It Matters Who You Can Talk With: Conversational Networks and Activists' Group Division in China's Democracy Wall Movement, 1978-1981

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Abstract

This study employs social network analysis to investigate the division of student and worker activist groups during China's Democracy Wall Movement (1978-1981). By analyzing conversational ties among political elites, activists, foreign journalists, diplomats, and state media journalists, the research explores how activists' emerging political status, mediated by their positions and properties in conversational networks, contributes to group divisions. The findings reveal that student activists benefit from both formal and informal conversational ties with reformist political elites, facilitating their co-optation. Conversely, worker activists face repression due to weaker and transient conversational ties, resulting in increased radicalization and further divisions within their groups. This study enhances our understanding of the micro-foundations of status group formation and division during political movements, providing novel insights into the interactions between activists and multiple social actors, state-movement dynamics, conversational ties, and the application of social network analysis in the study of social movements.

Introduction

On the night of September 29th, 1979, in a small room in Beijing during the Democracy Wall Movement, also known as the "Beijing Spring," pro-democracy activists engaged in passionate discussions (Xu 2009, 2014). The central focus of the debate was whether to organize a demonstration just two days later, coinciding with China's 30th national anniversary. Most college student activists expressed opposition to the idea, valuing the relatively relaxed political atmosphere and emphasizing the importance of institutionalizing the looming political reforms. They also voiced concerns about the potential for disruptive actions to provoke repression, which could jeopardize the movement (Hu 2014). In contrast, urban worker activists held a different perspective, seeing the demonstration as an opportunity to demonstrate their solidarity and strength to the government, serving as

a deterrent against possible repression. Eventually, influenced by the majority of worker participants, a decision was made to proceed with the demonstration through a vote. However, this outcome created apprehension among the student activists, leading them to inform the workers that they would no longer participate in collective actions in the future. Consequently, the demonstration took place successfully two days later, but it also marked a fracture in the collaborative efforts between the two groups.

The debate among pro-democracy activists during the Democracy Wall Movement presents an intriguing aspect - the divergent interpretations of the same tactic under similar political conditions. The movement originated from a wave of wall posters expressing grievances and advocating for political reform in the aftermath of the death of Mao Zedong and the decade-long Cultural Revolution (Chubb 2016; Nathan 1986; Opletal 2021; Paltemaa 2005). Encouraged by reformist political elites (Butterfield 1978), activists swiftly established diverse organizations within a short period. While the initial stages of the movement did not exhibit clear divisions in opinions and actions, all participants shared a collective aspiration for political freedom. However, over time, distinct collective identities and divergent political choices began to emerge (Paltemaa 2005). One of the peaks of disagreement over strategic and tactical decisions occurred during the pivotal meeting described earlier. Therefore, the enduring puzzle surrounding the Democracy Wall Movement is the emergence of divergent paths and interpretations among the pro-democracy activists. Why did college students and urban workers, who initially shared a collective aspiration for political freedom, gradually align their choices with their respective occupations rather than other social features?

The existing literature on social movements typically proposes a political status model to account for the formation and division of activist groups (Balser 1997; Barkan 1979, 1986; Benford 1993; Haines 1984, 2013; McAdam 1982, 1989; Polletta and Kretschmer 2015; Shriver and Messer 2009; Walder 2006; Zald and Ash 1966; Zald and McCarthy 1980). This model underscores the significance of individuals' positions and properties within political structures, which shape their diverse interests and give rise to varying and occasionally conflicting political choices. However, our understanding of the underlying mechanisms and socio-political consequences of political status formation remains limited (Diani and McAdam 2003; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). To bridge this gap, the present study adopts a social network analysis approach to investigate how activists' evolving political status, mediated by the endogenous and emergent structures of conversational networks, contributes to the emergence of divergent political choices (Lee 2022). During social movements, activists perceive the political environment, assess their positions in the political structure, adjust their political goals accordingly, and subsequently decide on a course of action (Walder 2004, 2006, 2009). These processes of observation, interpretation, and action are largely shaped by conversations. Therefore, by examining the dynamics of conversational ties between activists and various social actors, this study maintains that an analysis of conversational networks can provide insights into the intricate processes involved in the formation of status groups and shed light on their implications for the dynamics of social movements.

