ was hosted by carefully chosen co-sponsors, including 31

GONGOs, 21 corporatist organizations, three Kuomintang-affiliated organizations or companies, two military-related media outlets, two local legislative bodies, 12 professional organizations, five private schools, and six other organizations.³⁵ The hosts took the effort to present an inclusive and bottom-up front. However, the dominance of semi-official and Kuomintang-affiliated organizations visibly indicated the presence of the government's hand. Two GONGOs, the World League for Freedom and Democracy and the Grand Alliance for China's Reunification under the Three Principles of the People, were responsible for nearly 40 per cent of the budget.³⁶

Central to the Kuomintang's understanding was the founding story of the Republican Revolution of 1911. In the announcement of its Central Committee on 4 June 1989, the Tiananmen participants were said to embody the spirit of 'Yellow Flower Mound' martyrs (a failed uprising in Canton in 1911) more than 70 years ago. Hau Pei-tsun, then a powerful military leader, called the suppression of the Tiananmen Movement the 'second Yellow Flower Mound uprising', also implying a coming collapse of the communist regime; whereas the then Kuomintang secretary-general James Soong used the historical analogy of the Republican Revolution to explain why a Beijing-based revolt was not enough to topple the government.³⁷

The Tiananmen Incident was seen as the unfinished mission of the Republican Revolution, with 'Chinese nation', 'consanguinity', and 'anticommunism' as the keywords. The frequent use of patriotic songs on these occasions was significant because their lyrics celebrated the nation's past glory and promoted nationalistic allegiance, without mentioning democracy. Taiwan's patriotic frame clearly differed from Hongkongers' liberal patriotism. Due to their colonial legacy, liberal values, such as civil liberties and human rights, were embedded in Hongkongers' understanding of the Tiananmen Incident.³⁸ The patriotic frame in Taiwan evinced a weaker liberal ethos, and it was emphatically more traditional, even statist. Implicit was a complacent assumption that contemporary Taiwanese society was already a paragon of Chinese democracy, or probably the goal that Beijing student activists strived for.

The patriotic frame is of little relevance to Taiwan. The organizers took it for granted that the tragic fate of Beijing citizens and students was equally and keenly felt by Taiwanese. With the dissipation of grieving for the befallen, the patriotic frame lost its emotional appeal. The failure to articulate Taiwan's role in the narrative of the Tiananmen Incident was self-defeating in the long run. As Taiwan became increasingly democratized amid the rise of an indigenous identity, it seemed surreal to contend that people in Taiwan equally suffered from the same 'wound of history'.

The problematic lack of local connection was absent in Hong Kong. The city's pro-democracy movement was constantly facing a formidable pressure from the Chinese government, which put them in the same vulnerable situation as the Beijing student activists. Hongkongers took care to insert local demands and agenda into their vigils³⁹ to the extent that the annual mourning to commemorate the victims of the Tiananmen Incident has become a unified campaign both for Hongkongers and for mainland Chinese. Taiwan's patriotic frame became irrelevant because its original ideas did not keep up with ongoing developments in the host society. To put it bluntly, few Taiwan Tiananmen advocates seriously thought about Taiwan's democratization in the early 1990s.

Ma Ying-jeou's revisionism

Ma Ying-jeou played an important role in innovating discourse, putting Taiwan back into the 'mnemonic landscape'. In 1999, after being elected as Taipei City Mayor, he cited the official rehabilitation of the 28 February Incident and the White Terror as positive examples for the PRC government. Ma credited these achievements to Taiwan's democratization which persuaded political leaders to see things from the people's perspective.

