



Research Paper

Cycles of Resistance and Repression: A Comparative Analysis of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Movement and the 2019–2020 Hong Kong Democracy Protests

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ABSTRACT: *This article employs comparative historical analysis to examine the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and the 2019–2020 Hong Kong pro-democracy movement to explore recurring patterns of resistance and authoritarian repression within the People's Republic of China. Although separated by three decades and occurring under distinct political systems, both movements emerged from demands for greater political participation, civil liberties, and governmental accountability. Using qualitative comparative historical analysis supported by scholarly literature, policy reports, eyewitness testimony, and historical documentation, this paper analyzes the similarities and differences between the two movements in terms of government response, protest organization, communication strategies, symbolism, youth leadership, and international influence. The findings demonstrate that while the Chinese Communist Party adapted its methods of suppression—from overt military intervention in 1989 to legal, technological, and institutional mechanisms in Hong Kong—the fundamental objective of preserving one-party rule remained unchanged. The comparison further reveals an enduring cycle in which popular demands for democratic reform are consistently met by increasingly sophisticated forms of authoritarian control. By examining these two landmark movements together, this study contributes to broader discussions of authoritarian resilience, political resistance, and the evolving relationship between state power and democratic aspirations in contemporary China.*

KEYWORDS: *Tiananmen Square; Hong Kong Protests; Chinese Communist Party; Authoritarianism; Democratic Movements; Political Repression; Comparative Politics*

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I. INTRODUCTION

“Poverty is not socialism. To be rich is glorious” (qtd. in Dorn). During the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms integrated China into the global market under the vision of a new, open nation (Garnaut et. al). However, this transition brought with it unintentional consequences, as this sudden growth led to high inflation and unemployment among young adults. Furthermore, westernization promoted liberal ideas of democracy, pushing university students to protest for greater economic and political opportunities. These tensions culminated in the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests where hundreds, possibly thousands, of protesters were violently suppressed by the Chinese military, resulting in a crackdown that tightened authoritarian control and mass censorship (“Tiananmen”). A few years later, in the opposite fashion, China established a “One Country, Two Systems” model in Hong Kong that promised independent courts and freedom of speech outside its mainland (Maizland and Fong). Despite these changes, however, the government gradually centralized political power in Beijing, causing Hongkongers to rally under the 2014 Umbrella Movement in protest for greater democracy. The movement proved unsuccessful, but rose again in greater numbers in the subsequent 2019-2020 democracy protests. Again, in a cyclical pattern, China shifted toward extreme authoritarianism to quell all dissent, successfully suppressing the revolution. This article addresses the following question: How do the Tiananmen Square movement and the Hong Kong democracy protests illustrate changing strategies of authoritarian repression within contemporary China? Although the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Pro-Democracy Protests were separate revolutionary events in different historical contexts, they both failed in achieving democratic reforms, demonstrating the cyclic nature of civilian resistance, violent repression, and silencing of dissent in the Chinese authoritarian regime. These two movements differed in terms of government response, CCP strategy, communication methods, but ultimately shared key similarities in their use of violence, symbolism, youth leadership, and Western influence that linked them as connected events within a broader struggle for political freedom in China. This study argues that the Tiananmen Square movement and the Hong

Kong democracy protests represent recurring cycles of resistance and authoritarian adaptation, revealing how the Chinese Communist Party has modified its mechanisms of repression while maintaining political control across distinct historical contexts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on the Tiananmen Square movement and the Hong Kong democracy protests has expanded considerably over the past three decades, yet these events are most often examined independently rather than comparatively. Historians and political scientists have generally focused on either the causes and consequences of the 1989 Tiananmen movement or the constitutional and political transformation of Hong Kong following the 1997 handover. As a result, less attention has been devoted to understanding how both movements collectively illustrate the evolution of authoritarian governance within contemporary China.

Merle Goldman argues that the Tiananmen movement fundamentally transformed political participation in China by demonstrating both the possibilities and limits of reform under one-party rule. Likewise, Louisa Lim emphasizes the Chinese Communist Party's systematic suppression of collective memory, contending that censorship and historical amnesia have become central instruments of authoritarian legitimacy. Rather than relying solely on coercion, the state increasingly controls historical narratives to reinforce political stability.

