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Tiananmen Moon: Beida Summit

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Philip J Cunningham marched with student protesters in 1989 at Tiananmen Square and conducted interviews with student activists for BBC and ABC news. His memoir of that time, Tiananmen Moon; Inside the Chinese Student Uprising in 1989, will be published in May by Rowman & Littlefield, but he will be sharing excerpts of it here (such as the first and second in this series).

By Philip J Cunningham

For the second time in a day I’m on the run with Chai Ling. For the second time in a month I find myself in a beat-up jalopy racing towards the Beida student center at Sanjiaodi. Again I am huddled together with members of the vanguard, only this time it’s not musicians wanting to know what the students are up to but the student leadership itself.

The interior of a moving van is a reasonably good place to hide, assuming the driver is trustworthy and the vehicle not bugged. Chai Ling sits behind me in the third row, curled up like a kitten, snuggled next to her puppy dog husband Feng Congde. They look like feuding lovers who have just made up. I am seated in the middle of the second row with a bodyguard named Yang on one side, a professor on the other. Way in the back, and up front, yet more students are squeezed in, keeping pretty much to themselves.

The driver turns north then eventually works his way west. Chai Ling is reviewing the familiar scenery with the intense appreciation of someone ready to take an extended trip abroad. Both she and her husband had been talking about studying abroad; maybe they had one foot out the door already. Start a revolution, then fly away in time for the start of a new school year.

“There’s that restaurant!” she exclaims. A few minutes later, she gets nostalgic about another landmark known to her and her husband. “Remember the time we went there?”

The mop-headed driver, who could have passed for the fifth Beatle, zooms at high speed along the ring road, only shifting gears to slow the van down when we get to the busy streets of Haidian District.

“Do you think we could visit Beida one more time?” Chai Ling asks. She does not seem to be addressing the question to anyone in particular.

“That’s possible,” the bodyguard next to me says after a pause. “But let’s wait till it gets dark.”

“Beida, Beida, I want to go to campus! I want to go home one last time!” she pleads with a girlish flair.

Talk turns to politics again. I choose not intrude and cannot fully grasp what is going on, but I don’t want to bring undue attention to myself asking too many questions. From what I could gather, Chai
Ling is still on the verge of running away, but due to the intervention of her husband and some friends, she dumped Wang Li and is now going to postpone "going underground" until a more necessary and appropriate time. More importantly, she seems to be enjoying some kind of high-level support for her political line, and even the protection of bodyguards. If so, who was the ultimate protector?

Are the students working in tandem with protégés of the fallen Zhao, or perhaps a military protector? There had been rumors of old generals being supporters of the cause, but students also liked to say they were free agents, not aligned to any faction. That’s what the May 27 meeting was about.

Who could possibly be lending support to the students at this late stage, enough tacit support to make them utterly unafraid of arrest in the Beijing Hotel? Was it Public Security? A rogue intelligence group? Or just plucky citizen volunteers?

And how does the interview we did this morning fit into all this? At that time she expressed disappointment with fellow students but she also talked of overthrowing the government! ABC News had already indicated they were going to use the tape, and it was nothing if not highly incriminating. If Chai Ling is still in town when the interview is aired, her likeness and passionately expressed anti-government ideas will be all that much better known.

Finally, I decided to interrupt their back-seat musings. “Chai Ling?”

“Hi, Jin Peili,” she smiles as I turn around to face her.

“You know, that interview, the interview today, you said a lot of things that could, like, get you in trouble. Are you sure you want it to be broadcast?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not too late to call ABC and ask them not to air it, or at least delay it,” I advise. "If your life is in danger.”

“I want it to be broadcast,” she answers pointblank, without batting an eyelash.

“But you said some things. . .like about the government, you know, wanting to overthrow it.”

“When will it go on the air?” asks Feng, with a sudden perk in interest.

“Sometime tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry, we will be gone by then.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. After we visit Beida, one last time,” he says.