Ma Ying-jeou had the mindset of a Chinese nationalist, and his earlier statements regarding the Tiananmen Incident fell within the patriotic frame. While maintaining a nationalistic outlook, his revisionist remarks began to put more emphasis on upgrading democratic values, implying that Taiwan's pro-democratic movement had potential lessons for the mainland, and by extension, those who supported Taiwan's democracy should also pay attention to the prospect of democracy in China. Ma proposed human rights as a universal value in the campaign to rehabilitate the Tiananmen Incident.⁴⁰ The commemorative events held by Ma's personal foundation included topics that were directly related and relevant to Taiwan.⁴¹ The climax of Ma's efforts to reformulate the contemporary meaning of Tiananmen was his strongly worded assertion that 'if there is no political rehabilitation of June Fourth, there will be no discussion of unification' (六四不平反統一不能談). He repeated this mantra when campaigning for the 2008 presidential election. Lip service or not, the expression actually upended the patriotic frame by placing democratic values over national unity.

In his presidential tenure (2008–16), Ma continued to mention the Tiananmen Incident every year, but his tone became more conciliatory. He systematically declined to meet Tiananmen exiles, signalling his intention not to antagonize Beijing.⁴² For his defenders, such a change was a necessary and pragmatic adjustment to promote cross-strait rapprochement; for detractors, he had forfeited the halo of a Tiananmen advocate.

During Ma's presidency, escalating social protests emerged to resist encroaching influences from China. The trend started with the Wild Strawberry Movement of 2008 and culminated in the Sunflower Movement of 2014, the latter of which opposed a free-trade agreement with China. The Sunflower Movement had profound political reverberations that paved the way for the DPP's capture of the presidency and legislative majority in 2016. The Kuomintang was voted out of office because it was perceived as being willing to put aside democratic procedures for the cross-strait agenda, which also revealed the limit of Ma's revisionism. To modernize the patriotic frame, Ma refurbished it with a dose of democratic values and human rights by foregrounding Taiwan's political transition, without fully reconciling the inherent tension between Chinese nationalism and Taiwanese democracy, and his presidency actually exacerbated the conflict between these two tendencies.

Ma's commitment to the Tiananmen Incident was met by weak response within his own party. When in opposition, Kuomintang politicians and their business allies touted China's economic progress under the communist leadership in an effort to discredit Chen Shui-bian's government. The more the Kuomintang politicians extolled China's bright prospects and belittled Taiwan's situation under the DPP government, the more it gave the impression that they preferred prosperity under dictatorship to 'economic stalemate' in democracy. As Kuomintang politicians ventured into business in China, they had to

toe Beijing's line, one consequence of which was to treat the Tiananmen Incident as a taboo. Ma's Tiananmen advocacy not only became diluted over the years, but also failed to elicit a rejoinder among his own ranks.

Ma's intervention has updated Taiwan's perspective on the Tiananmen Incident, transitioning to something akin to Hong Kong's liberal patriotism because of more emphasis on democratic values and a closer local link. Both frames assumed the possibility of reconciling a Chinese national identity and Western liberalism, which became more and more questionable with the growing entrenchment of autocratic rule in Beijing and its anti-democratic encroachment in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Starting in 2013, critics over the 4 June vigils in Hong Kong emerged, and they denounced its ritualism as well as its futile patriotic preoccupation.⁴³ These 'localist' challengers maintained that Hongkongers do not bear a moral responsibility toward the mainland and, at the same time, they rejected the Chinese identity.

The universal values frame

With the emergence of the Student Working Group in 2011, the commemoration in Taiwan witnessed a decisive break with the previous patriotic frame; the Tiananmen Incident was seen as an episode of egregious human rights violations, and Taiwanese were no longer assumed to have experienced the same trauma because of a shared nationhood. The organizers acknowledged the co-existence of different national identities and political preferences in Taiwan, but contended that concerns for the Tiananmen Incident should transcend these divides. A 2011 news release encouraged the youth to 'set aside ideologies', because 'if you do not care about politics, politics will take care of you'.⁴⁴ The 2012 announcement asserted that Taiwanese shared the same values of liberty, democracy, and human rights regardless of their stance on unification or independence.⁴⁵ The universal values frame stressed the centrality of their own experiences. The 2014 announcement called attention to the pernicious impacts of the 'China model' and how Beijing attempted to export its undemocratic influences overseas. Keeping the memory of Tiananmen alive is instrumental in promoting democracy in China as well as in preventing an authoritarian backslide in Taiwan.⁴⁶

