

The Shadows of Tiananmen: Chinese Foreign Policy and Human Rights

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/04/15/the-shadows-of-tiananmen-chinese-foreign-policy-and-human-rights/>

JESSICA KIRK, APR 15 2016

The choice made by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to authorise the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to fire upon pro-democracy protestors in Beijing, June 1989 – widely referred to as the Tiananmen Square incident – has had a lasting yet complex impact upon foreign policy in China. At its core, it placed China at the centre of a conundrum. How much should outside yet widely circulated discourses affect domestic matters? Should states' actions within their sovereign territory affect their international standing? Tiananmen demanded answers to both of these questions. In particular, it demanded that China, as well as the rest of the world, ask themselves how closely meshed their foreign policy and ideas of universal human rights are. This essay will argue that, for China, the international reaction to Tiananmen signified that the human rights discourse holds significant – but contingent – “productive power” (Barnett and Duvall 2005). In other words, the human rights discourse can affect the behaviour of states by defining their realities and encouraging particular behaviours. Yet it is, in itself, an expression of power and is thus ultimately reliant upon the coherent performance of those major players (notably the US) who are in the unique position to construct discourses and establish their dominance. An understanding of these factors has driven China's foreign policy, leading to two seemingly contradictory sets of behaviours since 1989: compliance and resistance.

I will commence with a literature review detailing the two prominent theoretical approaches to Tiananmen's significance in order to establish both the core elements of the event and its aftermath as decided upon by the academic community, and the need to examine human rights as a discourse. Then, within the main argumentative body of my essay, I will first examine how and why China has felt the need to adhere rhetorically and in limited practices to the global human rights discourse, arguing that Tiananmen revealed the power of the human rights discourse by defining some realities for the states and non-state actors involved. I will then detail how, despite this seeming compliance, China has not demonstrated any sign of internalisation of this compliant behaviour in its domestic politics and has rather sought to (1) minimise exposure to criticism, (2) attack the legitimacy of the human rights discourse, and (3) reconstruct the discourse into a variety that suits China. I will argue this to be the outcome of recognition by Chinese leaders – facilitated by Tiananmen – of the power behind the human rights discourse's construction and implementation, namely how incoherent performance by major actors due to competing discourses both permitted China to talk compliance without actually complying and opened space for China to challenge the human rights discourse itself.

Two Approaches Needing One Answer

To start with, however, we must briefly discuss the two dominant theoretical perspectives of the Tiananmen Square incident's significance that is abound within academic work. One of the most prominent interpretations is a constructivist appreciation of the role played by a norm of universal human rights protection. According to this view, the sanctions, public condemnation, UN resolutions, NGO activism, and denial of direct meetings between Chinese officials and high-level state leaders following Tiananmen were undertaken due to the global internalisation of a normative commitment to protect human rights, necessitating punishment of regimes such as China that flagrantly violate these apparently common standards of moral state behaviour (Nathan 2010: 212-3; Foot 2012: 338-9). The strong push for punitive measures by the US Congress, heavily influenced by both public outrage aligned with a

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discourse of human rights and a stated principled commitment since the mid-1970s of infusing US relations with other states with human rights demands, is often cited as a prime example of such normatively-generated behaviour (Skidmore and Gates 1997: 518; Foot 2000, 2012).

When discussing China's foreign policy during and following Tiananmen, proponents of this constructivist view often argue that the case is one of exposure and eventual socialisation. Thus, in the face of such substantial US and global pressure, China is argued to have made "adjustments" such as lifting martial law and releasing Tiananmen protestors from prison in 1990; signing the Covenants on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and Civil and Political Rights; permitting the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture to visit in 2005; adding to the Chinese Constitution in 2004 an amendment which states that China "respects and protects human rights"; participating in debates surrounding the Responsibility to Protect doctrine (Foot 2012: 342, 344); and conducting peacekeeping and humanitarian missions such as the "harmonious" tour of the hospital naval vessel 'Peace Ark' in 2014 (Brant 2014). The basic idea underpinning this stance is that China is in the process of being socialised to conform to a widely accepted norm (Foot 2000, 2012; Zhang 1998); thus it is "engaged" with a "normative diffusion" with the assumption that "full implementation of core norms is still to come" (Foot 2000: 25-26).