This research focuses specifically on examining the formation and implications of divergent political choices within the context of China's Democracy Wall Movement (1978-1981), with a particular emphasis on the group division between student and worker activists. The central argument of this study posits that student activists, benefiting from both formal and informal conversational ties with reformist political elites, were more susceptible to co-optation by the existing power structures. In contrast, worker activists, faced with repression and possessing weaker and transient conversational ties, experienced heightened radicalization and further internal divisions within their groups. These conversational ties, characterized as meaningful dialogues between activists and multiple social actors, such as political elites, foreign journalists, diplomats, and state media journalists, serve as crucial channels through which activists perceive their political positions and leverages (Chubb 2016; Paltemaa 2005). In essence, the division between student and worker activist groups during the Democracy Wall Movement can be comprehended by examining the evolving political status of activists within dynamic conversational networks.

In general, in unraveling the complexities of the Democracy Wall Movement, this study seeks to contribute to our understanding of the micro-foundations of political status formation and its socio-political consequences. By examining the interplay between activists' emerging political status, conversational networks, and their different political choices, this project aims to provide novel insights into the interactions between elites and activists, the dynamics of state-movement relationships, and the application of social network analysis in the study of social movements.

Political Status Model and Conversational Networks (Incomplete Part)

The study of political status within social movements has been approached from two main perspectives: the static perspective and the procedural perspective (Walder 2006). The static perspective emphasizes the pre-existing social features of activists and views their choices and positions through the lens of their initial political predispositions (Barkan 1979; Benford 1993; Carmin and Balser 2002; King 2008; Lee 1978; Mason 2018; McAdam 1989). This approach assumes that activists' political status is determined by their pre-dispositional social characteristics before their engagement in the movement. While this perspective provides valuable insights into the influence of social backgrounds on activists' choices, it has limitations in terms of its determinism and lack of consideration for the dynamic nature of political movements.

On the other hand, the procedural perspective focuses on the political processes and opportunities that shape activists' positions and choices (Balser 1997; Barkan 1986; Shriver and Messer 2009; Walder 2006, 2012, 2019; Zhang 2021). It argues that activists' political status is not solely rooted in their pre-existing social features but emerges within the specific political opportunity structure of the movement. This perspective acknowledges the contingent nature of activists' positions

and recognizes the role of external factors in shaping their political identities. However, it may overlook the intricate dynamics of interactions and the formation of political status within the movement.

In this study, I argue that both the static and procedural explanations have their limitations. To overcome these limitations, it is crucial to emphasize the emerging positions and properties of activists within the dynamic conversational network structure that involves various social actors. By focusing on conversational ties, which encompass meaningful dialogues between activists and other social actors, social network analysis offers a valuable tool for understanding the formation of activists' political status and its implications.

While I am not familiar with the specific literature on conversational ties, social network analysis provides innovative insights into the interactions between activists and other social actors (Diani and McAdam 2003; Gould 1991, 1995; Gould and Fernandez 1989). It enables us to examine the evolving conversational networks and the influence they have on activists' perceptions of their political positions and leverages. By incorporating the dynamics of conversational ties into the analysis of political status, we can gain a deeper understanding of the micro-foundations of political choices and the socio-political consequences within social movements (Gould 2002).

In summary, this study aims to overcome the limitations of existing explanations by highlighting activists' emerging positions and properties within dynamic conversational networks. By exploring the role of conversational ties through social network analysis, we can shed light on the formation of political status and its implications for the dynamics of the Democracy Wall Movement.

Data and Methods

To investigate the political choices and conversations among various actors during the Democracy Wall Movement (DWM), including individual activists, reformist political elites, foreign journalists, diplomats, and state media journalists, a diverse range of data sources was collected. These sources encompassed interviews, memoirs, newspapers, and other historical documents. Given the political censorship prevalent in China, the majority of Chinese sources on the DWM were produced overseas by activists. Therefore, exiles' autobiographies, memoirs, and interviews obtained through online platforms constituted the primary source material for this research. In addition, efforts were made to contact key figures of the movement to acquire unpublished memoirs, allowing for the confirmation of critical details in comparison with textual materials. Helmut Opletal, a scholar from the Department of East Asia Studies at the University of Vienna, has compiled a comprehensive database containing detailed interviews, historical documents, and other relevant sources pertaining to the movement (Chen 2013; Hu 2014; Liu 1995; Opletal 2021; Sun 2014; J. Wang 2014; X. Wang 2014; Xu 2009, 2014).

