

### “China in the Bully Shop”

I remember 1989 very well. I'd been living out of my car for a few years by then, popping around the country, wintering down south, summering in the east. The first part of that year I'd spent in the east since I'd decided to settle down, at least for a while, and even thought about having a family. But that hadn't worked out the way I'd hoped and here I was again, all my earthly goods in milk cartons in the rear of my station wagon and ten bucks in my wallet and not much in sight except dirt roads and days baking in the sun.

1989 was a pivotal year for me, since it was the spring my mother laid down the law, telling me I needed to eventually settle down, maybe go to grad school, maybe join the military. Graduate school held no attraction for me but military life held even less, so

I was tootling around the country about this time in search of someplace to settle in at least until she'd cooled off. Eventually, I'd meet Bill Dyer at a bar in Mankato, Minnesota, that summer and he'd convince me to attend school there, where in swift succession I got my act together, met my wife Jayne, and after a few abortive years trying to make another go of it back east, settled back in Wisconsin where I eventually found this church.

But that was all before me. Now, a lot of this sounds like 1989 was a big year for me, and it was, but something more momentous happened in that summer of 1989. I remember exactly where I was on June 4. I was driving down a dirt road outside Eureka Springs, Arkansas, where I'd been staying with some people I'd met at an organic farm outside town. I'd driven into town that morning to visit the library, and on my way back to help with lunch the announcer came on the radio and said that the People's Army of the People's Republic of China had entered Tiananmen Square, where students had been clustered for about 3 weeks, firing into the crowd, driving tanks over bodies, bayoneting people who simply weren't moving quickly enough. I pulled off onto the shoulder and sat listening to the frightened on-the-scene reporter giving his story in gasps and breathlessness. I wondered what had happened to the country whose principles of attention and enlightenment I'd adopted as my own. I wondered what was happening in my China.

I call it "my" China, even though I've never been there, because after reading the *Tao te Ching*, Ezra Pound's and Robert Bly's "translations" of Chinese poetry, and such books on Chinese influence on the Beats as *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, I had adopted many of its best aspects as my own. Fancying myself akin to its wandering,

itinerant scholars, cultivating the politeness of its citizenry—accepting everything with a smile and a bow—and subsisting on a diet of primarily rice, I saw myself in some ways as heir to the best of Chinese culture.

Now of course we know. Or we have a better idea of what's been going on. For those of you whose memories might be faulty or who simply are unaware what happened that summer in 1989 let me remind you.

In China, what we refer to as the Tiananmen Square Protests or Massacre are referred to as the June 4 or 6/4 Incident. If it is referred to at all. Reference in any way except the official party line is illegal, punishable by prison. It began, like most important things do, on a small scale. The trigger was the April death from illness of Hu Yaobang, former General Secretary of the Communist Party. He had been removed from power in 1987 for being too much the liberal, a strange accusation in a leftist state one would think. Previously, Deng Xiaoping, Hu's predecessor, initiated a series of economic and political reforms leading to a gradual implementation of the market economy referred to there as "Socialism with Chinese characteristics." The reforms enriched some but left most unaffected, except that the few were often corrupt officials whose positions in the Party made their corruption all the more unconscionable; in China, the activities of Party functionaries are generally covered uncritically by the media, but even so, the depth of corruption was impossible to ignore.

Students and intellectuals, who provided leadership for the nascent movement, particularly felt the sting from the corruption. The reforms had been sold to them as opportunities, and it was galling to them that they simply enriched the bureaucracy. Hu's death provided them with a golden opportunity to publicly register their disaffection with

the government without fear of repression: it would be extremely awkward for the Communist Party of the People's Republic of China to ban a gathering memorializing a former General Secretary of the Party. Equally fortuitously, the foreign press had arrived to cover the impending May visit by extraordinarily popular new USSR president Mikhail Gorbachev.

This was not the first protest in Tiananmen Square. Mao had declared victory there and it was the traditional Beijing preferred place to speak out, most famously in 1976, the protest which eventually led to the downfall of the so-called Gang of Four. Another, abortive attempt at a popular student uprising had taken place there in 1987. But most importantly, the 1989 students also saw themselves as Chinese patriots, heirs to the May Fourth Movement of 1919, undertaken in favor of "science and democracy." From its origins as a memorial to Hu, recognized by the students and intellectuals as an advocate for democracy, the Tiananmen Square movement gradually developed from protests against corruption into demands for freedom of the press and an end to rule by the Communist Party and Deng Xiaoping, or at least their reform. Partially successful attempts were made to network with student groups in other cities, resulting in protests in Shanghai and a few other cities, as well as smaller protests by other groups around Beijing.