I was beginning to feel the immense responsibility that goes with putting something provocative on the air, especially something political. Millions would see it, but more to the point, it would be closely monitored by Chinese security.

Feng grins at me to dispel my doubts “Don’t worry, you’ve done a good job. We all appreciate your help.”

“So satellite transmission has been cut,” I explain, “ABC has to take the tape out of China by hand. It will be carried to Hong Kong or Japan, and then relayed by satellite to New York. The earliest it could be on the air is the evening news, American time, which means early tomorrow morning here.”

“It’s fine, no problem,” he says. Feng is disarmingly self-assured.

“It’s not too late to call, if you need more time.”

“Jin, don’t worry. We will be gone by then.”

So, they still plan to run away, and this little jaunt, this little joy ride they have invited me to partake in, is for what? For fun? Or a mix of business and pleasure, saying goodbye while just taking care of some last-minute logistics.

I have trouble putting together the young woman who confessed and cried her heart out earlier today, face contorted and full of pain, with the breezy young woman in the van.

What’s going on? Why is Feng Congde so confident that nothing will happen to them? Was he reckless or did he know something that his wife did not when she made her mad dash for the train station?
What happened at the train station, anyway? There were so many things I wanted to ask, but given the gentle cooing sounds behind me it didn’t seem like the right time.

Chai Ling was no stranger to the Beijing Hotel, she had been there twice today. A few days before, I had seen her meeting there at midnight in a darkened coffee shop with Wang Dan and Wuerkaixi. Yet on the square, one had to pass through all kinds of security ropes just to get in her vicinity.

The student leaders seemed unnecessarily stringent in their security, but an illegal movement of that size required vigilance. So why was it that, in the most-heavily monitored hotel in town, the student rebels seemed so at home, if not outright welcome? I knew from talking to the floor attendants that many ordinary workers supported the students, but ordinary workers also knew not to get in the way of police.

Beijing Hotel workers had marched under banners indicating their work affiliation and a gigantic ten-story banner proclaiming solidarity with the striking students had been draped from the top of the hotel during the height of the protest. The multi-storied banner, partially draped in front of my room, each character the size of a person, read:

*WHO IS TO SAY WHAT IS THE FATE OF SO VAST A LAND? DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM ARE THE SHARED IDEALS OF ALL HUMANITY!*

With a banner like that, suspended from the 17th floor, running all the way down to the seventh floor, right past my window as it turned out, one could imagine why the students might be attracted to that particular building, but why was the banner permitted in the first place? Was there some kind of connection between the security staff of the Beijing Hotel and the student movement?

If there was support, it was hidden and erratic. Even now, the van took precautions in ferrying us across town. Not only had the driver made some unnecessary turns on the way, but he took to circling Haidian District like an airplane, awaiting official permission to land.
When I ask about this the bodyguard explains that the driver is killing time, waiting for the cover of darkness before slipping onto campus. But Beida is a gated community. Would the guards let this vehicle, the student command on wheels, pass through the gated checkpoint? It was no secret Beida harbored activists, wouldn’t the secret police be looking for student radicals on campus, or were they such Keystone cops that it never occurred to them to look in obvious places?

As Yang shrewdly observes, the driver will not attempt to enter Beida until darkness falls. When he at last pulls up to the front gate on the south side of campus and greets the guards, I worry how they might react to my presence, –did the presence of a foreigner make the entourage look less innocent, or more? One guard presses his face up to the window, mentally registering my presence with eye contact, but it ends with that. We are then waved in. Once inside the huge walled campus, the driver again adopts a defensive posture, crawling in long slow circle around the lake and tree-dotted grounds while Chai Ling and her friends heatedly discuss if they should get out of the van, and, if so, where.

The tentativeness of the travelers upon arriving at Beida reminds me of my midnight visit to Beida with Cui Jian on the eve of May 4. Sitting inside a vehicle creates a certain perception, perhaps illusory, of security. One feels safer inside than outside. For me, sitting in the back of a car reminded of the security of childhood when everything important was decided by your parents sitting up front. For an American like me, being in a car had deep associations going back to childhood. But what comfort did the hum of a vehicle give Chai Ling and Feng Congde, for whom riding in a car was still a novelty?