To explore the diversity of political opinions and debates among activists, the unofficial journals they used as platforms for expression during the DWM were examined. These journals were

later collected and compiled by a Taiwanese research institution under the title *The Compilation of Underground Journals in Mainland China* (Zhonggong yanjiu zazhishe 1980). Moreover, to gain insights into the actions of political elites during the movement, memoirs and official historical documents were analyzed. To ensure the accuracy of oral materials, newspapers and governmental archives were meticulously scrutinized to trace specific dates and details related to the movement. This extensive array of sources facilitated the construction of a highly detailed historical narrative of the DWM at the individual level, encompassing a three-year period from 1978 to 1981. It is important to note that all Chinese translations utilized in this research were undertaken by the author.

Table 1: Type of characters in the social network analysis.

Type of Major Characters	Frequency	Percentage
Activist	32	69.57%
Official	7	15.22%
Foreign Diplomat or Journalist	4	8.7%
State-Media Journalist	3	6.52%
Total	**46**	**100%**

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of Democracy Wall Movement activists.

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Activist Occupation	Worker	25	78.13%
	Student	7	21.87%
Cadre Family Background	Yes	8	25.0%
	No	20	62.5%
	Unknow	4	12.5%
Beijing Resident	Yes	22	68.78%
	No	10	31.25%
Political Orientated Activism	Yes	22	68.78%
	No	10	31.25%
	Total	**32**	**100%**

At the current stage of data collection, the dataset consists of a total of 46 individuals. Among them, 32 are activists, accounting for 69.57% of the dataset. There are also 7 officials (15.22%), 4 foreign diplomats or journalists (8.7%), and 2 state media journalists (6.52%). As the research progresses, additional activists will be included to enhance the comprehensiveness of the analysis. Among the pro-democracy activists, the majority, 25 individuals (78.31%), are urban workers, while 7 core leaders (21.87%) are students. It is worth noting that most of the activists did not come from cadre family backgrounds, although 8 individuals (25%) did. Additionally, 22 activists (68.78%) were residents of Beijing at the time of the movement, while 10 individuals (31.25%) were not living in Beijing during that period. In terms of their engagement in the movement, 22 activists (68.78%) directly participated in political-oriented discussions, while 10 individuals (31.25%) expressed themselves through poetry, literature, art creation, conveying their political preferences with a framing of "seeking the freedom of art creation" (Mang 2013; Qv 2014).

Disagreement among Democracy Wall Activists

The Democracy Wall Movement emerged in the late 1978 as a response to the policy of "rehabilitation" in China (Nathan 1986; Paltemaa 2005). It began with petitioners gathering in front of a 600-foot-long brick wall in Xidan, located in the center of Beijing, to voice their grievances stemming from previous political movements. Initially, the focus was on personal grievances, but as the movement progressed, activists started advocating for political and social reforms, emphasizing the need for greater freedom of expression.

As the movement unfolded, the presence of disagreements among activists based on occupational divisions became increasingly apparent. These differences can be categorized into three main areas: collective identity, diagnosis of China's political and social problems, and prognosis for the future (Zhonggong yanjiu zazhishe 1980). Student activists identified themselves as allies of reformist political elites, believing that China's political system could be reformed through institutional channels and engagement in state-tolerated actions. In contrast, worker activists saw themselves as independent social forces that should be free from government control. They identified a more fundamental institutional problem and grew increasingly radical, adopting riskier strategies and engaging in disruptive actions.

Table 3: Disagreements among student and worker activists.