At Hu's funeral, a large group of students gathered at Tiananmen Square and requested to meet with premier Li Peng, widely regarded to be Hu's political rival. Li rebuffed them. The students called for a strike at Beijing's universities. On April 26, an editorial in the *People's Daily*, parroting the message of an internal speech by Deng, accused the students of plotting turmoil. The statement enraged the students, and on April

27 about 50,000 students went onto the streets of Beijing, ignoring the warning of a crackdown made by authorities, insisting that the government withdraw the statement.

The entire movement lasted roughly 7 weeks from start to finish. On May 4, approximately 100,000 students and workers peacefully marched, demanding free media reform and a formal dialogue between the authorities and student-elected representatives. The government rejected the proposed dialogue, agreeing only to talk with members of government-appointed student organizations. On May 13, large groups of students occupied Tiananmen square and initiated a hunger strike, demanding the government withdraw the accusations made in the *People's Daily* and talk with student representatives. Hundreds of students joined the hunger strike and were supported by hundreds of thousands of protesting students and residents of Beijing. This lasted for a week.

Martial law was declared on May 20. Demonstrations continued and the number of participants grew. A majority of students from the city's numerous colleges and universities participated with support of their instructors. Workers left their jobs in droves and joined the strikers. Although the initial protests had been made by students and intellectuals who believed that the Deng reforms had not gone far enough, they attracted the support of urban workers who believed that the reforms had gone too far. The leaders of the protests impressed their focus on the issue of corruption, uniting both groups. They were also able to invoke the uniquely Chinese archetype of the selfless intellectual who spoke truth to power. The students rejected official Communist Party-controlled student associations and set up their own autonomous associations

Generally, the demonstration at Tiananmen Square was well-ordered, with daily marches of students from various Beijing area colleges displaying their solidarity with the boycott of college classes and with the developing demands of the protest. The students sang "The Internationale," a detail often left out of western media reports. The group singing and hunger strike resonated strongly with the Chinese people. While no hunger strikers were observed to become emaciated, a Chinese urban legend persists that some protestors starved to death. Ironically, this is perhaps one of the few ways people did not die at Tiananmen.

Many analysts since 1989 have often focused on what seems an ambivalence on the part of the Communist Party. Such ambivalence indeed existed. The Standing Committee of the Politburo, along with the Party elders (retired but still-influential former officials of the government and Party), were hopeful that the demonstrations would be short-lived or that cosmetic reforms and investigations would satisfy the protesters. They wished to avoid violence if possible. They relied at first on their far-reaching Party apparatus to persuade the students to abandon the protest and return to their studies. A recent article in the *New York Review of Books* focussing on a new essay collection by former dissident writer Dai Qing recounts her attempts to do precisely that as well as her subsequent arrest, incarceration, and enforced "reeducation" by the Party after the crackdown (her crime was that she had ventured to the Square for a few hours' pleading with the protestors, who laughed at her because she did so at the request of the Party itself). One barrier to effective action was that the leadership itself supported many of the demands of the students, especially concerning corruption. However, the protests contained many people with varying agendas, and it was unclear with whom the

government could negotiate and what the demands were. The confusion and indecision among the protesters was mirrored by confusion and indecision within the government. The official media mirrored this indecision as headlines in the *People's Daily* alternated between sympathy with the demonstrators and denouncing them.

Within the Square itself, there was a debate between those who wished to withdraw peacefully and those who intended to remain within the Square at the risk of possibly creating a bloodbath. To understand the strength of those in the latter category, you have to remember that Mao Tse-Tung had promised, at its inception in 1949, that the arms of the People's Army would never be turned on the people themselves. Those in favor of withdrawal won, and the protesters left the square.