There is, however, another broad type of interpretation of the response and repercussions of Tiananmen: a realist one. According to this perspective, state leaders recognised that their interests demanded maintaining cooperative relations, outweighing any moral qualms about domestic matters. US President George H. Bush's approach to Tiananmen is often cited as a core example of this line of thinking (Dumbaugh 1992; Skidmore and Gates 1997: 517). Bush proclaimed that "good relationships with China are in the national interest of the United States" (Suettinger 2003: 94) and acted in accordance with this assertion by sending letters to Deng Xiaoping to try and explain the US' punitive policies, asserting that the US and China shared a friendship that transcended domestic matters such as US public opposition to China and China's human rights violations (Qian 2005: 131). The quick reversal of sanctions, loans freezes, and communication cuts by not only the US but European and Asian states further fuels such theories (Cabestan 2010). In regards to China, it is frequently stressed that China exploited its burgeoning economic and political influence to minimise criticism and re-establish beneficial relations, engaging in substantial diplomatic efforts involving threats of economic or political consequences and arguments that "what is happening [domestic intervention] to China today will happen to any other developing country tomorrow" (Nathan 2010: 213). It also realised that intransigence in the US domestic sphere was driving policy and acted to protect the strategically important US-China relationship (Ross 2000). This apparent demonstration of how states ultimately prioritise strategic and economic interests over ethical considerations such as human rights has, according to realists, led to a 'realpolitik' approach for China; one where China merely pays lip service to the idea of human rights and only to further its national interest (Wan 2001; Nathan 2002).

None of this is to implicitly suggest that either group is wrong in their analysis. Both make valid and important observations. Rather, the problem lies within their inability to explain the other side. Constructivists are absolutely correct in their assertion that China has demonstrated some kind of compliance with international human rights agreements, mechanisms, and demands. Yet norm socialisation fails to explain resistance and the types of resistance and apparent compliance China has engaged in. Realists do offer explanations for China's attempts to resist human rights as a norm and its emphasis upon strategic and economic interests. Yet, they too fail. They cannot offer adequate reasons as to why China does appear to engage the human rights regime in certain notable ways, other than cynically asserting that it is just 'words'. If we are to truly examine the significance of the Tiananmen Square incident, we must find an explanation that encapsulates both sets of behaviours.

In order to achieve this, I will instead adopt a more poststructuralist approach and examine human rights as a discourse rather than 'norm'. Discourses are linguistic systems which "delineate the terms of intelligibility whereby a particular "reality" can be known and acted upon" (Doty 1996: 6). As opposed to norms, which are considered "cognitive 'maps' for actors to determine what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour" (Flockhart 2012: 84), examining discourses entails an acceptance of certain forms of power: the "productive power" of the discourse itself (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 56) and the power of actors to construct discourses (Hansen 2012: 100). Thus perceiving human rights as a discourse enables us to ask questions as to both its power and that behind it.

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Compliance

This approach to human rights as a discourse enables us to understand China's limited compliance during and following Tiananmen. Discourses hold a particular kind of power: a "productive" ability to "constitut[e] the subjectivity of all social beings of diverse kinds with their contingent, though not entirely fluid, identities, practices, rights, responsibilities, and social capacities" (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 56). This occurs through the production and reproduction of forms of 'knowledge' such as claims about who 'we' are, what 'we' value, and so on to the point where it becomes perceived as 'reality' (Foucault 1982). The human rights discourse is a prime example of this. The invocation of the linguistic framework immediately produces identities for state actors as either 'protectors' or 'violators' and imbues them with responsibilities, consequences, interests, values, and an entire range of suddenly permissible policy actions. In particular, punitive measures such as economic sanctions, public humiliation, and even military intervention are encouraged as part of this 'protector' identity (Jahren 2013; Hannam 2008).

For China, Tiananmen was a particularly stinging demonstration of this productive power in action upon the policies of other states. The discourse of human rights was employed by state leaders, NGOs, international organisations, and the media both through the events of June 1989 and afterwards. China's actions were discursively constructed as violations in two ways. The first – and obvious – violation lay in the authorisation to fire upon citizens, depicted as a "military crackdown" upon innocent students (McFadden 1989) and an "indiscriminate slaughter" (Hawke 1989). The second – and more controversial – was the framing of democratic freedoms such as choosing government, protesting, and freedom of speech as universal human rights, thus condemning China's refusal to confer such freedoms upon its citizens as a violation. In particular, within the US, the apparent aims of the protestors were often discursively linked within the media and political debates to values enshrined within the American democratic system, including the Bill of Rights (Kluver 2010: 89). This served to engender a strong identification of the US as a 'protector' of human rights (that were ultimately congruent with what were stated as American values) against the inherently repressive 'violator' China, leading to substantial public pressure to react in stronger, more punitive ways in all China-related policies (Dumbaugh 1992: 17). As poststructuralist thinkers have pointed out, this dichotomising is a common element of foreign policy; the identity of the Self is affirmed through a contrast with an Other (Campbell 1992: 56).