	College Students	Urban Workers
Collective Identity	Alliance of Reformist Elites	Independent Political and Social Forces
Diagnosis	A Reformable Institutional Problem	A Fundamental Institutional Problem
Prognosis	Institutional Channels and State-Tolerated Actions	Risky Strategies and Disruptive Actions

To provide a visual representation of the disagreements among student and worker activists during the Democracy Wall Movement, Table 3 presents an overview of the various viewpoints and their respective categories. Initially, the common goal of attaining political freedom masked these divisions, but as the movement progressed, the contrasting perspectives based on occupational identities became more pronounced, influencing the strategies and actions undertaken by the different activist groups.

Three Conversational Phases during the DWM

This research aims to analyze the formation of divergent political choices among activists in the Democracy Wall Movement through an examination of the dynamics of interactions and changes in conversational ties. The movement is divided into three distinct stages, each characterized by unique patterns of engagement and power dynamics.

Table 2: Three conversational phases during the Democracy Wall Movement.

	Time	Political Elites' Action	Activists' Action
Phase I	Oct 1978 to Jan 1979	Facilitating	Mobilizing
Phase II	Jan 1979 to Oct 1979	Monitoring	Group Formation
Phase III	Oct 1979 to Apr 1981	Channeling and Repression	Group Division

In the first phase, occurring from October 1978 to January 1979, the movement was facilitated by reformist political elites. During this stage, activists capitalized on the political opportunity and mobilized their efforts accordingly. Conversational networks played a pivotal role during this phase, as political elites employed different types of conversational ties to approach various activist groups. For instance, reformist political leader Deng Xiaoping reached out to worker activists through foreign journalists, sending a vague political signal that marked the opening of a political opportunity. Students, on the other hand, had formal and institutional conversational ties with middle-level reformist elites who could convey their messages to the central leaders during party meetings. During this period, the differences in opinions among activists were not yet evident.

The second phase, spanning from January 1979 to October 1979, witnessed significant shifts in power dynamics. As activists continued to mobilize, they began forming sub-groups aligned with various social and political features, such as geographical and biographical factors. Concurrently, counter-reform factions were swiftly removed from positions of central power, prompting reformist political elites to contemplate pacifying the situation. Consequently, they started monitoring the actions of activists. Student activists obtained inside information through both established institutional

channels and informal conversations with various levels of political elites. In contrast, conversational ties between worker groups and political elites remained weaker and transient, with political elites dispatching only a few state-media journalists to investigate worker thoughts and actions.

The final stage, spanning from October 1979 to April 1981, witnessed further transformations in the dynamics of the movement. Reformist elites adopted a strategy of divide and conquer, aiming to suppress the movement. Drawing from previous conversations, they considered students as a safer group and thus provided them with formal institutional access by allowing them to join the district-level People's Representative Elections. Simultaneously, they viewed worker groups as more threatening, as journalists had portrayed some workers as potential dangers. Consequently, while co-opting the students, political elites resorted to repression tactics, such as banning wall posters and unofficial journal publications, and arresting worker activists. This strategic approach effectively led to divergent perceptions of political positions and leverage, eventually leading to divisions among student and worker activist groups. As a result, almost all worker activists were arrested and heavily sentenced, while student activists were successfully co-opted and enjoyed a decade-long political reform era until the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989.

Phase 1: Facilitation of the Movement by Reformist Political Elites (Incomplete Part)

During Phase 1, the movement was facilitated by political elites who employed various communicative methods. In the graph, workers are represented in red, students in green, reformist political elites in purple, and foreign journalists in yellow.