At the same time, after deliberations among Communist party leaders, the use of military force to resolve the crisis was ordered, and Zhao Ziyang, Hu's successor as Party General Secretary and who opposed military action—and who, incidentally, died just this past January—was ousted from political leadership. Soldiers and tanks from the 27th and 38th Armies of the People's Liberation Army were sent to take control of the city. These forces were confronted by Chinese workers and students in the streets of Beijing.

It is here that images blur. What is known is this: that early in the morning of June 4, as the protesters existed the Square, troops moved in with tanks and fixed bayonets. No one knows how the massacre began, or at least anyone who knows has not spoken up, considering the students had no firearms except a few subsequently wrestled from troops, but at the end of it a number of students, intellectuals, and urban workers,

and not too few soldiers as well, were dead. It has often been alleged that the soldiers were themselves killed by overzealous comrades.

The government has claimed that no one was killed in the Square itself, a fact that by the accounts of those who were actually in the Square appears to be technically true, but misleading in that it does not account for the casualties in the approaches to the Square. The number of dead and wounded remains a state secret. An unnamed Chinese Red Cross official reported that 2,600 people were killed, and 30,000 injured. Two days later, Yuan Mu, the speaker of the State Council, estimated that 300 soldiers and citizens died, as well as 5,000 soldiers and 2,000 citizens injured, and 400 soldiers “lost contact,” an inventive phrase acknowledging they never returned to base. It’s been suggested they threw down their arms and either joined the students or drifted into the confusion of the crowds. The Preparatory Committee of Autonomous Associations of Tsinghua University claimed that 4,000 died and 30,000 were injured. Chen Xitong, Beijing’s mayor, reported 26 days after the event that only 36 students and tens of soldiers died, amounting to a total 200 dead, 3,000 civilians and 6,000 soldiers injured. Foreign reporters who witnessed the incident have claimed that at least 3,000 people died. Some lists of the casualties were created from underground sources with numbers as high as 5,000.

The best-known image of those heady, doomed days was the photograph of a single protester, taken the day after the slaughter. A lone man carrying a plastic shopping bag stood in front of a column of four tanks rumbling down the street, halting their progress. When the lead tank moved to pass him, he moved to stay in front of it, and

when it moved to outmaneuver him, he moved in front of it again. This pas-de-deux continued for a half hour before the man, whose name and fate remain unknown to western media to this day, was pulled away by people watching from the street. For years, the image, taken by Associated Press photographer Jeff Widener and published by Time magazine, who dubbed him the Unknown Rebel, has come to symbolize the spontaneous spirit that overcomes a person sometimes, the unshakable certainty that, despite whatever consequences one may face, shameful behavior must not go unacknowledged.

What could all this possibly have to do with us? Horrendous as Tiananamen Square or the 6/4 Incident was, it was nearly 20 years ago and in another part of the world. That world is long ago and far away, and we are the better for it.

Let's not fall into the trap of obliviousness, of deciding that, in the words of so many of my students, "that happened before I was even born. Of what possible importance can it be now?" I'm currently teaching *Candy*, a memoiristic novel about growing up female in contemporary China, banned in that country for several years because of its frank talk about sex and drugs and AIDS. It was recently removed from the Party's official list of outlawed books when its author, who continues to live in Shanghai, came to the attention of a number of writers and cultural observers outside China. Not for her mistreatment by the authorities I hasten to add, but as an example of the bar-hopping, heroin-snuffing fashionista in which every contemporary culture recognizes itself. Be that as it may: at one point her narrator Hong has been robbed with several friends and eventually, through a series of coincidences, ends up at a precinct

station where one of the boys who robbed them is caught and handcuffed. “I saw an overgrown boy...and recognized him as the one who had slapped Luobu. He was a real mess. He was dull-eyed and dirty, and he stank. His fingernails were especially filthy...The police scolded me and said that by not reporting the crime I was condoning it. When I asked the cops how the theives might be punished, they said that these boys had done all sorts of bad things and might face...a bullet to the head.”

Consider that one in four jobs that leave the US go to China. Consider that Wal-Mart, the largest employer in the world, has, to quote Ted Fishman in his book *China, Inc.*, “has embraced China’s potential more vigorously than” anyone else: he estimates that the amount of Wal-Mart’s merchandise manufactured in China—where, for one example, wages paid by Lakewood Engineering of Chicago at its fan factory in Shenzhen in 2003 dipped to 25 cents an hour—is around 85 percent. Eighty percent of Wal-Mart’s six thousand factories in its database of suppliers are in China. Wal-Mart alone accounts for 1.5 percent of China’s gross domestic product.

