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Part II

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By Philip J. Cunningham

"Tiananmen," whispers Chai Ling.
"What?" I ask, comprehending without comprehension.
"I'd like to see Tiananmen, one last time."

We skip the turn to the train station—she and Wang Li had been talking about catching the first train out of Beijing— and instead continue east on Chang'an. As the car approaches the familiar student-controlled zone around Tiananmen Square, I try to make sense of what we are doing.

I had just delivered to the international media a candid interview with a wanted student leader who said she is going to run away, while speaking forthrightly about imminent bloodshed and the desire to overthrow the government; if she was at risk before the interview, she's at even more risk now. What was the right thing to do?

It wasn't just a question of abstract journalistic ethics; I suffered from the vague sense that I was the one being taken for a ride. I had no objections to being a partisan in principle, but the behavior of those I was trying to help was confusing me.

The car putters slowly in deference to the thin but irregular flow of pedestrian traffic as we cut across the largely empty north face of the square.

Chai Ling peers out the rear window, studying the scene of her rise to fame in silence. The precipitous drop in the number of protesting bodies is offset somewhat by the profusion of new tents. The bright tarps and canvas from Hong Kong made the student command zone at the monument look busy with color, if not people.

It seems crazy, taking this confused fugitive, alternately frightened, alternately fearless, to the place most likely to get her in trouble. Then again, Tiananmen was still more or less under the control of her people. Have I lost my faith in people power? Reluctantly, I told the driver to swing to the south when we get to the Great Hall.

Traffic is light and what protesters there were, were widely dispersed. The thinning ranks of student volunteers serving as traffic police did not demand to know our business today.

Waved on by a weary student sentry standing on the northwest corner of the Square, we head south, halting when we reach the nearest point to the monument. All at once, Chai Ling seems to have second doubts, expressing a reluctance to get out of the car. She asks me to run over to the Monument, to see if I could find her husband.

"Tell Feng Congde I need to see him right away," she says in a grave whisper, leaning on me lightly.

"Where is he?"

"I'm not sure." She hands me another one of her little cryptic notes. "Please give this to him, my husband. He will know where to reach me."

"But how am I supposed to find him?"

"I think he is still on the Square," she says.

"Where?"

"Probably by the Broadcast Tent," she clarifies.

"I'll go with you," Patricia volunteers, switching to English. "You and me, we can get out here and walk. They are in danger. They need the car, don't they?"

"Why don't you wait for us at Kentucky Fried Chicken? It's walking distance for us, the driver can park there, and I think it will be safe."

"Kentucky?" The fugitives consider the idea. "Okay, Kentucky."

I paid the driver the meter fare plus some extra in case they need to make a quick escape.

"Be careful, you two," I say in parting. "Keep the car as long as you need to, it might be hard to find another one."

"Thank you, Jin," says Chai Ling, biting her lip, at once coquettish and shy about all the trouble.

"See you in Kentucky!"

Patricia and I ford a path through the thick but listless mass of day-trippers on the perimeter of the Square who give way to die-hards, student wardens and hardcore operatives as we get closer to the student HQ. Unwittingly imitating the government they speak of overthrowing, the student elite had become super paranoid about security. Undercover police were undoubtedly a problem, I had noticed men taking my photograph ever since May 4 and many of the photographers were older than the students, but so was I. Did that make me a spy in their eyes?

Latecomers to the cause from the provinces, for whom a mere claim of student status was initially sufficient to get access, were subsequently banished to the east periphery, though they now started to squeeze closer to the center, vying for prestige by seizing high ground.

Access to the Martyr's Monument is still tightly restricted, however, with security at the southeast corner being unusually tight, roped-off and zealously guarded for the exclusive use of the current pick of student leaders only. The center is bustling as before, but the surrounding crowd is a skeleton of its former self. The array of tents encircling the student command and control center stand open to passersby, once tightly guarded university camps are violated by passing foot-traffic. Worse yet, for

one who still carries the after-image of a million souls gathered peacefully and purposefully, large swaths of the Square are empty.