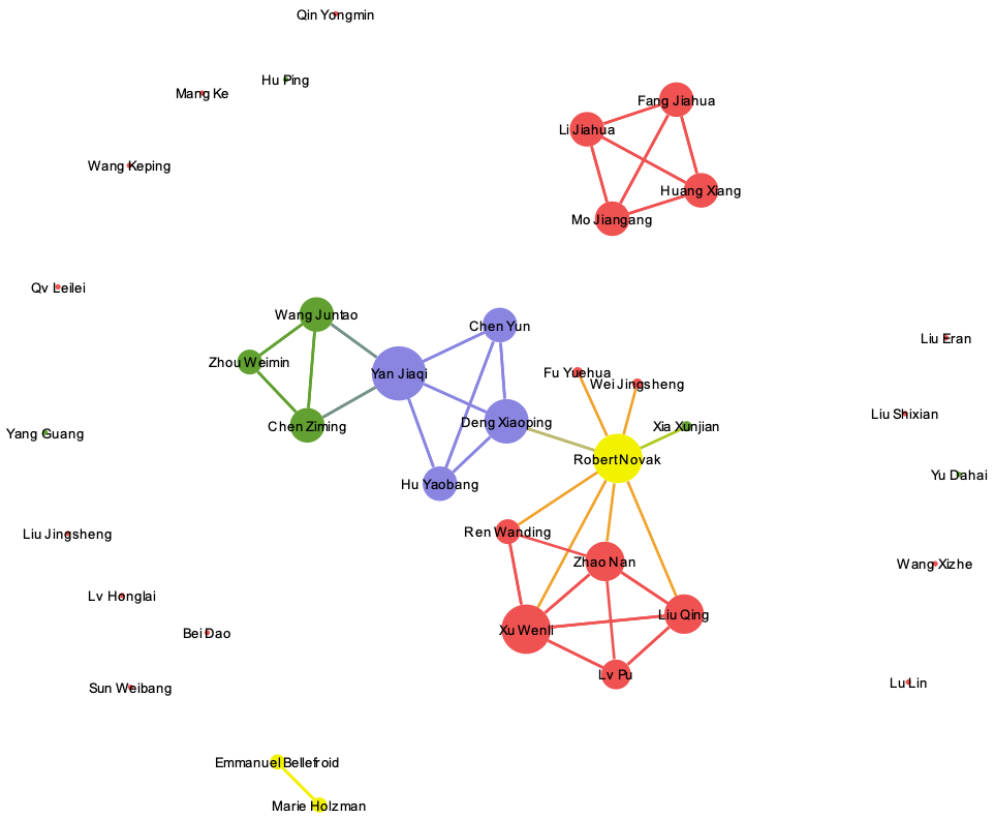

Figure 1: Phase 1 from Oct 1978 to Jan 1979.

Deng Xiaoping, China's Vice Prime Minister and a reformist leader, faced challenges in directly communicating with the workers involved in the Democracy Wall Movement. Instead, he relied on foreign journalists and politicians to convey his political signals. On November 26, Deng expressed his support for the activities at the Democracy Wall during a conversation with a Japanese politician. During a conversation, Deng said, "the Constitution guarantees wall posters. And, we have no intention of suppressing them or denying the right of the masses to express their views by pasting up wall posters. It has been necessary for some time for us to be urged along by them" (Butterfield 1978). On the same day, American journalist Robert Novak visited the Democracy Wall and engaged with the protestors. He promised to interview Deng the following day and sought input from the protestors on the questions they wanted him to ask Deng. When Novak asked about Deng's

attitude toward the Democracy Wall during the interview, Deng replied that "the people like to have the right to speak." Next day, "a large group of people had gathered there to wait for Robert Novak," however, "Novak did not return to the wall posters, but sent word through another journalist that Mr. Deng had told him the posters were 'a good thing.' This brought a cheer from the crowd. So, at the time, many foreign journalists and diplomats believe that Deng "might be the force behind the latest poster campaign" (Butterfield 1978).

However, the situation was different for the student groups. While they also heard about the news, they had a more reliable channel of communication through Yang Jiaqi (Chen 2013; J. Wang 2014). Yang Jiaqi, an official in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, had established a relationship with a student activist, Wang Juntao, prior to the emergence of the Democracy Wall. He maintained constant communication with Wang Juntao and Chen Ziming while attending a high-level secret Meeting on Theoretical Work of the party. For the first time in history, he gave a speech that proposed to end the lifetime tenure of CCP central leaders. Deng espoused Yan's proposition. About a year later, Deng himself drafted a resolution on the same issue and then was adopted by the politburo. During the same meeting in January 1979, a reformist leader Hu Yaobang, told the people that "there are truths on the Democracy Wall." Bo Yibo, a former Vice Premier, told his subordinate officials who were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution that "it is useless that you talk to me. Go to Democracy Wall to appeal your cases. These pieces of insider information were all heard by the students involved in the movement.