Scholarship on Hong Kong similarly emphasizes the gradual erosion of civil liberties under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework. Rachel Stern identifies the National Security Law as a watershed in Hong Kong's constitutional development, while Lindsay Maizland documents the progressive restriction of democratic institutions and political freedoms. Christina Gonzales further compares Tiananmen and the Umbrella Movement, arguing that student activism and symbolic resistance remained central to both movements despite changing political contexts.

Although these scholars provide valuable insights into each movement individually, comparatively few studies examine Tiananmen and the Hong Kong democracy protests as successive manifestations of authoritarian adaptation. This study addresses that gap by comparing both movements through a common analytical framework, arguing that they reveal recurring cycles of resistance and evolving mechanisms of state repression. Rather than viewing these protests as isolated historical episodes, this article demonstrates how the Chinese Communist Party has modified its methods of preserving political authority while maintaining its fundamental commitment to one-party rule.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative comparative historical methodology to examine the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement and the 2019–2020 Hong Kong democracy protests. Comparative historical analysis is particularly appropriate because both cases involve large-scale pro-democracy movements confronting the same authoritarian state under different political and technological conditions. Examining the two movements together allows for the identification of recurring patterns as well as significant changes in state repression, protest organization, and political strategy.

Evidence for this study consists of peer-reviewed books, scholarly journal articles, policy reports, historical archives, and eyewitness accounts. Primary evidence includes contemporary speeches, interviews, photographs, and official government actions, while secondary sources provide historical interpretation and political analysis. Rather than attempting to measure protest outcomes quantitatively, this article emphasizes qualitative comparison of five analytical categories: government response, Chinese Communist Party strategy, protest organization, political symbolism, and youth leadership.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. Reliable casualty figures for Tiananmen remain contested because of government censorship, and access to official Chinese archives remains restricted. Likewise, the long-term consequences of the Hong Kong protests continue to develop. Nevertheless, sufficient historical evidence exists to support a comparative analysis of the evolving relationship between authoritarian governance and democratic resistance.

IV. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

4.1 Tiananmen Square, 1989

Morgan Chua, a Singaporean political cartoonist, recalls his early belief in the leadership of Deng Xiaoping: "[l]ooking back, I supported Deng Xiaoping...because I respected his pragmatic reforms...I believed that he would lead China into a brighter future with care and understanding, without repeating the horrors of the past" (Chua). However, despite early hopes that Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms would usher in a more open and prosperous China, the Tiananmen Square massacre revealed the regime's enduring authoritarianism and its willingness to use violence to suppress political dissent. Even though the Chinese government guaranteed little freedom of speech, obstructed free elections, and promoted strict censorship at the time, the majority of Chinese

citizens still entrusted political figures like Xiaoping due to a strong nationalistic belief in a greater economic future. However, at the same time, newly educated university students sought political liberalization as seen in the West and believed in a future characterized by democracy and freedom. Around 100,000 students led peaceful protests for political reform in Tiananmen Square, a city square in the center of Beijing ("Tiananmen Square"). However, as Chua describes, "[o]n 4 June 1989, [Xiaoping] betrayed me, just as he betrayed his people and the international community who trusted in him. His government used the military to suppress its own innocent, unarmed people with firepower, brutality and insanity" (Chua). The intense, violent military crackdown killed an unknown amount of people and set a greater authoritarian character for China in the years to come. These events established an enduring pattern of political repression that would later shape both the Chinese government's response to dissent and the strategies adopted by subsequent pro-democracy movements.

