4-23-2009

Reflecting on Tiananmen, 20 Years Later

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive

Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/356
Reflecting on Tiananmen, 20 Years Later
April 23, 2009 in A Year of Anniversaries by The China Beat | 1 comment

China Beat sent out a note to a few scholars and journalists who have carefully watched and written about the events of 1989, asking them to send in short commentaries detailing what they wish more people knew, associated with, or remembered about that spring. Here is the first of their responses.

John Gittings is a research associate with the Centre for Chinese Studies at the School of Oriental & African Studies and a former writer and editor at The Guardian. He is the author of The Changing Face of China: From Mao to Market and numerous other books and articles, including this 2008 review essay, "Here Be Dragons..."

There are always two points I make about 1989:

1. It was the Beijing Massacre, not the Tiananmen Square Massacre: only one or two seemed to have been actually killed in the square (I’m not even entirely sure of the evidence for that); though some students were crushed by tanks at Liubukou after they had marched out of it. This is not a pedantic point but reflects the important fact that it was the laobaixing, the people of Beijing, including students, who were killed, not students alone. Most were killed either as the army made its way in or, after it had occupied the square, when it fired lethally to keep protestors (and bystanders) at bay, and in subsequent days up and down the avenue. I don’t think it helps either to continue to say that thousands may have died (as in the weaselly formula “hundreds if not thousands” used by one wire agency). Most estimates of massacres are likely to err on the high side: this was hundreds not thousands — and it does not diminish from the horror in the slightest.

2. While the students were the mobilizing force, the events of May-June 1989 should be understood as the time when a coalition emerged of students, dissenting scholars, worker activists, and the ordinary people of Beijing — particularly the mums and dads who watched over the barricades and who reproached the soldiers for forgetting about army-people unity. It was this coming together of different social forces which so freaked out the reactionary/conservative/dinosauric leaders.

Tags: 1989, 6/4, Tiananmen