Activists responded to the political opportunities with mobilization.

Phase 2: Sub-Group Formation and Divergent Conversational Ties (Incomplete Part)

Phase 2 involved the formation of conversational networks and sub-groups among activists, with political elites monitoring them through different communication channels.

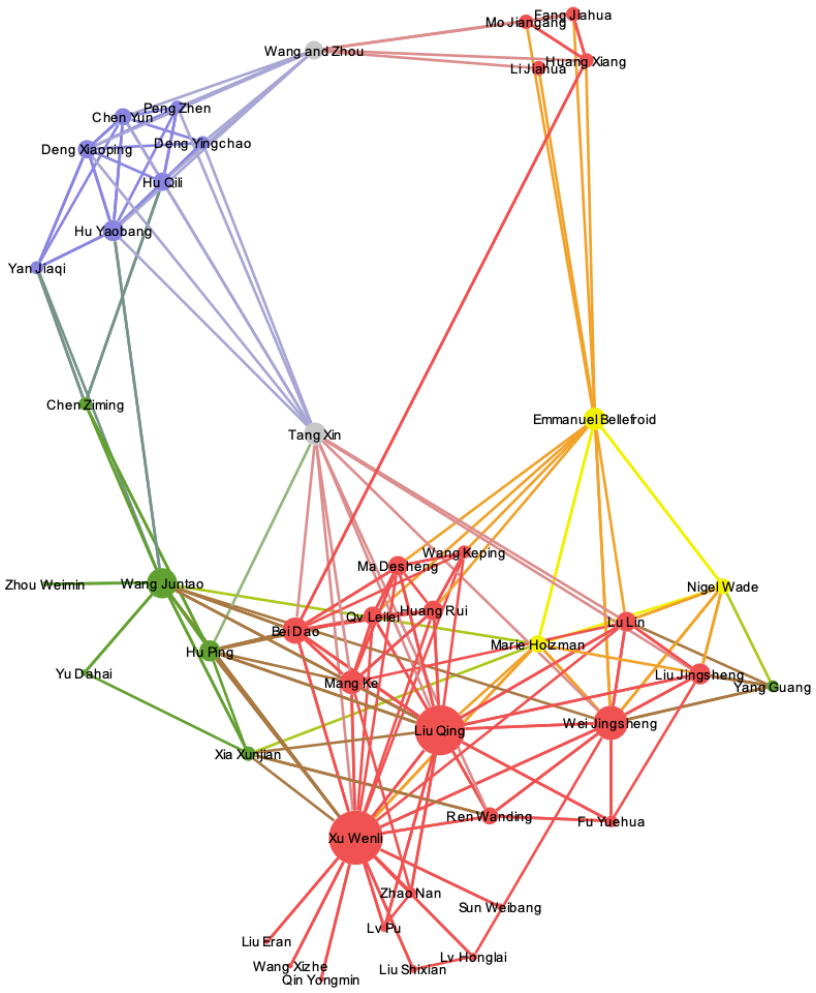

Figure 2: Phase 2 from Jan 1979 to Oct 1979.

Worker activists formed three major sub-groups: artists, coordinators, and street protestors. Artists, who often came from families with party members, expressed themselves through literature, poetry, and other art forms. Their focus was on seeking the freedom of artistic expression rather than engaging directly in political discussions.

Coordinators included prominent figures like Xu Wenli and Liu Qing (Liu 1995; Xu 2009, 2014). Xu aimed to establish a nationwide network of unofficial journals, bridging the gap between Beijing and other local organizations. Activists with ties to Xu were from cities like Tianjin and Wuhan. Liu Qing played a crucial role in unifying worker activists in Beijing, forming a coalition of unofficial journals, including the street protestors.

The street protestors were seen as radical and potentially dangerous by other activists. Their strategy involved organizing gatherings of petitioners in front of the Democracy Wall, staging parades and demonstrations. They also established connections with foreign diplomats and journalists to amplify their voices through foreign media, despite the significant risks involved. Some of them speak fluent English that facilitated communication.