4.2 The Umbrella Movement and the Hong Kong Protests

Roita, a 60-year-old Hong Konger, describes her motivation for protesting against increased mainland political control: "At our age, we saw the Tiananmen massacre. At that time we were not strong enough to fight for the young people, that's why we come out now. I want Hong Kong to have more democracy, more freedom and to have peace. I don't want to earn more money ... I want more freedom" (qtd. in Kamb et al.). The 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong reflected a continued resistance to Chinese authoritarianism, driven by a collective memory of past violence and a renewed desire for political freedom. When Beijing intruded onto the "One Country, Two Systems" principles of civil liberties and democratic institutions through denying open election nominations and only allowing Beijing-approved candidates to run, the 2014 Umbrella Movement was born ("Hong"). Although lack of wide public support and government disregard caused its failure after only 79 days, the movement did leave a lasting impact on Hong Kong society. It awakened a new generation of activists, fostered a stronger sense of Hong Kong identity, and deepened the political divisions within the city.

Rooted in decades of resistance to authoritarianism, from the Tiananmen Square massacre to the Umbrella Movement, the 2019 Hong Kong protests emerged not only in response to the proposed extradition bill but also as a culmination of growing fears over Beijing's tightening control and erosion of democratic freedoms. The proposed "Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation Bill" that would allow suspects to be tried in mainland Chinese courts, threatened to undermine the independence of Hong Kong's legal system (Gomes). In response, millions took to the streets, rallying behind five core demands: the full withdrawal of the bill, retraction of the term "riot" used by authorities, amnesty for arrested protesters, an independent investigation into police misconduct, and the implementation of universal suffrage. Though the bill was eventually withdrawn, the government refused to meet the other demands, and police violence and public anger intensified. In the short term, Beijing responded with sweeping repression. The 2020 National Security Law criminalized dissent under vague charges like "subversion" and "collusion with foreign forces," leading to mass arrests, the silencing of independent media, and the dismantling of the remaining democratic institutions in Hong Kong. In a harsh repression to these protests, the Chinese government reformed the Hong Kong government under its authoritarian regime.

V. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

5.1 Government Responses

The Chinese government's responses to the Tiananmen Square and Hong Kong protests differed significantly based on the existing political systems and levels of freedom in each region. In 1989, the students in Tiananmen were asking for new rights, like free speech and democracy, within mainland China's system, which was already very strict and controlled by the CCP. Since those rights did not exist yet in China, the government saw the protest as a serious threat and responded with military violence to stop it completely. Tiananmen Square was on a much larger scale and signaled the beginning of a complete revolution that could lead to regime change, especially when some soldiers within the People's Liberation Army (PLA) resisted CCP orders to fire on civilians. The willingness of portions of the PLA to hesitate demonstrated internal tensions surrounding the state's response, although the military ultimately enforced Party directives. On the other hand, in Hong Kong, people already had more freedoms because of the "One Country, Two Systems" policy after Britain handed the city back to China in 1997. That system promised Hong Kong its own legal system and rights like freedom of speech and assembly. So, when people protested in 2019–2020, they were trying to protect rights they already had, not asking for something completely new. The Chinese government did not use the army like in Tiananmen, but instead passed the National Security Law to slowly take away those freedoms through arrests, surveillance, and changing the legal system. In both cases, the goal was to shut down protests, but the response to Tiananmen was much more unpredictable and violent, while Hong Kong's was consistent and contained.

5.2 Chinese Communist Party Strategy

The CCP responded differently to the Tiananmen Square and Hong Kong protests, depending on the political context and the visibility of each movement. The CCP is the founding and sole ruling political party of China, declaring its ideology to be “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” (Socialism). The death of Hu Yaobang, a high ranking CCP official who was ousted in 1987 for being too liberal in regard to democratic reforms, triggered the mass student-led demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. The CCP viewed these demands as a threat to its authority and responded with a violent military crackdown, killing hundreds or possibly thousands of unarmed civilians. Afterward, the government refused to acknowledge the massacre, censored all discussion of the event, and punished those who attempted to commemorate it (“Tiananmen”). In contrast, the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests occurred in a semi-autonomous region where freedoms of speech, assembly, and press were still supposed to be legally protected. Although the CCP could not immediately impose violent military force, it gradually increased its control by backing the passage of the 2020 National Security Law, which criminalized dissent and led to mass arrests of protesters, journalists, and opposition lawmakers (Hernández). In both cases, the CCP functioned as more than a political party, a military force that protects the Chinese authoritarian regime at all costs; however, it did so using different strategies depending on the level of freedom and historical context.

