

Xu Zhiyong and the Gains and Losses of the Citizens' Movement

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Abstract

In recent years, several public intellectuals and activists, such as Liu Xiaobo and Xu Zhiyong, have emerged in China with a “heroic” posture. Their actions continue the spiritual legacy of the May Fourth Movement while reflecting influences from Western democratic figures like Nelson Mandela. However, behind this “heroic narrative” lies a complex historical and cultural framework, shaped by Confucian loyalty, chivalric ideals, mythologized Western democracy, and an educational emphasis on self-sacrifice. This paper examines Xu Zhiyong and the Citizens' Movement to analyze the gains and losses of such heroic activism. It argues that while the movement awakened civic consciousness and inspired moral courage, it suffered from emotionalism, elitism, and lack of institutional grounding. The paper concludes that future civic movements in China must transcend individual heroism, prioritize institutional reform, and foster mass rights awareness to achieve sustainable democratic transformation.

Keywords: Xu Zhiyong, citizens' movement, heroic narrative, Confucian culture, democratization, China, civil society

Introduction

As one of the leading figures of the “Citizens' Movement,” Xu Zhiyong has triggered debates not only about the outcomes of his actions but also about whether such modes of activism can truly advance China's democratic transformation. From Liu Xiaobo to Xu Zhiyong, the persistence of “heroic narratives” in the public sphere reflects both a spiritual need to resist authoritarian power and deep-seated cultural continuities in Chinese collective psychology (Chen, 2013). This paper asks: in the current Chinese context, is heroic sacrifice an inevitable means for transformation—or an elitist “suicidal movement”?

Cultural and Historical Roots of the Heroic Narrative

The May Fourth Movement and Early Democratic Space

The May Fourth Movement (1919) is often considered the origin of modern Chinese intellectual consciousness. Yet the political environment at that time differed significantly from that of 1989. Despite controversies, Duan Qirui's government maintained some constitutional forms, and protests were not brutally suppressed (Chow, 1960). This contrast illustrates that the success of social movements depends not only on courage but also on institutional context and political structure.

Confucian Loyalty and Chivalric Traditions

Chinese culture venerates narratives such as "loyalty unto death" and "sacrificing one's life for righteousness." From Yue Fei's martyrdom to the Liangshan heroes, these archetypes shape activists' psychology (Liu, 1999). Xu Zhiyong's self-sacrifice reflects this tradition but overlooks the tension between personal survival and institutional reform.

Mythic Projections of Western Democratic Heroes

Liu Xiaobo has been hailed as "China's Mandela," and Xu Zhiyong as "the conscience of Chinese citizens" (Link et al., 2009). However, different historical conditions render such comparisons problematic. Overemphasis on individual heroism risks emotional, "Don Quixote-style" resistance rather than strategic transformation.

Gains and Losses of the Citizens' Movement

Gains: Moral Inspiration and Public Enlightenment

1. Raising public awareness: Xu and his colleagues introduced concepts like "citizenship" and "equal rights" into public discourse.
2. Creating symbolic legacy: Their actions reinforced the significance of individual rights and continued the modern Chinese tradition of moral resistance (Perry, 2008).

Losses: Emotionalism and Elitist Isolation

1. Neglecting institutional constraints: Unlike the May Fourth era, today's centralized system lacks democratic buffers.
2. Elitist character: The movement relied heavily on intellectual elites, failing to engage grassroots society (He, 2014).
3. Strategic deficiency: Excessive reliance on personal heroism limited institutional pathways, often reducing the movement to symbolic sacrifice.

Beyond the Heroic Dilemma

From Emotional Sacrifice to Rational Engagement

Zhuangzi's philosophy teaches detachment from illusions of "noble death." Rational civic engagement requires preserving the self to sustain long-term practice (Zhuangzi, ca. 4th century BCE).

Institutional Reconstruction, Not Narrow Anti-Communism

Democratization is not merely "anti-Communist" opposition but systemic reinvention:

- Political: Dismantle centralization; promote local autonomy; redefine the center as a service organ.
- Social: Guarantee basic rights—livelihood, healthcare, education.
- Judicial: Grant amnesty to elites while recovering illicit assets to reduce fear and resistance.

From Elite Sacrifice to Mass Rights Awakening

True civic transformation arises not from elite martyrdom but from widespread rights consciousness. This awakening must manifest in everyday life, not symbolic slogans (Xu, 2014).

Conclusion

Xu Zhiyong and the Citizens' Movement left an enduring moral imprint on China's civic consciousness. Yet overreliance on individual heroism, emotional sacrifice, and elitist activism limited practical impact. Future movements must transcend the "Liu Xiaobo–Xu Zhiyong" heroic paradigm, prioritizing institutional construction, local autonomy, and public rights awakening. Only by embedding equality and self-governance into political culture can China achieve sustainable democratic transformation.

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