

Memories of Tiananmen in Hong Kong

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It has been over thirty-five years since thousands of unarmed peaceful student protesters were killed in Beijing, in the sacred Tiananmen Square. For many, it might seem intuitive that people from Mainland China would form and hold a strong and vivid collective memory of this relatively new historical event because of its tragic nature and its apparent contradiction with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) propaganda that the People's Liberation Army are the ones to save the people and protect the people. Because of the contradiction itself, however, this incident has become the most sensitive and remains taboo for any public discussion. Any attempts to discuss, commemorate, and demand justice for what happened have been completely restrained (Amnesty International UK, 2023). Therefore, the collective memory remains silent and internal. Chinese netizens have made efforts to commemorate the event every year in June on Sina Weibo (a Chinese platform similar to Twitter/X), even though they knew that their posts would be censored shortly after (Chung & Fu, 2021). Although the older generations might have a collective memory of the Tiananmen Massacre, very few of them have transmitted this memory to their children who were born after 1989. Therefore, most young people in Mainland China who do not have access to foreign websites have almost no idea what the event is and what happened 35 years ago (Viggiano & Nathan, 2009).

Fortunately, Hong Kong, a region that is most closely related to Mainland China, has tried its best to form and preserve the collective memory of the Tiananmen Massacre for the past 35 years. Hong Kong locals, journalists, academia, and pro-democracy entrepreneurs have all contributed to making and transmitting this collective memory. Because of the unique relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China and the availability of literature, this current literature review will focus on Hong Kong's collective memory of the Tiananmen

Massacre, how this memory has changed within the course of 35 years, and how the ways of commemorating have changed.

What Happened 35 Years Ago and Why Hong Kong Remembers It

The Tiananmen Square protests were student-led protests demanding freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (Wuer Kaixi, 1990). The protests were precipitated by the death of pro-reform CCP general secretary Hu Yaobang in April 1989. More students, workers, and intellectuals from all over the country joined the protest in Beijing, and the government declared martial law on 20 May. After several weeks of confrontation between the CCP and protesters, the leaders of the CCP decided to clear the square. On the night of June 3 and into June 4, the People's Liberation Army and the People's Armed Police advanced into the center of Beijing with tanks and armed troops to forcibly disperse the crowds. Soldiers opened fire on unarmed protesters and bystanders, killing an estimated hundreds to thousands of people.

Hong Kong was deeply involved in this event and the memory-making process as thousands of Hong Kong people marched in the streets to show their support for the protesters as a reaction to the declaration of martial law (So, 1997). After the United Kingdom and China signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, many Hong Kong people accepted the inevitability of Hong Kong's reversion to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 (Carroll, 2007, p.190). In other words, Hong Kong people reluctantly accepted the identity of being Chinese. As a result, for those who decided to stay in Hong Kong until the handover, any significant public event that occurred in mainland China seems relevant to their future and the future of Hong Kong. Among these, the Tiananmen Massacre had the most significant impact on Hong Kong and its people's vision for the future.

Besides the socio-political reason, the flashbulb memory of the massacre plays an

important role in the formation of this collective memory. Unlike first-hand memory, flashbulb memories are memories of public events that are usually emotionally charged and have impactful consequences on both personal and collective levels (Hirst & Phelps, 2016). Similar to how most Americans learned about the 9/11 attacks, many Hong Kong people watched the images and footage of the massacre on television, feeling shocked, disgusted, and horrified (Carroll, 2007, p.191). For them, although they were not in Tiananmen Square on June 4, the massacre was traumatic, and it formed a clear, vivid, and long-lasting flashbulb memory. Many of them recalled strong emotional memories even 20 years later (Lee & Chan, 2021). Lee and Chan interviewed people who participated in the protests or watched live coverage on the night of June 3 in Hong Kong. One interviewee started sobbing when they just started recalling; another recalled that their hands were shaking and feeling a sense of powerlessness (Lee & Chan, 2021). With such a strong emotional imprint, one could argue that the massacre has become a cultural trauma for the Hong Kong people, which largely contributed to the shift in opinions on the CCP.