5.3 Protest Organization and Leadership

Another key difference in these revolutionary events was the way protesters communicated and organized. In 1989, demonstrators relied on traditional methods like leaflets and word of mouth, which were often slow to spread, while the Chinese government retaliated with propaganda posters and censorship of the state-run media. In contrast, the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests made extensive use of modern digital tools, mainly social media (Ngai). Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram enabled protesters to share real-time updates, organize flash mobs, and spread their message globally. Memes, live streams, protest art, and viral hashtags helped build solidarity and international attention. In retaliation, the Chinese government used modern technology to develop defenses such as firewalls to censor revolutionary information. While both protest movements were met with government efforts to silence them, the methods of communication and censorship reflected the evolving technological landscape and the shifting dynamics of state control.

5.4 Communication and Digital Mobilization

The decentralized and leaderless nature of the Hong Kong protests marked a key difference from earlier revolutionary movements like Tiananmen, highlighting both the power and limitations of modern, digitally driven activism. One of the most distinctive features of the Hong Kong democracy movement was its “leaderless” structure, with no central political party or figure directing the protests (Ngai). Instead, coordination took place through decentralized platforms like Telegram, where individual users could organize or join events based on their availability and location. This structure, enabled by modern technology, brought both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, instant messaging like Telegram allowed for flexible, fast mobilization across geographic areas and made it harder for authorities to shut down the movement entirely. On the other hand, open platforms made the movement vulnerable to infiltration, hacking, and disorganization. Without a unified leadership, it was also more difficult to maintain a consistent message or strategy. Protest turnout was unpredictable—too many participants could lead to chaotic scenes, while too few could expose individuals to police retaliation. These challenges reveal a paradox in grassroots democracy: while decentralized participation empowers many voices, it can also blur goals, fragment coordination, and hinder long-term reform. The adoption of encrypted digital platforms fundamentally altered collective action by decentralizing organizational authority. Unlike Tiananmen's hierarchical student leadership, Hong Kong's networked mobilization reduced dependence on identifiable leaders but simultaneously complicated strategic coordination.

VI. SHARED CHARACTERISTICS

6.1 Shared Political Demands

Despite occurring three decades apart, the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 and the 2019–2020 Hong Kong demonstrations shared strikingly similar demands and outcomes. Both movements emerged from dissatisfaction with Chinese authoritarian governance and called for greater political reform, government accountability, and fundamental freedoms such as freedom of speech and fair elections. In Tiananmen, students demanded anti-corruption measures and democratic participation; in Hong Kong, protesters outlined five key demands, including universal suffrage, amnesty for arrested activists, and an independent inquiry into police violence. In both cases, the Chinese government refused to compromise, framing the protests as threats to national stability. Though the methods of repression differed, Tiananmen ending in a military massacre, while Hong Kong saw a sweeping legal crackdown through the National Security Law, the outcome was the same: the silencing of dissent. These two failed pro-democracy movements reveal a pattern in greater China where popular demands for

reform are consistently met with escalating authoritarianism, tighter political control, and suppression of civil liberties. Regardless of the aims of the protestors, this result of increased authoritarianism has consistently produced similar outcomes.

6.2 State Violence and Repression

Both the Tiananmen Square and Hong Kong protests contained intense and often violent government repression, reflecting the Chinese government's reliance on violence to maintain authoritarian control. The Chinese government reports casualties at 200-300, but some Western sources estimate the number to be as high as 10,000 (Mathews). The vast discrepancy in numbers, coupled with strict censorship and the absence of official accountability, underscores the regime's lack of transparency. As seen in Figure A, the infamous "Tank Man", extreme military force met peaceful protesters in a cruel imbalance of power. In Hong Kong, while the death toll was lower, the violence was still severe and widespread. Approximately 3,000 people were injured during these protests. As seen in Figure B, a crowd of armed police surround a peacefully protesting woman in an excessive show of authoritarian power. In one instance, police confirmed firing tear gas 87 times and reported 34 injuries on a single day. Although there were less casualties, their stories are still poignant, including a 21-year-old student who was shot in the stomach at close range. Violence serves as a continuous theme to maintain the authoritarian power of China.