As the workers formed sub-groups based on different survival strategies, the student activists established stronger conversational ties with the reformist elites. One notable example is the meeting between Wang Juntao and Hu Yaobang, the Secretary-General of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), where they discussed the movement and China's political reform in person (J. Wang 2014).

During the meeting, Wang first said he was against the repression toward the DWM activists. Hu did not respond directly but passed Wang an internal document that contained detailed information about how he had ordered the police to release some of the arrested activists. Then he turned to Wang and said, "I propose solving the problems this way." "You should promote political reform," Wang further said. Hu then responded, "I want political reform. I cannot fall asleep when I think about it. But, young man, it is not that easy." He told Wang that he had a book about Wang Anshi (a Chinese reformer in Song Dynasty) on his table. Whenever he read about ancient Chinese reformers, he got very excited and could not stop. When he dropped the book, he always asked himself that "why did all Chinese reformers in history fail?" He then asked Wang, "can you very specifically point out to me what we did wrong since the Third Plenary Session meeting? What have we done? What have we done wrong? What have we done well?" Hu continued, "you are a student. You told me you need democracy and freedom on your campuses. Well, can you tell me specifically how we should design the rules about publication, demonstration, and election?" These questions stumped Wang as he had never thought through the policymaking before. "Young man, you have three merits," Hu stated, "you are aspiring. You have knowledge. And you have passion. But you also have two weaknesses. First, you are impractical. You never think based on the current political conditions but only talk about what you want to do. Second, you are too impatient. Things will go wrong if you are too impatient." This conversation significantly influenced Wang's thoughts about the movement and China's reform later on.

In contrast to students who had direct conversations with reformist political elites, workers encountered difficulties in establishing communication channels with officials, even those who came from cadre background families. An example is Wei Jingsheng, whose father was a party cadre and had connections with Chen Yun. However, Wei's attempts to reach out to Chen Yun were met with rejection and warnings from his father, severing his ties with elites and cutting off his communication channels.

Another notable incident involved Tang Xin, a self-proclaimed journalist from the People's Daily. Tang Xin attended coordinating meetings under the guise of conducting an investigation. Despite activists being aware of his affiliation with the government, they invited him. However, Tang Xin remained silent about his role and instead inquired about activists' actions and future plans.

This interaction represented the only instance of direct conversation between activists and state agencies during this period.

As this phase unfolded, workers faced increasing arrests, particularly those who were active and held radical views. Fu Yuehua and Ren Wan Ding were among the first to be arrested (Ren 2014), followed by the group that had connections with foreign journalists and diplomats, including Wei Jingsheng (Wei 2014). Faced with escalating repression, the artists' group chose to distance themselves from the movement, prioritizing their own safety.

Phase 3: Channeling Students and Repression of Workers (Incomplete Part)

During this phase, political elites successfully channeled students by providing them with more institutional access, allowing their participation in district-level elections in 1980. State media journalists closely monitored these developments. On the other hand, workers faced surveillance and threats from the police.

