

# **China: We do not need “great symbols of authority” with double standards: expel patriarchal behavior and harassment from our social movements!**

Sunday 24 September 2023, by [PAK Mi-Hyang](#) (Date first published: 23 September 2023).

**Every year in June, the annual memorial of the Tiananmen Square crackdown is held around the world. The annual memorial was also held in Tokyo on June 4 this year. Many young people participated in it. On that day, many young Chinese who had no direct knowledge of the incident also attended the memorial ceremonies held in London and New York. Red bowls with the same slogans as those used by the youth during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests were prepared. Again this year, young people gave speeches, but with a different look than in previous years. Leaflets with the following wording were distributed.**

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“It is now 2023. We don’t need ‘great symbols of authority’. Drive sexual violence out of social movements!”

It criticized the sexual violence of the then leader of the Tiananmen Square protests. [1] There were also signs around the area criticizing leaders of China’s democracy movement who have been accused of sexual violence and harassment in the past.

“Are you silent about crimes of sexual violence while you claim democracy and human rights?”

Among young people opposed to the authoritarian rule of the Xi Jinping regime, empathy for the students who stood up for political reform 34 years ago is spreading. On the other hand, these voices also expressed the disposition of the post-Tiananmen generation which does not necessarily see the pro-democracy activists as heroes. They expressed surprise at the old patriarchal view and disregard for human rights shared by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese democracy movement community, including democracy movement organizations that exist primarily outside of China.

## **Wave of the #MeToo movement**

The #MeToo movement that spread in the US in 2017 spread to China in 2018. Since then, sexual

harassment has been found to be widespread in various sectors of Chinese society. And the #MeToo movement had arrived in Taiwan. Officials from Taiwan's ruling party and opposition parties accused sexual harassment one after another. However, most of the allegations within the Taiwanese regime were buried in the dark. Under these circumstances, many people accused the then student leader of the Tiananmen Square protests of sexual violence. One of the accusers revealed the name and face to the media to make the allegation of sexual violence.

The then student leader was the main leader of the Tiananmen Square protests. He was also known worldwide as an icon of the Chinese democracy movement. It was reported that the university, where he taught for several years, launched its own investigation and contacted his students. And the university's special faculty decided to cancel his lectures for the coming semester out of concern for the students. On the other hand, the "political intentions behind it" were also reported.

### **Incessant accusations and silence of the CCP**

This accusation of sexual violence would not be subject to the claim of "political intentions". Prioritizing the "democratization of China" while dismissing sexual harassment would only be a secondary crime against the victims under the pretext of the "political position. Meanwhile, sexual violence and human rights abuses by other "pro-democracy activists" have come to light. It has been reported that a "pro-democracy activist" sympathetic to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests echoed racist propaganda similar to that of the Chinese Communist Party, demonizing the Uyghurs and labeling them as "terrorists". [2]

What some "pro-democracy activists" wanted at the time may have been nothing more than democracy for the majority Han ethnic group living in China. The disrespectful behavior and statements of those thought to be in opposition to the Chinese government were shocking. At the same time, a question arose in the Chinese democracy movement community: "Even if they were to become the new leaders of China, wouldn't they be the same as the CCP today"? The issue of sexual harassment and human rights abuses by the Chinese democracy movement community was not significantly reported by the official Chinese media. It seemed to symbolize a silence between the two sides that shared the old patriarchal behavior and a similar sense of human rights. The CCP seemed to be quietly hoping for the self-destruction of the Chinese democracy movement community by the #MeToo movement while hiding the Tiananmen Square protests and then leaders from the Chinese people.

### **Differences in the united front's human rights sense**

The annual memorial of the Tiananmen Square crackdown held this year in Tokyo took the form of a united front that included groups such as the young White Paper Protests group, the elderly activist group, and the young Hong Kong group. In the united front, there was a subtle difference in the sense of human rights. A new generation, unfamiliar with the Tiananmen Square protests, mourned the protests while openly criticizing the human rights violations of the then Tiananmen student leaders of the past. The White Paper Protests that took place in China and around the world last year were strongly influenced by feminism. They do not tolerate human rights abuses by the leaders of pro-democracy movements as well as the CCP.

