Mobilizing a Social Movement in China: Propaganda of the 1905 Boycott Campaign

Wong Sin-Kiong*

Abstract

Previous studies of the 1905 anti-American boycott have considered the protest to be an anti-foreign movement or a nationalism-inspired political movement. They have failed to take account of its social aspects. Unlike the history of protest movements in later years, no existing account has systematically analyzed the propaganda techniques and mobilization strategies of the boycott. I intend to explore this neglected aspect of the boycott campaign in this article. In fact, throughout the struggle, different groups of boycotters used different varieties of language when speaking to different audiences, and sometimes the same boycotters employed different varieties of language in different situations. When boycott promoters, mostly from the cultural and commercial elite, spoke to one another, they used newspapers and other written publications as the means of dialogue. When they spoke to the illiterate they used pictorial illustrations, songs, street-corner lectures, theatrical performances, and material object exhibitions. When they spoke to a semiliterate audience they employed devices with few written characters, such as hand-