The Consolidation of the Collective Memory of The Tiananmen Massacre in Hong Kong

According to Hirst et al. (2020), this kind of event is where people with flashbulb memories can serve as witnesses because they could claim that they “lived through” the incident. As witnesses of the massacre, Hong Kong people started the annual commemoration vigil in 1990 in Victoria Park to show support for pro-democracy values and to consolidate not only the collective memory of the massacre but also a new Hong Kong identity (So, 1997). Although the commemoration vigil has been held every year in June from 1990 to 2019, the consolidation of the collective memory was not very successful, as the number of people participating in the vigil dropped from 100,000 in 1990 to 40,000 in 1993, according to the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China (hereafter, the Alliance) or 12,000

according to Hong Kong Police (Chu, 2021). According to Lee and Chan (2021), with the determination of economic reform in the mainland and the restoration of relationships with foreign countries in the early 1990s, Hong Kong people's sentiments and attitudes toward China shifted from powerlessness, anger, and hatred to a more optimistic view about the future.

Fortunately, there were still people who made an effort to make the memory survive and consolidate. For example, the public broadcaster RTHK produced a total of five episodes in the *Hong Kong Connection* documentary on the 1989 student protests between 1990 and 1997. Those episodes included content like the lives of the student leaders who fled China after the massacre, contrasting opinions between then and now, and the uncertain future of the Alliance. (Lee & Chan, 2021). Although not always strongly opinioned, those episodes made efforts of the Alliance and other pro-democracy organizations' voices visible to the public. The documentary is an example of a repertoire of memory of the Tiananmen Massacre that involves the active role of mnemonic agents, or active remembering, allowing Hong Kong people to make meaning out of it and help mobilize people (Cheng & Yuen, 2019). Therefore, by the handover of power in 1997, Tiananmen commemorations had evolved into a morally driven act, symbolizing the conscience of the participants (Lee & Chan, 2021).

The Evolution of the Collective Memory of the Tiananmen Massacre in Hong Kong

Although the collective memory of the Tiananmen Massacre in Hong Kong has been comparatively stabilized since the mid-1990s, it underwent an evolution in terms of memory transmission and memory mobilization (Cheng & Yuen, 2019; Lee & Chan, 2013; Lee & Chan, 2016). Despite many obstacles, Hong Kong's collective memory of the Tiananmen Massacre in the 21st century has stabilized and become stronger (Lee & Chan, 2021). This section will discuss the mobilization and transmission of the collective memory, as well as criticisms around

the annual commemoration vigil.

Memory Mobilization

Memory mobilization refers to the process by which social organizations make efforts to bring the collective memory of certain historical events to the front through strategic actions and communications for the purposes of social mobilization (Lee & Chan, 2016; Lee & Chan, 2018). That is, memory mobilization is a social process of actively recalling or remembering the event, which is partly in line with Halbwachs' (1950/1980) view on memory that all memories are social in nature. Moreover, following Bartlett's (1932) theory that memory is a process of reconstruction, mobilizing a collective memory is also a process of making new meaning of the historical event and bringing about contestation (Lee & Chan, 2016).

In Hong Kong, the most prominent form of memory mobilization of the Tiananmen Massacre is the annual candlelight vigil at Victoria Park. Cheng and Yuen (2019) suggested that the vigil not only showed support for the Tiananmen movement but also encouraged Hong Kong's own pro-democracy movements, like the protest against Article 23 of the Basic Law in 2003, the Umbrella Movement (Lagerkvist & Rühlig, 2016), and possibly the 2019-2020 protests. All of the movements listed were protesting against the CCP's intervention in the "One country, two systems" principle enacted in Hong Kong, attempting to impede the practice of democracy in Hong Kong. Lagerkvist and Rühlig argued that "persistent mass mobilization was the only way to contribute to the democracy movement" in Hong Kong after it was repressed in 1989. In line with Liu and Hilton's (2005) point that representations of history are central to constructing and maintaining group identities, scholars have proposed that the annual vigil in Hong Kong consolidates the collective identity of the participants. For example, Lagerkvist and Rühlig (2016) argued that the Tiananmen generation greatly shaped the identity of Hong Kong

protesters in the Umbrella Movement in 2014 because they set up a protest tradition for the younger generations. Chu (2021) also demonstrated how this vigil can contribute to the collective identity of Hong Kong people. The author suggested that the memory of 1989 was constantly invoked during the protests in the summer of 2019, where Hong Kong people protested against the government's introduction of a bill that would allow extradition from Hong Kong to mainland China (Cheung & Hughes, 2020). Moreover, in the 2019 vigil, which is the last public commemoration event in Hong Kong, the leaders of the Alliance urged the vigil participants to take an active part in the protest against the proposed amendments to the extradition law (Chu, 2021). This message unified the vigil participants with a shared collective identity – pro-democracy – and related the memory to the present by mobilizing them to participate in the recent protest. Therefore, the 2019 vigil not only consolidated their collective memory of the Tiananmen Massacre but also reinforced their collective identity with an emphasis on freedom and democracy.