As we wend our way through the depressing litter and mess, Patricia and I are stopped and questioned by student wardens and vigilante types, though the security is less comprehensive today. The burden of suspicion falls more often on Patricia, who flashed her Hong Kong press ID to get through. As for me, I had no press pass but an unusual and familiar profile –the Chinese-speaking laowai in the indigo shirt—and that generally suffices to let me move about freely.

As we neared the student-controlled inner perimeter, I turned around to check on the taxi, but it was gone. Once inside the inner zone, the security tightened, and we had to laboriously pass two more security rings before getting to the broadcast tent where influential students still congregated. Patricia was immediately turned away, flatly told that the inside of the tent was off-limits to journalists. To get cross the frontier of this final inner sanctum I had to produce the personalized all-points security pass signed by Commander in Chief Chai Ling.

The signature of “the leader” scribbled on a piece of cardboard did the trick and we were free to step inside. Gone was the tidy, homey atmosphere I remembered from earlier in the week. The inside of the tent was a mess, awash with litter and upended equipment, the mood chaotic if not frantic. Nobody seemed to be in charge.

There was no hospitality corner. There were no smiles, no offers to have a drink or take a seat. No one was willing to help us find Feng Congde, and no one seemed to care that I carried an urgent message from Chai Ling. It suddenly occurred to me I might be dropping the wrong names at the wrong time. What if there had been a student coup? Perhaps she and her husband had fallen from grace with factional infighting flaring up. Maybe that’s why she came to see me in such a hurry; maybe that’s why she was on the lam.

Sensing political fortunes had changed, I play it coy, the Wang Li way, asking if anyone had seen student commander in chief Chai Ling. The response was underwhelming. Although a few people paused long enough to show familiarity with the name, nobody seemed to know what was going on. There was an undisciplined, free-for-all, anything-goes atmosphere.

When I finally find a student willing to spare a few seconds to humor the foreigner, he states that I must go “upstairs” to the second level of the marble platform, just above the tent. When we try to go that way, we are stopped at a rope barrier. Adjacent to the checkpoint is a wooden table shaded by a canvas tent.

“This is the student information center,” I am told. Although the tent is open to the elements on one side and flimsy in appearance, it had the dank bureaucratic air of a Chinese government office. Student who needed to consult the leadership solemnly queued in line, impatient and irritable, hoping for “official” assistance.

Among those who waited in the sun, there erupted shoving matches and shouts, like desperate travelers trying to snag seats on a sold-out train. Some of them were looking for lost friends, much as we were, passing back and forth notes scribbled on little scraps of paper, hoping to win the attention of a “responsible person” inside student information bureau. This bureau is not only inefficient, but redolent of a bureaucratic arrogance. It is the holding pen one got sent to when student guards when unimpressed with one’s credentials. Trying to get an audience with the student leadership was an act in frustration, like petitioning Li Peng on the steps of the Great Hall a month before.

Impatient, like everyone else on line, I resort to shouting out my request, hoping to get some immediate assistance. Whether it was my blond hair or amusing foreign accent that managed to catch the “responsible authority’s” attention, I don’t know, but at least I got an answer.

"We are not clear about that."

"But where is he?"

"His location is unknown,"

"But..."

"Not clear about that."

*Philip J. Cunningham was a participant and observer of the events in Beijing in 1989. Now a professor of media studies at Doshisha University, Cunningham has a forthcoming book, **Tiananmen Moon: Inside the Chinese Student Uprising of 1989** (Rowman & Littlefield, May 2009) that details his story of the events.*

*In honor of the 20th anniversary of 1989, Cunningham will be sharing selections from his book at China Beat over the coming months. You can read more at the **Tiananmen Moon website**. Cunningham also blogs at the group blog, **Informed Comment: Global Affairs**.*

Tags: 1989, 6/4, Philip J Cunningham, Tiananmen, Tiananmen Moon