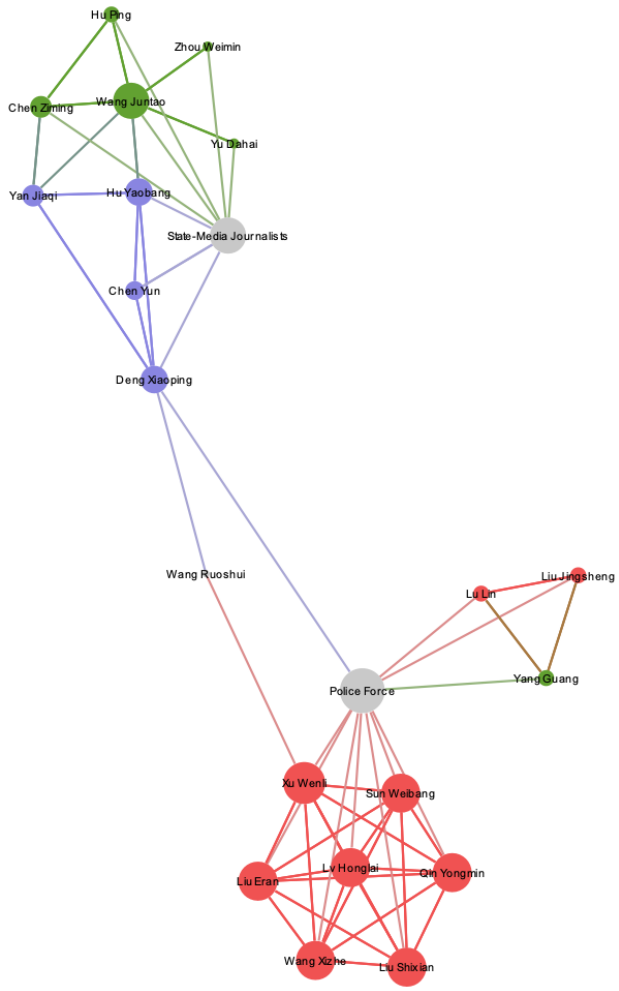

Figure 3: Phase 3 from Oct 1979 to April 1981.

When Liu Qing was arrested, Xu Wenli attempted to save him by petitioning People's Daily. Wang Ruoshui, the editor, agreed to a brief meeting with Xu. However, later that afternoon, Wang received a phone call from Deng Xiaoping's secretary, expressing Deng's anger and questioning the content of their conversation. Deng warned Wang to sever connections with Democracy Wall activists. Under constant threats of repression and severed connections, Xu Wenli attempted to establish an underground political party to overthrow the rule of the CCP, leveraging his earlier connections with local chapters. However, he was arrested and faced severe sentencing.

During this period, students distanced themselves from workers, and worker groups formed more exclusive and cohesive sub-groups.

Conclusion

This study employed social network analysis to investigate the division of student and worker activist groups during China's Democracy Wall Movement (1978-1981). By analyzing conversational ties among political elites, activists, foreign journalists, diplomats, and state media journalists, the research explored how activists' emerging political status, mediated by their positions and properties in conversational networks, contributed to group divisions. The findings revealed that student activists benefited from both formal and informal conversational ties with reformist political elites, facilitating their co-optation. Conversely, worker activists faced repression due to weaker and transient conversational ties, resulting in increased radicalization and further divisions within their groups.

The empirical findings of this study shed light on the micro-foundations of status group formation and division during political movements. The analysis of conversational networks provided insights into the intricate processes involved in the formation of status groups and their implications for the dynamics of social movements. The study highlights the significance of conversational ties in shaping activists' perceptions of their political positions and leverages.

The theoretical implications of this research contribute to the understanding of political status within social movements. By overcoming the limitations of static and procedural explanations, this study emphasizes the emerging positions and properties of activists within dynamic conversational networks. Social network analysis, with its focus on conversational ties, offers a valuable tool for comprehending the formation of activists' political status and its consequences.

The study of the Democracy Wall Movement demonstrated the influence of conversational ties on activists' political choices. The first phase of the movement was characterized by the facilitation of activists by reformist political elites, with diverse conversational ties established between different activist groups and political elites. In the second phase, power dynamics shifted, and divisions among activists based on occupational identities started to emerge. Conversational ties played a crucial role in shaping activists' perceptions, with student activists benefiting from stronger ties and worker activists facing weaker and transient ties. In the final phase, the co-optation of student activists and repression of worker activists led to further divisions and divergent paths for the two groups.

Overall, this study enhances our understanding of the complex dynamics of political status formation and its socio-political consequences within social movements. By examining the interplay between activists' emerging political status, conversational networks, and their different political choices, this research provides novel insights into the interactions between elites and activists, the dynamics of state-movement relationships, and the application of social network analysis in the study of social movements. It also emphasizes the importance of considering conversational ties as a crucial factor in understanding the formation and division of activist groups.

Further research can build upon this study by exploring other social movements and contexts to validate and expand the findings. Additionally, future studies could delve deeper into the specific mechanisms through which conversational ties influence activists' political choices and the long-term implications of these choices for social movements and political systems. By continuing to

examine the micro-foundations of political status formation, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of social movements.

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