6.3 Political Symbolism

Symbols also played a powerful role in both the Tiananmen Square protests and the Hong Kong democracy movement, reinforcing a shared visual language of resistance across generations. In 1989, students in Beijing created the "Goddess of Democracy," a statue modeled after the Statue of Liberty, to represent their aspirations for freedom and political reform (shown in Figure C). Thirty years later, Hong Kong protesters created their own version, "Lady Liberty Hong Kong", a masked figure holding an umbrella and a protest slogan, capturing the spirit of defiance under surveillance and repression (shown in Figure D). Both figures became powerful icons that transcended language, reinforcing a shared visual language of protest in the fight for democratic values.

Additionally, protesters in both movements adopted other visual tools to assert unity and resistance: Tiananmen activists used banners and handwritten slogans, while Hongkongers filled public spaces with "Lennon Walls," colorful displays of sticky notes bearing messages of hope, anger, and solidarity. The use of black clothing also became another unifying symbol during the 2019–2020 protests, representing mourning, anonymity, and resistance. These visual strategies underscore how symbolism served as a powerful, unifying force across generations, demonstrating the enduring spirit of civilian defiance under authoritarian repression.

Tactically, Hongkongers adapted the umbrella—first used in the 2014 Umbrella Movement—as both a shield against police pepper spray and a symbol of peaceful resistance, while Tiananmen protesters built makeshift barricades and formed human chains to block military advances (shown in Figure E). Across both protests, these symbols served not only as tools of expression and defense but also as enduring representations of pro-democracy struggle in the face of authoritarian suppression.

6.4 Youth Leadership

In both revolutionary events, university students led the charge physically and intellectually. Tang, a 15-year-old Hong Kong high student, describes his motivation for participating: "At first I thought I was not strong enough to come out, but then I started to think that everyone, no matter how small, needs to come," he said, wearing a black face covering. "I'm angry about police abuse against the protesters, sexual abuse and shooting tear gas for no reason." Oftentimes, the youth have new ideas and are the most open to fighting for change within the government. Similarly, in Tiananmen Square, the university students sparked the movement by demanding political reform, freedom of speech, and an end to corruption. Their leadership and idealism galvanized a broad coalition of citizens to join the protests, making young people a powerful force for change in both moments of resistance.

6.5 Western Democratic Influence

Furthermore, Western democratic ideals inspired both the Tiananmen Square and 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests, shaping their demand and drawing global attention. In 1989, Chinese students cited principles like free speech and multiparty elections that echoed liberal democracies in the West. The US imposed arms sanctions and the EU imposed an arms embargo on China, a measure that remains in effect today. Similarly, in Hong Kong, protesters demanded universal suffrage, fair elections, and freedom of speech that were originally guaranteed under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework. In Figure E, protesters hold American flags that represent these democratic ideals. In response, the US enacted the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which

allows for sanctions against individuals deemed responsible for undermining Hong Kong's autonomy and human rights. Both movements received widespread international coverage and condemnation of China's actions.

VII. DISCUSSION

7.1 Authoritarian Resilience

Despite waves of protest and public resistance over the decades, the People's Republic of China has successfully maintained its authoritarian regime through a combination of ideological control, cultural influence, and economic legitimacy. The CCP has built a vast and effective censorship system that tightly controls information and opinions against the government. They intertwine politics and education, promoting one mass positive view on the Chinese government that ties nationalism with the citizens' identity. The regime invests heavily in patriotic education and the rewriting of history to promote loyalty and discourage rebellion. Traditional values, Confucian ideals of hierarchy, and a culture that emphasizes collective over individual interests also contribute to societal acceptance of authority. Next, the CCP has also legitimized itself to economic growth. Many citizens believe that rapid economic development will provide individual financial gain that outweighs the importance of political freedom. This compromise, however, reveals an internal contradiction: while China claims to be a socialist state, its system depends on capitalist growth to maintain authoritarian rule.