In place of consanguinity, movement solidarity connected Taiwanese participants and Tiananmen activists. What happened at Tiananmen Square was placed in a global narrative of democratization. Mainland China was no longer accorded an exceptional place, making it possible for a broader and more inclusive focus. The 2015 rally was named 'Back to Tiananmen and Raising Umbrellas to Mourn June Fourth' (重返天安門, 撐傘悼六四) to showcase support for the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement. The programme of the 2018 event amounted to a display of international solidarity, beginning with a celebration of the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. After the testimonials of Tiananmen Incident witnesses and a poetry reading dedicated to Liu Xia (Liu Xiaobo's widow), speakers representing Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Southern Mongolians shared their experiences of human rights violations. In an 'East Asian Perspective' session, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Malaysian activists took to the stage to share their experiences.⁴⁷ While the commemorative events continued to foreground the Tiananmen Incident, their scope expanded to include more nations.

Table 2. Patriotism and universal values in the commemoration of the Tiananmen Incident.

Frame	Patriotism	Universal values
Narrative	The Chinese Republican Revolution	The global pursuit of democracy
Keywords in narrative	The Chinese race Consanguinity Anti-communism	Human rights Youth activism Civil society
Repertoire prototype	Government-sponsored patriotic rallies	Protest concerts
Songs	Patriotic songs	International movement songs

The revival of outdoor mass rallies coincided with a rising tide of protest activism. As youth protests concerning nuclear energy, urban renewal, and other issues proliferated, it was natural for the Student Working Group organizers to tap into the zeitgeist. ‘Human rights’, ‘youth activism’, and ‘civil society’ became keywords in their statements. Younger organizers did not directly experience the 1989 tragedy, and their personal motives often had a domestic origin. One interviewed participant mentioned that he first came to know of the Tiananmen Incident from a textbook, but his personal interest was aroused after viewing a documentary about the Wild Lily Movement in which many participants discussed the impact of the Tiananmen Incident.⁴⁸ New organizers tended to build their understanding from their own experience of growing up in a democratizing Taiwan; similar findings were reported about young activists and organizers in Hong Kong.⁴⁹

One noticeable invention was restructuring the commemorative event into a protest concert, featuring a cocktail of indie rock performances and advocacy speeches. Since 2009, Taiwan’s anti-nuclear activists had pioneered a series of music concerts on the beach where a controversial nuclear power plant was built,⁵⁰ and this specific repertoire spread into other activism because of its attraction to younger participants. In subsequent annual events, the song ‘Wound of History’ was replaced by a more cosmopolitan selection, including ‘Do You Hear the People Sing?’ (2014) and ‘We Shall Overcome’ (2015). Organizers chose these internationally famous songs to stress their identification with pro-democracy struggles around the globe. Musicians of various genres were invited for live performances, including activist indie rock bands such as Punkgod (盤古樂團, a Chinese punk band in exile) and Kou Chou Ching (拷秋勤, a Taiwanese hip-hop group) (2015). From patriotic songs to indie rock, Taiwan’s commemoration has become more ‘Westernized’ and more rooted in the island at the same time.

Discussion

Table 2 summarizes the different ways of remembering the Tiananmen Incident.

It should be noted that post-2011 events have not surpassed the scale of the first anniversary of 1990 which attracted more than 10,000 participants. Journalistic sources report patchy and irregular attendance: 100 (2010), 500 (2011), 500 (2013), 3,000 (2014),

and 100 (2018). The mini-climax in 2014 was largely due to the Sunflower Movement, indicating that these events became a barometer of Taiwan's politics, rather than reflecting the ongoing situation in China. The death of Liu Xiaobo in 2017 sparked a wave of global protests, but it only generated a muted echo in Taiwan.