The reactions that led from this discursive construction of the event as a human rights violation impacted China significantly. The US suspended weapons' sales, communication between high level officials, and civilian nuclear cooperation, as well as implementing sanctions and demanding the postponement of new loans to China from the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank. Outside of the United States, Japan and the European Union as well as individual European states announced sanctions and Australia and New Zealand cancelled visits of high ranking officials. Ultimately, over four years following Tiananmen, China was denied US\$11 billion in bilateral aid (Foot 2012: 337-339). Moreover, China was publically humiliated; its international image and bargaining power damaged. Humiliation is apparent from the fervent attempts undertaken by Chinese diplomats and leaders to minimise public criticism. From 1990 through to 1997, China had to defend itself against numerous condemnatory resolutions presented before the UN Human Rights Commission, the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention among others through extensive diplomacy, lobbying, and even aid projects from the developing state to others (Nathan 2010: 212-3). Even states such as Malaysia and Brazil who typically adhered to a position of non-intervention issued "expressions of regret" (Foot 2012: 339).

This punishment was enacted regardless of China's attempts to reframe the incident and the criticism itself. Before the authorisation of PLA troops to fire upon protestors, he proclaimed that the students and workers gathering in the Square and across Beijing were a result of the Western "propaganda machine [...] us[ing] things like "human rights" [...] to criticise us, but what they're really after is our sovereignty" (Nathan and Link 2001: 358). This line of thinking persevered following Tiananmen, as Deng feared that "peaceful evolution" of China's socialist system was the aim of the international condemnation (Cabestan 2010: 195). It is from this fear that his famous 28-character aphorism sprung: loosely translated, it is often quoted in a truncated form as "hide brightness, nourish obscurity" (Cabestan 2010: 195-196). In essence, Deng wanted to continue to modernise China's economy – including foreign investment and trade – yet sought to minimise the possibility that Western discourses of human rights could further damage

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China's internal stability.

To do this, China was forced to engage the international system and its discourses, at least to a limited extent. Concessions were extracted from the US (authorisation of World Bank loans, an Export-Import bank loan, talks about China joining the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade recommencing) and bilateral sanctions were removed by European countries and Japan in exchange for the lifting of martial law and the release of 573 protestors from prison in January 1990 (Foot 2012: 340-1). Dialogues on human rights between China and concerned states such as Australia, the US, Canada, the UK, France, Sweden, the EU, and others commenced, albeit according to China's pre-negotiated agendas (Nathan 2010: 216). Within the UN Security Council, China abstained on and thus permitted numerous humanitarian mission resolutions (Johnston 2008: 136). The Covenants were signed and one ratified. The addition to the Chinese Constitution in 2004 on protecting human rights was made. Intrusions into Chinese domestic affairs has been accepted to a limited extent with visits by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and even drafting a National Human Rights Action Plan for the UN in 2009 (Foot 2012: 342). This adherence to the human rights discourse at the international level seemed to reach a whole new level in 2005 when, despite campaigning previously for non-interference and sovereignty, China endorsed the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, seemingly agreeing to a principle that authorised humanitarian interventions in cases that could resemble Tiananmen (Teitt 2011).

So how do we explain this seeming compliance? China had an alternative frame for their response to the protests in Tiananmen: foiling a "counterrevolutionary plot" that threatened China's stability and harmony (Gong 1990: 88). Furthermore, they perceived international condemnation as Western ideals of democratic freedoms imposed from outside with the intention of overthrowing Chinese socialism. Yet they still complied. Ultimately, China felt the need to play by the rules of the game. Tiananmen demonstrated the political and economic power of the human rights discourse in encouraging and legitimating behaviours of other states that harmed China's growth and international image. In order to "de-isolate" itself, China had to 'nourish obscurity' by playing to the discourse that others imposed upon it. At this point, one could possibly argue that this seems to be merely a different, less absolute way of restating the constructivist argument regarding human rights as a norm and China's compliance as socialisation. But there is a difference. Constructivists stop here, claiming China to be on the road to "full implementation" (Foot 2000: 26). Yet this is only half of the story. There were, and still are, limits to China's compliance with the human rights discourse, running the gamut from merely not adhering in action to previously stated rhetoric to outright challenges to the human rights discourse's dominance.

