

When We Talk About Tiananmen

Written by Melinda Liu
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Twenty years later, China is still trying to move on. But nothing can happen until an honest retelling of what happened on June 4 takes place.

Here we are, talking once again about what it was like to hear the zinging of bullets, the screaming of the wounded, the blaring of garbled Orwellian propaganda from public loudspeakers in and around Tiananmen Square. It's been 20 years now. Even as I recount the horrifying anecdotes I feel like a vampire, feeding off the blood that soaked the flagstones of that blighted place.

Do I dwell too much on the past, ignoring a dynamic, changing China that's morphed through a thousand lifetimes since those dark days in 1989 when Chinese soldiers opened fire on their own people? I hate the thought that I might talk too much about June 4, confident in the power of those traumatic images to mesmerize and impress. And I hate the thought that I might talk too little about it, seduced by the potent China story of today that's all about global muscle and financial clout.

The ghosts of Tiananmen still haunt Chinese politics, and, for many of us journalists who witnessed firsthand the tragedy of 1989, they've haunted nearly every subsequent story we've written about China. Back then, I directed NEWSWEEK's Beijing team of reporters and photographers that covered the protests and their suppression. A decade ago I returned to Beijing as bureau chief, convinced that the country had changed tremendously since 1989. And indeed it has.

Yet when I see U.S. Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner visit Beijing—as he did this week to reassure China's money men about the safety of their vast investments in American T-bills—I think back to one morning in May 1989 when, on the edge of Tiananmen Square, I saw the 1930s-style Bank of China building at dawn with a huge white banner draped from one baroque pinnacle declaring DON'T BE A VAULT FOR CORRUPTION ANY LONGER. And I wonder how much more crooked China's bankers and planners would be today if public indignation over official corruption had not been one of the key grievances that sent protestors into the square.

When I hear Chinese authorities talk about the need to keep GDP growth rates above the magic number of 8 percent—because otherwise joblessness among new college grads reaches a tipping point and unrest could erupt—I think back to the university students in the square waving

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multicolored banners and signs with slogans such as I NEED FOOD BUT I'D RATHER DIE FOR DEMOCRACY. And I wonder if, despite all the effort the West invests in trying to understand the Chinese, we still underestimate their yearning for freedom just because it hasn't erupted in street protests for decades.

When I see Chinese blogs being shut down, access to foreign Web sites such as YouTube being blocked and Western television news crews being harassed while trying to film in Tiananmen Square, I think back to the delegations of Chinese journalists—some from state-run organs such as Xinhua, the government mouthpiece—that had marched on that very spot in May 1989 chanting "We want to tell the truth."

The truth has yet to come out about the Tiananmen Square bloodshed, and that's one important reason to keep talking about it. These days, even fashionable, Westernized young Chinese sometimes chide foreigners who bring up 1989. Look at Guantánamo, they say, and tell us American-style democracy is any better than the Chinese system.

Fair enough. But then why can't the regime simply come clean about 1989, exorcising those demons once and for all? Recently I paid a call on former top party aide Bao Tong, who was imprisoned during the 1989 protest movement for sympathizing with demonstrators and is the highest ranking ex-official to speak out about June 4. "The more authorities try to suppress discussion of what happened," he said, "the more it will fester like a wound that never heals."

We still don't have a credible official number for the civilians who died due to the repression, for example. If the government simply told the truth about the number and identities of June 4 victims, it would help begin to clear the air.

Recently I also visited the elderly former university professor Ding Zilin, who founded the [Tiananmen Mothers](#) group after her son was killed near the square. She told me she's collected the names of 195 victims of the bloodletting—mostly workers—whose relatives have dared to come forward. The total is believed to number at least in the hundreds.

Shards of truth are emerging slowly, bit by bit. This spring a former soldier named Zhang Shijun went public for the first time, giving an interview to the Associated Press about his unit's role in

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the military crackdown (though, as a medic, he says he was unarmed). He hinted at the commission of atrocities by other People's Liberation Army units, but declined to give details. Zhang is one of very few military men who've called for a reassessment of the protest movement, which authorities still sometimes call a "counterrevolutionary" riot.

This process of official re-evaluation—what in Chinese political jargon is referred to as a "reversal of the verdict"—took place after the tumultuous 1966-76 Cultural Revolution and resulted in thousands of citizens being politically rehabilitated. But after Zhang's story was published, he suddenly wasn't accessible to the media anymore.

Other demobilized soldiers are becoming more relaxed about discussing 1989—though not always with the spin you might expect. While interviewing a jobless migrant worker in Chongqing not long ago, I discovered he was an ex-soldier. Unsolicited, he started reminiscing about the years he spent stationed in and near Beijing. "I was there when martial law was declared in 1989," he said casually, "First I was based in the university district, helping keep students from leaving the campus to demonstrate in Tiananmen." He went on to recount how, on July 16, he was reassigned to the square itself—this time "to help stabilize things and keep demonstrators out of Tiananmen."

I asked him how he assessed those events two decades later. "Back then I believed the unrest was counterrevolutionary violence." (No big surprise here, since this was the government line.) What he said next was startling, however: "Today we have an era of peace; it's the dawning of an economic age. Now I no longer think the protests were counterrevolutionary. Anyway, the Communist Party has reversed its verdict on them.">

I tried to correct him: it wasn't true that the verdict had been overturned. In fact activists were still being detained simply for demanding the government make such a reversal. "Well, they've been partially reversed, anyway," he said blithely. Still, I tried to interrupt. But this was his story—and he was sticking with it.

Only gradually did it dawn on me that he knew very well the government hadn't "reversed the verdict" on Tiananmen—but, privately, he had done just that. This was his way of living with what had happened (and it was also unlikely to get him in much trouble with officialdom, in contrast with ex-soldier Zhang). In the end, he talked too little about June 4 and I wanted to talk too much—but at least we had a real conversation. Unless such discussions become normal, Beijing and especially that cold, hard square in its center will be haunted forever by ghosts.

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