Efforts to encourage Chinese students to join the event did not bear fruit. In 2013, sponsors distributed masks of Liu Xiaobo for those who did not want to reveal their identity. Many Chinese students found it an alienating experience to see many 'splittist forces' advocating the independence of Taiwanese, Tibetans, and Uyghurs. Complaints emerged that these 'irrelevant' issues stole the thunder from the Tiananmen Incident. There was an enduring debate over the central message of the whole event.

Some people said the event should not have the atmosphere of a carnival because it was about a massacre. So we should not stage a joyful event, but rather stress the aspect of mourning. There was another opinion that Taiwanese did not experience grief from the event directly, and how could Taiwanese people mourn for something that they did not experience?⁵¹

Similarly, a Chinese dissident exile acknowledged that the inclusion of topics such as Taiwan independence did not appeal to mainland students. However, young organizers' self-understanding of Taiwan was 'based on democracy and freedom', which certainly encouraged them to approach the Tiananmen Incident from this angle.⁵² For them, the repressions of Tibetans and Uyghurs were pressing issues of the time, whereas the blood-bath at Tiananmen Square was more or less a 'bygone' event. If one wanted to accuse Beijing of its wrongdoings, the plight of Tibetans and Uyghurs appeared more intimate and closer to their everyday experiences.

Although organizers made efforts to attract people across the political spectrum, they found that most of their rally participants were pro-independence, and there remained inherent difficulties in persuading those in pro-Kuomintang and pro-unification corners. One op-ed article, for example, mentioned:

In recent years, the commemorative activities for 4 June have incorporated local political demands and have become 'indigenized'. It has become a three-in-one carnival whereby pro-independence organizations advocated Taiwanese independence, opposition to China, and opposition to the Kuomintang.⁵³

One former Student Working Group activist with pro-unification tendencies admitted that it was not possible to stage a '4 June event for the blue camp' because most Kuomintang politicians are 'either pro-communist or pro-China, or adopt a pragmatic and moderate course so as not to antagonize mainland China'. The Kuomintang simply did not want to mention 4 June.⁵⁴

What was vanishing was a pro-unification voice willing to take up the cause of unfinished democratization in the face of an increasingly powerful PRC. The collapse of pro-unification idealists and concomitantly the rise of realists who maintained the need to accommodate Beijing because of commercial interests meant that the attempt to remember the Tiananmen Incident became marginalized. The tectonic change in Taiwan's political landscape facilitated the transition from a patriotic frame to a universal values frame.

There emerged a cohort replacement of Tiananmen memory carriers in that those who embraced Chinese identity had faded out and younger Taiwan identifiers took the stage. Student activists of the 2008 Wild Strawberry Movement and Wang Dan's young protégés were among the forces that have re-launched outdoor commemorative rallies since 2009. These youthful organizers belonged to the so-called 'naturally born pro-independence' generation, meaning that they grew up in an environment free of Sino-centric indoctrination, and popular re-election of Taiwan's top leadership was seen as a taken-for-granted birthright. They tended to view the Tiananmen Incident from the perspective of Taiwan as a democratic nationhood. The Sunflower Movement of 2014 was the most graphic expression of this generational worldview, because studies on survey data have found that its supporters were generally motivated by a 'democratic nationalism' in their attachment to Taiwan, and anxiety over the negative consequences of closer economic ties with China (rising inequality and violation of democratic procedure) were correlated with support for the movement.⁵⁵

If the new generation of organizers are typically avid Taiwanese nationalists, a pertinent question is: was this new frame of universal values facilitated by a rise of Taiwanese nationalism? If so, what happened was no less than a process of recombining Tiananmen memory with patriotism, albeit this time not under an inherited Chinese identity, but rather empowered by a surging Taiwanese identity. Some opposition activists in 1989 contended that Taiwan should expedite the pursuit of political independence because of the murderous nature of the communist rulers. Were younger Tiananmen commemoration activists simply reapplying lessons advocated by Taiwanese nationalists in the late 1980s?