Memory Transmission

In contrast to memory mobilization, which concerns collective memories' expansiveness on a horizontal scale, memory transmission looks at memories on a vertical scale and deals with questions like whether and how collective memory is passed down to younger generations who did not “lived through” the event (Cheng & Yuen, 2019; Lee & Chan, 2013). Prior research has shown that family is important in the process of intergenerational memory transmission, where younger generations learn historical events from their parents and grandparents (Cordonnier et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2014; Svob et al., 2016).

For the intergenerational transmission of the memories of the Tiananmen Massacre, Lee and Chan (2021) argue that schools and the media are important mediums for the transmission

process. One thing they are concerned about in intergenerational memory transmission for historical events like the Tiananmen Massacre is whether younger generations are “partaking in the collective memory of an event” instead of merely knowing about the existence of the event (Lee & Chan, 2021). Studies have shown that younger people in Hong Kong have been actively participating in commemoration rallies since the early 2010s. For example, Lee and Chan (2013) conducted an onsite survey at the commemoration rally in 2010. Among their respondents, 26.9% were between 15 and 20 years old, and 27.3% were between 21 and 29, indicating that a substantial amount of young people who were not born or were in their childhood when the Tiananmen Massacre happened joined the commemoration event.

Initial knowledge of the Tiananmen Massacre

Lee and Chan were two of the few scholars who investigated how younger generations first learned about the Tiananmen Massacre. Through interviewing young people in Hong Kong, they found that many of them were unable to recall the exact occasion but emphasized that they “knew all along.” Moreover, they pointed out that although many said in the interview that parents and media mentioned this event multiple times when they were younger, they seldom went deeper than that. Therefore, the authors argued that family and media only “constituted the social environment” in which this event was repeatedly mentioned (Lee & Chan, 2013).

The authors went on to ask interviewees what sources had the greatest impact on their understanding and perception of the massacre. The results indicated that school was important in shaping young Hong Kong people’s understanding. Moreover, they pointed out that the way teachers told the story of Tiananmen was particularly powerful (Lee & Chan, 2013). Chu (2022) confirmed that school played a remarkable role in the memory transmission of the Tiananmen Massacre. Chu interviewed young Hong Kong journalists who did not “live through” the

massacre. More than half of the interviewees recalled that their teachers mentioned the massacre in school assemblies on or before June 4, with a few mentioning that their teachers had an impact on their perception of the event (Chu, 2022). Therefore, although formal education might not provide comprehensive knowledge about the event, it has driven its young students to learn about it on their own through informal channels like news media and the Internet.

What do young Hong Kong people remember

Although the Tiananmen Massacre was the second most recalled event (the handover in 1997 being the first) among Hong Kong people (Lee & Chan, 2018), the actual memories of the Tiananmen vary even within one age group. Lee and Chan asked their interviewees how they would introduce the event to people who had never heard of the event. Many young interviewees could tell a generic story of the event with a broad cause and aftermath. For example, they might be able to tell that the series of protests was triggered by the death of a leader of the CCP. Nevertheless, they got confused with the leader's name (Lee & Chan, 2021). These interviewees demonstrated a rather superficial understanding of the Tiananmen Massacre as they should have addressed the broader historical context of this event. Other interviewees tend to provide a more detailed narrative of the event, expanding the discussion to political and economic reform in mainland China. Those people are usually active participants in events related to public affairs, including but not limited to commemoration vigils and small-scale demonstrations organized by local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Lee & Chan, 2021). Regardless of the amount of information about the massacre that young Hong Kong people retain, they all have internalized the stance that it was about a violent and immoral government suppressing its innocent civilians. With that in mind, the Tiananmen Massacre has gradually become a symbol of the pro-democratic movement instead of a complete narrative among younger generations in Hong

Kong. In this case, the loss of nuance in the collective memory of the event among young people might be attributed to the shift of identity of young Hong Kong people. Because of the huge discrepancy in the social system between Hong Kong and mainland China, plus the CCP's constant attempt to limit Hong Kong's autonomy, many young Hong Kong people who are less influenced by the optimism of reunification reject their "Hong Kong Chinese" identity and rebuild their unique "Hong Kong identity." Therefore, not only the collective memory of the massacre itself but also the annual commemoration vigils have become a symbol of the effort to maintain democracy in Hong Kong.