China's Resistance and Challenge

The Tiananmen Square incident not only demonstrated to Chinese leaders the power of the human rights discourse upon the behaviours of actors, but also how contingent this power's application can be. Discourses are never static; nor are they always implemented unconditionally. They "wax and wane" according to situations and in the face of alternative discourses (Hansen 2012: 105). This was demonstrated to China during Tiananmen with the policies of many states shifting or expressing confusion in their implementation. A notable example is the contestation within the US. Here, the human rights discourse championed by Congress and the public was promptly challenged by a realist approach espoused by President Bush and others with China's identification as a 'violator' contested by one of China as an 'opportunity'. Bush declared smooth relations with China a "national interest" (Suettinger 2003: 94) and wrote conciliatory letters to Deng Xiaoping, referring to him as a "friend" and expressing his hope that the punitive measures demanded by an outraged public would not harm the US-China relationship (Foot 2012: 340). Declassified diplomatic documents also reveal that high-level officials within the government and military interpreted Tiananmen as an "internal affair" (Richelson and Evans 1999: Doc 34). Other states had similar contestation; Japanese leaders were sympathetic to the Chinese desire to prioritise domestic stability over democratic freedoms and, as early as August 1989, relaxed sanctions and reinstated aid projects (Foot 2012: 340).

Ultimately, this contestation resulted in incoherent discursive performance. As Judith Butler points out, identities are performative, "constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be their results" (1990: 25). This means discourses and their constitution of identities and encouragement of behaviour can only be effective if they are coherently and unconditionally performed. Bush's adherence instead to a realist discourse that prioritised relations over values thus effectively undermined the human rights approach and opened room for China to move.

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Simultaneously, it demonstrated to China that the human rights outcry was not a 'norm' in action but rather a highly contingent discourse that could be challenged and even reconstructed. In response, China exploited the alternative framing and pushed its own. It immediately targeted the "weak link" – Japan – and exploited Japanese economic interests in China as well as its guilt for its militarist past, resulting in rapid easing of sanctions and a lifting of a freeze on aid projects (Foot 2012: 340). In 1990, it utilised its veto power in the UN Security Council to encourage lifting of American sanctions and a meeting with the American president – all of which it achieved (Suettinger 2003: 113-115).

Indeed, this practice was so successful in minimising criticism following Tiananmen that it has continued as a staple of Chinese foreign policy. For instance, proposed visits of the Dalai Lama and scheduled meetings between him and state leaders have elicited barely veiled threats to trade relations and political consequences. When Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin organised to meet the religious leader (or, in Chinese discourse: 'separatist leader') in 2004, the Chinese embassy offered a warning: "don't gamble on Sino-Canadian trade relations, valued at twenty billion dollars annually" (Wu 2010: 224). Similar threats have been issued at other state leaders, notably telling Barack Obama that a meeting with the Dalai Lama would "inflict grave damages upon the China-US relationship" (Kaiman 2014). Successes have resulted: Australia's Kevin Rudd refused to meet the Dalai Lama in 2007 (Wu 2010: 224-225). China clearly knows that alternative discourses can win out against human rights in defining states' national interests and it does everything it can to remind states of these competing approaches and push them towards the more China-friendly choice.

Yet China is increasingly demonstrating that it is no longer content to merely exploit competing discourses. Tiananmen also demonstrated the contingency of the discourse's power through revealing the power behind it. Discourses are expressions of power; those who construct and wield them are in a unique position (such as with access to broadcasted media or a political platform) to decide what is important, who 'we' are, what 'we' do, or what 'we' should do. On the international stage, these actors are typically certain states who enjoy a more significant prominence than others due to their privileged positions within institutions (what Barnett and Duvall (2005) refer to as "institutional power") and holding material capabilities ("compulsory power") or political influence discursively constructed to be noteworthy. Discourses are thus typically the products of these particular groups, namely states such as the US and international organisations like the UN, to legitimate their behaviour, beliefs, and status. With regards to human rights, it has been posited that the discourse has been a way of legitimating the American liberal order through infusing it with morality and tying liberal democratic ideas proclaimed to be distinctly American (through a discourse of American exceptionalism) to the notion of universally good statehood (Ikenberry 2011).

As hinted at above, China has always been aware of this. It clashed substantially with the dominant human rights framing of Tiananmen, claiming even today that the incident was a response to a "counterrevolutionary rebellion aimed at opposing the leadership of the Communist Party of China and overthrowing the socialist system" (Jiang, quoted in Kristof 1989). This was underpinned by a domestic discourse that prioritised state harmony and growth over political freedoms of individuals (Xiang 2012: 122; Foot 2000: 26). Such a discourse has sympathisers. Czechoslovakia, Kuwait, and Romania all offered support to the CCP following Tiananmen whilst others (notably Japan) relinquished punitive measures due to an understanding of this approach (Columbus 1998: 23; Huwaidin 2002: 196; Suettinger 2003: 105). For China, then, the enacting of punitive policies lay within Western dominance over international discourses on human rights; a success that, during the moments immediately after Tiananmen, China could not truly challenge in any substantial way.