Here I give a qualified affirmation to these questions. Yes, the universal values frame is closely related to the emergence of the naturally born pro-independence generation who share the aspirations of Taiwanese nationalism. However, their nationalistic sentiments appear more cosmopolitan and future-oriented than their predecessors because younger Taiwanese in general do not experience ethnic discrimination and political repression. The assertion of nationalistic self-determination has less to do with redressing previous crimes committed by authoritarian rulers, but more about sustaining a democratic and free lifestyle. For senior pro-independence activists, the authoritarian Kuomintang was their nemesis, whereas for younger ones, an increasingly powerful China has emerged as the biggest threat. Younger pro-independence enthusiasts are more drawn to the Tiananmen cause than their seniors are because continuing its commemoration amounts to a moral condemnation of Beijing. As Taiwanese nationalism evolves into a more inclusive project, with its opponent shifting from a domestic oppressor to an external hegemon, the affinity between universal values and nationalism grows and becomes the driver for the recent Tiananmen commemorations in Taiwan.

Conclusion

This article has analysed how the memory of Tiananmen shifted over the past three decades in Taiwan. In the 1990s, a patriotic frame grounded in Chinese nationalism emerged as the dominant perspective, and most of the commemorations were hosted by semi-official organizations. The Tiananmen Incident was seen as a national trauma directly

experienced by Taiwanese. Beginning in 2011, a frame of universal values took root as the driving force behind these mass rallies. The newer perspective of universal values rejected the assumption of nationhood and viewed the Beijing tragedy as a global incident of human rights violation. With such a frame shift, the mnemonic politics of Tiananmen in Taiwan has taken a U-turn. The Tiananmen Incident was used to buttress a Kuomintang version of Chinese nationalism; later, it became a platform for the independence movements of Taiwanese, Tibetans, and Uyghurs to launch their challenge against the PRC's official nationalism.

Such a paradigm shift reflects the changing political conditions both in Taiwan and in China. A Taiwan-based understanding of the Tiananmen upheaval was already present in 1989. Opposition politicians, student activists, and critical intellectuals attempted to fashion an alternative view, which was eclipsed amid mass emotional outpourings. There existed an explicit reference to Taiwan's 28 February Incident at that time long before Ma Ying-jeou's intervention. With the fading Tiananmen memory and the obsolescence of Chinese nationalist discourse, Ma began the project to revamp the discourse. He initiated this change by incorporating the elements of Taiwanese experience and universal values into the Tiananmen narrative; however, his presidency ended in a growing worry that Taiwan would be absorbed into a despotic China. Young activists proceeded without the assumption of Chinese nationalism, thereby fashioning an indigenized narrative.

Taiwan's case provides an interesting comparison to Hong Kong, where a patriotic understanding of the event emerged and was sustained as the dominant frame in the years thereafter. While the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China upheld a more liberal conception of nationhood, the Kuomintang's version of nationalism appeared conservative by comparison. The 'mnemonic mobilization' in Hong Kong was successful to the extent that pro-Beijing politicians and media refrained from 'whitewashing' the incident.⁵⁶ The increased salience of localism gave rise to a strong criticism of the hitherto nationalistic framing, and the result was an ideological warfare over how to memorialize the Tiananmen Incident. By contrast, in Taiwan the transition away from patriotism started earlier and its replacement with a more locally based understanding was less contested. In both cases, the continuing reformulation of collective memory around Tiananmen represented an important aspect of the search of Taiwanese and Hongkongers for their own identity amid their ever-changing relationship with China.

The consolidation of communist dictatorship hastened the demise of Taiwan's patriotic frame and Hong Kong's liberal patriotism. Chinese rulers no longer denied the causalities but asserted the correctness in the decision to suppress because the country has become wealthier and more powerful since then. An aggressive form of nationalism has emerged as the regime's leading ideology, and in this context, commemorating the Tiananmen Incident from a patriotic perspective, regardless of its internal nuances, risks losing the critical edge. Patriotism essentially prioritizes national unity, interests, and identification over other values, and is therefore easily co-opted by Chinese communists. Universal values have become one of the few remaining ideational resources to uphold the Tiananmen memory.

Notes

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