Generational differences

We can derive from the previous section that the younger generation in Hong Kong holds a weaker collective memory of the Tiananmen Massacre than the older generation. Moreover, since the younger generation does not form a flashbulb memory of the event that left a strong emotional imprint as the older generation did, younger participants in the annual vigil were not likely to report strong emotional reactions when thinking about the event (Lee & Chan, 2021). However, we should acknowledge that the younger generation's opinions and judgments regarding the Tiananmen are never uncertain. Lee (2012) investigated whether support for the rehabilitation of the Tiananmen Massacre, local democratization, and trust in the government differ across generations in Hong Kong 15 years after the event (i.e., in 2004 and 2005). Lee found that across all the dependent variables, the attitude toward Tiananmen always elicited the strongest impact in the "mature group," i.e., people who were older than 25 in 1989. However, ten years later, in 2014, Lee and Chan conducted a similar survey with the same set of questions and found contrasting results. This time, they found that the youngest age group (18-29 in 2014) indicated the strongest support for rehabilitation and continuing commemoration events.

Moreover, young people were also more supportive of local democratization and had less trust in the government. Nevertheless, the younger generation reported that they were less concerned about this issue, indicating that they are less influenced by this event personally and affectively (Lee & Chan, 2021). This goes back to the point that young Hong Kong people, although highly supportive of pro-democratic movements, have distanced themselves from the “Hong Kong Chinese” identity.

Criticism around the Annual Commemoration Vigil

Despite the seemingly successful mobilization and transmission of the collective memories of the Tiananmen Massacre, criticism exists around the annual candlelight vigil at Victoria Park. As discussed in an earlier section, many young Hong Kong people have developed a stronger local identity (Hong Konger) than a mixed Hong Kong Chinese identity. They might argue that Tiananmen is no longer relevant in Hong Kong’s society. Moreover, some people argue that the form of the candlelight vigil is old-fashioned and would not put pressure on both the Hong Kong government and the mainland Chinese government. In addition, some people have been critiquing the Alliance for being too easily satisfied with the number of vigil participants. With the Hong Kong Federation of Students withdrawing from the Alliance, there was a decline in young participants in the vigil (Kung, 2022; Cheng & Yuen, 2019). All these factors have created challenges for consolidating, mobilizing, and transmitting the collective memory of the Tiananmen Massacre.

Memories of the Tiananmen Massacre in Today’s Hong Kong

As mentioned in the Consolidation of the Collective Memory section, the commemoration vigils have been held annually on June 4 at Victoria Park in Hong Kong ever since 1990 and were not suspended until 2020. There are three main reasons this public

commemoration event has not been continued since 2020. First, the large-scale protest of the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement broke out during the summer of 2019, which led to a completely different political landscape in the city of Hong Kong (Lee, 2024). Second, the Council of Chairpersons created and imposed the National Security Law (NSL) on Hong Kong, bypassing the legislative council of Hong Kong (Griffiths, 2021). The enforcement of this law led to the arrest of the three leaders of the annual commemoration vigil (Lee, 2024). The third reason is the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the vigil did not resume after the end of COVID-19, marking the third reason an excuse for the government to limit Hong Kong's freedom of assembly. In fact, around 20,000 people showed up at Victoria Park on June 4, 2020, including 26 being arrested (Cheng, 2024).

After the enactment of the NSL, the memories of the Tiananmen Massacre in Hong Kong were threatened to be erased from a societal level to a personal level. On the societal level, the only June 4th Museum established by the Alliance was pressured to close down in May 2021 because of being charged with operating without a license. Two statues built in memorial of the massacre, the *Pillar of Shame* and the *Statue of the Goddess of Democracy*, were removed from the Hong Kong University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Lee, 2024). Studies have suggested that memorial statues/monuments play an important role in the representation of collective memory and identity (Sturken, 1991), and the removal of the statue/monument often serves the interest of the government's attempt at memory erasure (Mitchell, 2003). Particularly, those statues were placed on two major university campuses in Hong Kong, which are ideal places for memory transmission and where active student demonstrations and protests take place. In addition to the government's attempts at erasing the collective memory, self-censorship became pervasive in society in response to the implementation of the NSL. For example,

teachers in secondary schools stopped discussing the event and the commemoration in Hong Kong, and libraries removed books mentioning the 1989 protests and the Massacre (Lee, 2024). Self-censorship also permeated the journalism field. According to Lee (2024), the number of media coverage of Tiananmen has dropped from 340 in 2021 to only 113 in 2022.