However, as China has risen in global prominence – whether due to economic growth, increased political activism in multilateral institutions (Foot 2011), or a combination of the two – it has found itself within a position that facilitates the spread of a competing discourse on human rights. Core to this alternative discourse are the prioritisation of state sovereignty and non-interference over the encouragement of intrusion and punishment currently facilitated by the dominant discourse. A notable example of this lies in the 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights. During the preparatory meetings, China leveraged support from most of its Asian neighbours in favour of an interpretation of human rights as focusing upon non-selectivity (UN bodies should not be able to single out individual member-states for criticism), non-interference in domestic matters, the prioritisation of collective, economic, and social rights over civil and political rights, and cultural relativity (the recognition of different human rights across different cultures) (Nathan 2010: 214). China would engage in similar processes in relation to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

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doctrine. Through extensive lobbying with like-minded states and small disputes with the UN and the UN Security Council over the idea that intervention could occur without state consent or UNSC authorisation, China managed to “divorce R2P from non-consensual force” and only acquiesced to the idea after obtaining this victory (Teitt 2011: 299).

This slow build-up of new discourses returns us to the discussion on compliance. China recognises the power of the human rights discourse. As Teitt writes, the R2P example demonstrates that “China remains hesitant to assert its position and be seen to be undermining normative and policy developments” even as it aligns itself with the “Global South” in direct contrast with the West’s “normative order” (2011: 309-310). These seemingly contradictory behaviours appear within many of China’s human rights discussions. A report on China’s human rights abuses by the UN Human Rights Council found China guilty of violating several rights, including freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and rights of minorities. Yet China claimed – despite the report’s substantial evidence to the contrary – “there is no censorship in China”; “rights to freedom of assembly, association, procession, and demonstration are protected”; and ethnic minorities are allowed to fully exercise their human rights” (CECC 2009), demonstrating a desire to adhere to the human rights discourse even if it has no intention of following any recommendations to actually practice human rights. Moreover, China frequently responds to US human rights reports with its own report on American human rights violations, utilising their own discourse against them (Reuters 2013). These are forms of compliance and resistance, rolled into one. Chinese leaders are clearly still not entirely willing to wholly accept the human rights discourse. They know that they do not need to. Thanks to Tiananmen, China understands that the human rights discourse is contingent: reliant upon performance that will never be coherent and unconditional due to competing discourses; being a construction of specific powers that do not speak for the entirety of the globe; and are increasingly less able to make pretences to the contrary. Thus resistance is not only possible, but even desirable.

Conclusion

Tiananmen Square was a watershed moment in Chinese foreign policy. It was not the first time that China had been exposed to the human rights discourse but it was the moment that defined what exactly the forces of power at work truly were. Two competing theoretical approaches have become prominent in seeking to explain this: a constructivist argument pertaining to the role of a human rights norm in socialising China; and a realist interpretation that claims China only seeks its narrowly defined national interest and is enabled to do so by other states doing the same. Both are valid in their observations of compliance and resistance, respectively. Yet neither can adequately explain the other. Instead, a poststructuralist approach that examines human rights as a discourse enables us to explore both sets of behaviours. Through an adoption of this perspective, I have sought to argue that the Tiananmen Square incident revealed to China the significant yet contingent productive power of the human rights discourse and that an understanding of this has guided much of China’s foreign policy on the subject since 1989. The productive power of the discourse explains the apparent Chinese compliance in areas such as declarations, humanitarian missions, and rhetoric because it encouraged punitive policies and an altogether hostile stance from other states that impacted significantly upon China’s political and economic growth. Thus, if China wanted to engage the international system and reap the benefits, it was forced to play by the West’s proclaimed rules of the game – or at least, it had to seem like it was. Complete coherence in performance has never been required as the discourse has always been undermined by the major players’ own incoherence. Competing approaches such as Bush’s realism allowed China both some space to breathe and a glimpse at a faultline that could be exploited. China has therefore utilised its growing influence to minimise criticism and slowly challenge the discourse, moving it away from the unrestrained, intrusive model championed by liberal human rights advocates into a weaker kind that China prefers. Yet the question remains to the future of this approach. China’s outright lies (“there is no censorship in China”) and delicate hedging of the human rights discourse may be successful now, but their balancing act is dangerous. China wants to remain on the good side of the powers in the international community yet simultaneously craft its own powerful discourses. Their initially cautious response to the 2014 protests in Hong Kong is a perfect demonstration. While it is unlikely that another Tiananmen would ever occur, its shadow clearly still hangs over Beijing 25 years later.

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Date written: October 2014*