7.2 Regional and International Implications

The characteristics of these two revolutions, their failure to ensure governmental reform, their violent repression, their symbolic codes and youthful composition, are not unique to China, but also apply to nearby nations facing similar fights for democracy. A Japanese protester in Hong Kong, Sakura, remarks on the nature of these pro-democracy protests: "It's not just a Hong Kong problem. It's an international problem. Today Hong Kong, tomorrow Japan. That's why I came all the way from Japan to support the protest today. I want to safeguard Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong as we are closely connected. So I feel the same as a Hong Konger and will stand with Hong Kong" (qtd. in Kamb et al.). The legacy of these two events extends far beyond isolated moments in Chinese history. As we have seen throughout history, revolutions have the power to inspire others, whether they fail or succeed. They set precedents that influence global perceptions of China and serve as warnings of authoritarianism or inspirations for democratic reform.

7.3 Cycles of Political Change

Beyond immediate political outcomes, these recurring episodes invite interpretation through broader theories of cyclical political development. Human nature, such as our constant dissatisfaction with any current government structure, may also play a key role in these recurring political cycles. Looking back to the wisdom of antiquity, *anacyclosis*, the political theory described by the ancient historian Polybius, outlines the cyclical progression of regimes from monarchy to tyranny, aristocracy to oligarchy, and democracy to mob rule, before beginning again. According to Polybius, history follows the shape of a circle, constantly repeating itself. In the context of China, signs of this cyclical pattern are evident. Even though the current regime appears deeply entrenched, historical precedent suggests that such systems are ultimately subject to transformation.

However, what if history is no longer bound to repeat itself? The growing global awareness, the rapid evolution of technology, and the increasing demand for transparency and rights may be pushing humanity toward a new trajectory—one that is not cyclical, but progressively linear. Although the long-term political trajectory remains uncertain, these movements continue to shape collective memory and structure permanent building blocks in the international understandings of authoritarian governance.

VIII. CONCLUSION

At the end of the day, whether the Chinese government will continue its authoritarian regime or eventually face a successful internal revolution remains uncertain. What is certain, however, is that people will continue to question and challenge systems that fail to meet their political, economic, or moral expectations and continue to fight for freedom.

This comparative analysis demonstrates that although the Tiananmen and Hong Kong movements emerged under different political conditions, both illustrate a recurring pattern in which demands for political liberalization are met by increasingly sophisticated forms of authoritarian control. While methods of repression have evolved from direct military intervention to legal and technological mechanisms, the underlying objective of preserving CCP authority has remained consistent.

APPENDIX



Figure A. Tank Man confronting People's Liberation Army tanks near Tiananmen Square following the military crackdown, Beijing, June 1989.

Source: Tiananmen Square Collection, IUPUI University Library Digital Collections



Figure B. Hong Kong police surrounding a protester holding a yellow umbrella during the 2019 pro-democracy demonstrations.

Source: Reuters



Figure C. The Goddess of Democracy statue erected by student protesters in Tiananmen Square, May 1989.

Source: Tiananmen Square Collection, IUPUI University Library Digital Collections.



Figure D. Lady Liberty Hong Kong statue displayed during the 2019 democracy movement.
Source: Reuters

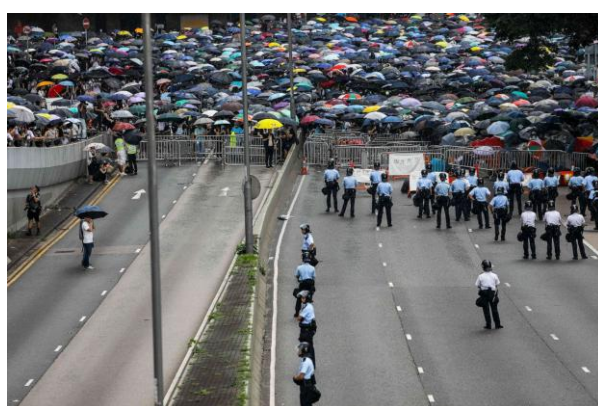


Figure E. A mass of Hong Kong protesters holding umbrellas while advocating democratic reforms under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework.
Source: Reuters



Figure F. Hong Kong protestors holding American flags and signs referencing the Tiananmen Square incident.
Source: Reuters

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