Despite direct censorship from the government and self-censorship out of fear, there are people who care about this event, and its memory has taken other forms of commemoration. Since 2020, citizens have been banned from entering Victoria Park on June 4 for commemoration. Thus, many people brought flowers and candles to the entrance of the park and stayed briefly (Lee, 2024), making Victoria Park a distant memorial spot instead of simply a place to hold commemoration events. In addition to that, the Catholic Church took the responsibility to hold the commemoration masses on June 4 (Lee, 2024). Seet and Tandoc's (2024) study, "Re-meme-bering Tiananmen? From collective memory to meta-memory on TikTok," although it was not conducted in Hong Kong because TikTok was banned, demonstrates a trend of commemorating this event in the future. Among the TikTok videos they analyzed, the memory of the event extended from the sociopolitical contexts surrounding Tiananmen, the protests, and the massacre to commemorating it in association with other historical events and even a "counter-memory" that the soldiers were also victims in the massacre. Beyond those more serious commemorating videos, other videos represented what Seet and Tandoc called "memory of the memory," which refers to "commemorating what others remember or want to remember." This included memes about the CCP's preferred memory, or not remembering, and censorship. In support of Ibrahim (2015), Seet and Tandoc (2024) also identified that the Tank Man image is a prominent symbol of the memory and commemoration of the massacre on the Internet.

Taken together, under the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of the NSL in Hong Kong, the mobilization and transmission of the collective memory and the commemoration of the Tiananmen Massacre have drastically changed. Instead of a top-down mode where social organizations and traditional media took the responsibility to mobilize and transmit (Seet & Tandoc, 2024), a new form of collective memory process has emerged. Individuals, not traditional memory institutions, take the initiative to commemorate. Although the TikTok study was not conducted in Hong Kong, we could infer that Hong Kong people might also commemorated on social media platforms like Instagram but more secretly.

Discussion and Conclusion

This literature review probes into the collective memory of the Tiananmen Massacre in Hong Kong. Specifically, this review discussed why this historical event is important to Hong Kong society, how this collective memory is consolidated, the evolution of this collective memory, the memories in today's Hong Kong, and the challenges of retaining the collective memory in Hong Kong. Some significant themes emerge in the extant literature on this topic that are central to the understanding of the memories of Tiananmen in Hong Kong. First, the formation, consolidation, and transmission of this collective memory is political in its essence, although it has shifted to a human rights discourse to a certain extent in later years. Second, the most important form of commemoration is the annual candlelight vigil held from 1990 to 2019 at Victoria Park, organized by the Alliance. It played a crucial part in mobilizing and transmitting the collective memory and has been very successful. Third, the change of the collective memory is accompanied by the gradual shift of the identity in Hong Kong. As Hong Kong people identify less with their Chinese identity, the Tiananmen Massacre becomes less relevant in Hong Kong's local pro-democracy movement despite its underlying influence on recent protests like the

Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the Anti-ELAB Movement in 2019.

The previous section discussed how collective memory and the form of commemoration have changed due to an elevated level of control from the CCP. Although the NSL was initially intended to suppress the Anti-ELAB Movement, it eventually suppressed almost all events showing democratic values, including the annual candlelight vigil that has become a tradition for many Hong Kong people regardless of age and whether they “lived through” the Tiananmen Massacre. As the CCP’s propaganda continues to grow rampantly in Hong Kong, what identity would the young children develop, whether they learn/know about this tragic event and whether this event still be relevant in Hong Kong are questions that need further exploration. Therefore, future research should study how the Tiananmen Massacre will be represented if younger children who receive secondary education after the NSL know of this event and how the memory of their generation is related to their identity. Future research should also investigate how this collective memory is represented on social media and what forms of commemoration are under state censorship. Specifically, do Hong Kong people use memes and more covert ways to allude to the massacre? In addition, due to the NSL, many Hong Kong people have left the city and either migrated or sought political asylum in the UK, Taiwan, Canada, etc. How they would commemorate the Tiananmen Massacre is also worth exploring.

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