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*"There is no future for a movement that turns its back on the changing times. And there will be no young next generation willing to take over such a movement."*

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It has been reported that some prominent pro-democracy activists who have criticized human rights abuses by the Chinese government committed sexual violence and openly ignoring the human rights of ethnic minorities living in China. Under these circumstances, it may be natural to wonder whether a government seized by the pro-democracy activists would be the same as the current CCP government. Many of the then Tiananmen student leaders and pro-democracy activists, who had sought democracy and human rights in China, fled the country to avoid harsh crackdowns. On the other hand, once outside the country, their political influence within China rapidly diminished. This is also why Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, who effectively died in prison in 2017, stayed in the country until the end. Today, however, there is more than distance between China and the outside world; there is an unbridgeable generational gap in terms of human rights.

### **No future for a movement that turns its back on the changing times**

The White Paper Protests against China's zero-COVID policy that erupted across the country late last year were a movement without a specific leader. The Tiananmen student leaders at that time appreciated the White Paper Protests "since the Tiananmen Square protests". However, the difference in human rights consciousness between the participants in the White Paper Protests and conventional pro-democracy activists was significant. The Chinese youth living in China and abroad who participated in the White Paper Protests emphasized justice in everyday life. From this perspective, the gap between them and the generation that ignores sexual violence and harassment is clear. In addition, the previous political spaces, where criminal/civil prosecution was difficult, were sometimes closed and oppressive. And sometimes, the political spaces became hotbeds of sexual violence and harassment.

In China and Hong Kong (of course, this is not necessarily true in other countries or regions), the conventional political movement where a handful of leaders talk about democracy and the masses follow them may not fit the current situation. In extremely repressive countries, the movement suffers a severe blow when a leader is arrested. In fact, the Chinese government has suppressed the civil rights movements as such. On the other hand, it is not easy for the government to contain a spontaneous movement against the problems of everyday life that is spreading mainly among teenagers and young people in their teens and 20s through social networking sites.

The spontaneous movement symbolized by the White Paper Protests was also seen in the 2019 Hong Kong protests. It should also be noted that many of the participants in the White Paper Protests were women and many of them overlap with those sympathetic to the #MeToo movement. And those who advocate for the rights of sexual minorities became mainstream. [3] The CCP's model of governance is based on patriarchal system and women who seek to dismantle such structures are a major driving force behind the movement. A future movement to push the CCP in a democratic direction may be a movement like the White Paper Protests that takes place outside the traditional Chinese democracy movement community. The Chinese democracy movement community has long

lost its influence in China due to the government's crackdown on political leaders. Moreover, some in the Chinese democracy movement community would have themselves turned their backs on the changing times. There is no future for a movement that turns its back on the changing times. And there will be no young next generation willing to take over such a movement.

We are living in the capitalist society where various forms of discrimination and social exclusion are rife. However, we have taken a political position against all forms of oppression and discrimination. Any forms of oppressive or discriminatory behavior must be sanctioned and, if necessary, the perpetrator must be excluded. It is not "great symbols of authority" with convenient double standards for human rights that will transform our society.

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## Footnotes

[1] *Deutsche Welle's* Taiwanese coverage and other media reported accusations of sexual violence against the then student leader.

[2] East Turkistan Government in Exile, 12 May 2021, "Condemning Chinese Supremacist Wei Jinsheng's Racist Attacks Against The Uyghurs". In 2021, the president of the Japan Uyghur Association made similar criticisms in the Japanese media.

[3] 岡田 洋一郎 (Okuma Yuichiro), TNL Mediagene, 28 June 2023, "「天安門後世代の目覚め」—若者が逃げ出す習近平時代 (Awakening of the "post-Tiananmen generation": Young people fleeing the Xi Jinping era)