The tree-shrouded campus is quiet and dark. We make a clockwise sweep, tooling past Shao Yuan, the foreign dorm, then the library and then back down a dirt road leading to the Chinese student dorm adjacent to the hot spot of Sanjiaodi.

The van draws up to the stairwell of the dorm and the driver tells everyone to get out. As soon as we have all clambered out, he hits the pedal and speeds away. We are whisked into the unlit hallway by waiting escorts. We mount a dark, dank stairwell, then turn down an empty corridor. A door
Once we are inside, the door is closed and Chai Ling is greeted with hugs and pats on the back by her comrades, like a war hero just in from the battlefield. A few of her supporters eye me curiously, with stares neither friendly nor unfriendly, because I arrived with her group, but the attention is clearly focused on her.

We are led up another flight of stairs and into another room. Again the door was closed quietly but firmly behind us. Chai Ling is no stranger to the makeshift student headquarters, and quickly assumes the role of host rather than guest. Sensing my bewilderment if not discomfort, she leads me by the arm into an adjacent dorm room, where the furniture has been rearranged to serve as an office. She is a known entity on her home turf, just being seen with her makes my presence more acceptable, just as being with me made it easier for her to navigate the Lido Hotel earlier in the day.

We squeeze into a dorm room that had been converted into a primitive communications office. There are three bunk beds and a desk in the middle of the floor, from the ceiling dangles the usual no frills light bulb. In the corner there is a rack of metallic washing basins, hot water mugs, toothbrushes, and thermos bottles. What made this room different from nearly every other dorm room in China was the addition of a communications devise both rare and highly useful: a telephone.

Seeing the phone made me think of my friends. Was Bright still waiting for me back in my room? What about Lotus? And where did Wang Li run off to after Chai Ling changed her mind about taking the train south?

"Can I make a phone call?" I ask.
"You may," one of the students answers, "but be careful about what you say, the phone is bugged." As often is the case in China, convenient communication comes at a price.
"I want to call the Beijing Hotel."
"Go ahead."

I dial my room number, wondering what cryptic words I should use for a phone call bugged on both ends, but no such luck for the eavesdroppers tonight. No answer.

Chai Ling is preoccupied, instantly immersed in student dealings, though she manages to flash a friendly little smile my way every once in a while. For the second time today we sit on the same bed, she on one end, me on the other. At one point she breaks from her group to come over and offer me a drink of water, perhaps trying to return the hospitality of the morning. But basically she is too busy to chat, let alone field my questions.

I lean back against the wall, sipping hot water, trying to take it all in. One by one her friends and followers pop in to talk with her, sometimes waiting on line to do so. It's like a campus version of the broadcast tent.

Some of the talk is semi-confidential, judging from excited whispers, cupped hands and hushed tones. I overhear talk about going somewhere by airplane. I hear talk about the military. Just at a moment where the conversation takes an interesting turn, with military overtones, my appointed companion Yang, the young bodyguard, takes a seat next to me and, almost deliberately it seems, begins to distract me with a different sort of conversation.

"What sports do you like?"
"What are your hobbies?"
"Do you like music?"

When I tell him that I like to play guitar, he gets up and retrieves a cheap folk guitar that had been abandoned on the other bed. He presses me to play something, anything. I refuse several times but can't bring myself to say I’d rather be eavesdropping than singing, so at last I yield to his request.

I finger a few chords, tune the strings a bit, and strum some more. The reverberations of the guitar comfort me and without even a glimmer of conscious thought, my hand starts to finger chords to
"Tiananmen Moon." I strum lightly and sing quietly to myself, in a whisper really, because I don’t like to perform. The song sounded so innocent, so anachronistic now.

"Midnight moon of Tiananmen,
When will I see you again?
Looking for you everywhere,
Going in circles around the Square."

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