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Philip J. Cunningham

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China Beat has been running *excerpts* from Philip Cunningham's forthcoming memoir, [Tiananmen Moon](#), over the past few weeks, and Cunningham will continue to share selections from that work in the weeks to come. However, he also recently wrote this essay, which reflects on the way 1989's events are remembered and written about. It was also posted at [Informed Comment](#), [History News Network](#), and the [Bangkok Post](#). We thought it was of sufficient interest readers to run it again in full [here](#).

by Philip J Cunningham

"Tiananmen" is a taboo topic in China. But even in places where it is remembered and commemorated, the Beijing student movement of 1989 is best known for its bloody ending on June 4, a tragic turning point of unquestioned significance, but one which tends to obscure the amazing weeks of restraint, harmony and cooperation in crowds that swelled to a million at the height of an entirely peaceful and extremely popular social movement.

Twenty years ago, as hundreds of thousands demonstrated day after day in Beijing, as ordinary citizens joined in or supported the student protesters with offers of food, drink and hearty cheers, crime all but disappeared and with it everyday suspicions and the habitual selfishness of an alienated populace. A remarkable degree of forbearance was evident on all sides, the government included, making it possible for a truly peaceful mass movement to emerge and blossom in the sunshine of that fateful Beijing spring. Even the provocative hunger strike, despite its grim overtones of self-starvation, did not claim a single victim and was wisely called off after one week.

Given the way the media works, perhaps reflecting something intrinsic to the workings of memory itself, there is undue focus on the big-bang at the end, the ultimate failure of the movement, rather than its peaceful flowering. The brutal crackdown of June 4 tends to eclipse the breath-taking accomplishments of April 27, May 4, May 10, May 13 — indeed nearly every day in mid-May 1989 — until martial law was declared. After the troops were moved in, protesters started to panic and mutual threats became more pointedly violent.

Of course, mourning the dead and injured, mourning the lost opportunities for China, bemoaning the injustice is essential in taking measure of what happened. But what about the good times that preceded the blow-out, the soaring dreams taken wing, the beauty of a peaceful uprising?

The understandable, but ultimately misplaced media focus on a handful of nervous politicians and their hot-headed student interlocutors has obscured not only the considerable restraint showed by the communist party and its leaders for much of the period in question, but also occludes the positive, in some cases, outright remarkable contributions of the student leadership who performed brilliantly as crowd facilitators and morale boosters. Key actors on both sides of the barricades were less than democratic in word and deed, but they were adept at utilizing native, communist-influenced political tools to manage people power to an impressive degree.

The focus on the failure of the movement, and the foibles of those best known as its representatives, also obscures the even more weighty and valorous contributions of tens of thousands of ordinary citizens whose defiance was singular and courageous, who made China's biggest peace fest both peaceful and festive. Nobody was really in charge of the crowd, as much as student activists and government emissaries might try, the crowd was self-policing and constantly undergoing spontaneous transformations, at once creating the conditions of its own existence and reacting to subtle shifts in the prevailing political winds.

While focusing on a handful of individuals is perhaps necessary for narrative simplicity, if not coherence, we need to constantly remind ourselves about the multifarious 'silent majority' who were out there in the streets of Beijing, hoping to augur in and witness the re-birth of a more equitable and

just China. Even for those without a clue as to what democracy might mean, there was courage and conviction in the way so many showed their feelings with their feet, voting with their bodies rather than ballots, putting their lives on the line, come sunrise, come sunset, at Tiananmen Square.

Now that twenty years have passed, it is time to go beyond the hate inspired by the crackdown, beyond the ad hominem attacks on inept octogenarians, dithering party cadre and inexperienced student activists, and instead to look at the larger picture of a million souls gathered purposefully and with great self-discipline on the streets and plazas of Beijing, and many more across China, who were part of a rare transformative moment in history. Nearly everyone involved, despite their disagreements, stubbornness and imperfections, exhibited a potent love for country and fellow citizens.

Now that twenty years have gone by, it is a time for reconciliation, a time to ponder the tragedy not with a desire for revenge or recrimination but with a plain telling of the truth, as best as a multidimensional and in some respects unknowable truth can be told, and to accept that this revolutionary drama-turned-tragedy, this alternatively uplifting and gut-wrenching karmic kaleidoscope, was composed of ordinary, mostly well-meaning people acting in predictably human, if not always completely noble, ways.

When mourning the victims of June 4, 1989, when challenging the uncomfortable silence that has descended upon an otherwise much reformed, much more open China, let us recall not just the bloodshed that ended the popular uprising at Tiananmen, but the sustained participation of hundreds of thousands of ordinary folks who, simultaneously empowered and laid vulnerable, contributed to the inspirational flourishing of peaceful protest in May 1989.

Tags: [1989](#), [6/4](#), [Philip J Cunningham](#), [Tiananmen](#), [Tiananmen Moon](#)