If it is true that all empires fall—and it is true—the US empire is in its final days and the Chinese empire, which is really more a resurgence of an old empire than a new one, is just on the cusp of ascendance. As the period from 1900 to 1999 was called the American century, so will the period from 2000 to 2099 come to be known as the Chinese century.

These are examples of China’s economic force. In addition, a recent unsolicited advertisement from an outfit calling itself Asia Business and Investing points up what it calls the coming China Showdown—it quotes Canadian economist Mark Anielski to the

effect, “China will eclipse US consumption in 20 years or less, and there’s not enough oil to feed 2 superpowers”—and thunders, “Back off, Beijing, that’s our oil!” This past Thursday US Treasury Secretary John Snow lectured China’s population to do as the US does: that is, “spend more, borrow more and save less.” The *New York Times*, respectful but winking, notes that “China’s savings rate is nearly 50%, one of the highest in the world. The savings rate in the US, by contrast, has sunk to less than zero in recent months,...one of the lowest in the world.” Snow’s comments, the author Edmund Andrews concludes, “underscored the Bush administration’s newest theme toward China: the need for the world’s most populous nation to promote more growth at home and less from exports.”

The year before Tiananamen Square, China became a signatory to the UN Convention Against Torture. The Party seems to have misread what it was signing to read as “Conventions in support of Torture,” because torture in fact has increased since the 6/4 Incident. Deaths of prisoners in custody have become commonplace, and official executions have increased to the effect that 77% of worldwide executions are conducted in China. Amnesty International cites January 9, 1993, as an impressive date: 356 death sentences were handed down on that day, 62 of them carried out immediately. China has become more like the US in at least one other respect: attacks on children in schools have increased the last two years. There have few deaths from these school attacks since guns are relatively hard to come by in China and most attacks involve knives. (In *Candy*, a Shenzhen gangster is unimpressed by the narrator until she whips out a gun and aims it at his crotch. Guns are so seldom seen on the streets in China the gangster does not recognize it is a plastic children’s toy.) Wednesday saw the most recent attack, in which

16 students were injured. The middle-aged man opening fire apparently had to make his guns at home.

But there is another force, equally important, and that is a nation's moral force. It has been fashionable among Sinologists to bemoan Mao's 1949 victory as the entry of China into the corridors of the bullies of the world. I don't want to give the impression that I am being what the *Economist* magazine in an editorial rightly terms a scaremonger. This is not fear of a Yellow Horde. Those days, while not exactly over perhaps in some parts of the US, are best forgotten. There is no reason to bemoan America's fall as the preeminent power and China's rise. The Chinese have been masters of the universe before—China was the home of culture, technology and the sciences, and the land to which most freedom-loving people yearned while most of Europe was living in mud huts and trying to decide if Christ preferred people to die by the rack or by fire—and for far longer than the US. It's in the nature of things for the old order to fall and the new to rise. Certainly, the US empire's rule has been over for a while now and frankly, it would be best for people who live here to take a rest. We can use some time off from being the go-go place, the nation living on the edge of things, the place where it all happens and it all matters.

Except. I remember the Unknown Rebel and his dance with the tanks. My land of Lao Tsu and Confucius, of tao and enlightenment, of the immortality of the Forbidden City and of wisdom as a stone living in a dragon's mouth, has become the land symbolized, in a famous sculpture erected by students in the Polish city of Wroclaw, by a

slab of concrete on which rests both a broken bicycle and a tank tread. A red dribble from the rear tire runs along the slab for a couple feet.

There is such a thing as a morality of nations. The US once stood for something larger than itself, better than its reality. There was an ideal associated with it, and the ideal became a dream. With what will China replace it? I would hope it will be with the civility of the common people, the contemplation of the monk, the grace of tai chi, and the attentiveness of the scholar. I hope it will be those things. I fear it will not. I fear it will be the China of tanks and a bullet to the head. If it's true that a society is judged by the way it treats the least of its members—and it is true, and America certainly fails that test today—does the ascendancy of China to the role of preeminent superpower present a change for the better? For the worse? Or a depressingly common case of business as usual?