

The five flagpoles that stand in front of the Star Ferry terminal at the tip of the Kowloon peninsula in Hong Kong have long been a popular meeting place. It was at this familiar spot 20 years ago that democracy advocates sold commemorative items to raise money for the victims of the June 4 crackdown at Beijing's Tiananmen Square. I bought one: a four-inch plastic replica of the Goddess of Democracy statue that had been erected at the square. For a 9-year-old trying to make sense of the world, that keepsake was a concrete link to the revolutionary scenes spanning the globe during that eventful year.

I knew very little about the politics energizing millions of people from Berlin to Budapest to Beijing. Beyond TV images and conversations with family and friends, I had no conception of the grievances that would lead to the demolition of the Berlin Wall, would bring about multiparty elections in Hungary or caused crowds to gather in Tiananmen. But even a child could sense that the times were momentous.

Hong Kong encourages an astute sense of politics among its residents, who are, by Chinese standards, well informed, not least because they enjoy unrestrained access to global news and political commentary. That Hong Kong was, in 1989, an undemocratic British colony with a seething communist giant as a neighbor merely taught people to pick their battles carefully — in itself a valuable political skill — and they saw Tiananmen as a cause worth the agitation. The principal of my primary school, who addressed us soon after the Tiananmen drama unfolded, warned us to ignore the protests and the marches, saying, "You're kids — what do you know about politics?" He was adopting the stance of an anxious educator, but he did not represent the moral tone of the city — not then, not now.

Today, Tiananmen seems forgotten in mainland China, or else it is seen as a blip on the march to prosperity. In Macau, the annual remembrances are almost invisible events (only 70 people attended last year's gathering, which jointly commemorated Sichuan earthquake victims). Only in Hong Kong are the killings still openly observed and debated by large numbers — a tribute to its unique status as China's freest society, and a reminder of the widely held view that China can truly move forward only when the 1989 protesters have been rehabilitated. "We have been China's conscience," said journalist Ching Cheong, who quit a pro-mainland Hong Kong paper in 1989 in protest against the crackdown.

When the Beijing students started gathering at Tiananmen that April, Hong Kong was galvanized. Local stars held fund-raising concerts and closed them with the song "We Love Freedom." News appeared incessantly across all media. Huge marches and rallies were held.

Guarding History

Written by Anka Lee

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"Eastern Europe is changing," I overheard someone telling my mother at the time. "When will China?"

Over a million people, about one-sixth of the colony's population, took to the streets hours after the crackdown. They shouted "Down with Li Peng," naming China's then Premier as responsible for the killings. Entire buildings were draped in black flags. Office workers were given lists of random fax numbers in China and asked to transmit newspaper clippings of events, news of Tiananmen having been suppressed in China itself. Slow-driving protest convoys of motor vehicles took to the streets at night. Wild rumors flew around — one held that Communist Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, a student sympathizer, had fled to Guangzhou and was preparing to mobilize southern divisions of the People's Liberation Army in an uprising against the north. At rallies, the song "We Love Freedom" gave way to the more sobering "Blood-Stained Aura." This had been composed two years earlier as propaganda, commemorating the Chinese soldiers who fought in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese conflict. Now the crowds sang the words in bitter reference to fallen students: "If I bid farewell and never return/ Will you comprehend? Will you understand?"

Until the crackdown, the spring of 1989 felt like one of those rare moments when it seemed possible to take advantage of the sudden cracks in history in order to reshape it. Many in Hong Kong yearn for that chance again. This spring, during my second extended stay in Hong Kong since I left for California 17 years ago — where the statue's replica still sits on my desk — I went back to that familiar spot by the flagpoles. There, I thought of a TV interview that I saw in Hong Kong a few weeks ago, in which a local college student, born in the 1980s, was asked what Tiananmen meant to her generation. "We love this country, but this country is sick," she said. "We want it to be better." With all its physical changes I can barely recognize Hong Kong anymore. But I am comforted by the knowledge that the emotions sparked by the events of 1989 have yet to fade.

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