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Digital Traces of 1989

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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. We ran the first piece in this limited series, by John Gittings, on April 23, the second, by Jonathan Unger, on April 26. This is the third piece.

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Media played an important role in the mobilization of Chinese protesters in 1989. Twenty years afterwards, the protest movement is still linked to media, except that it is now the new media. The Internet has become a reservoir of the history and memories of that fateful year.

The most comprehensive English-language material on the Internet is perhaps the web site The Gate of Heavenly Peace run by the Long Bow Group. Because it is already well known to readers of China Beat, I will mention two other sources.

One is CND’s “Virtual Museum of China ‘89.” CND has a large “Virtual Museum of the ‘Cultural Revolution,” which I often use. Its “Virtual Museum of China ‘89” is smaller in scale, but nonetheless contains many valuable resources. The archives of the “Virtual Museum of China ‘89” consist of “Images,” “Sounds,” “Writings” and other documents related to the protest movement. The “Writings” section contains, among other things, a diary by a student in Tsinghua University, two novels, ten special issues about the movement published in English from 1989 through 1999, and many special supplements published in Chinese from 1992 through 1999. The diary had many touching details. For example, the entry for May 20, 1989, the first day of martial law, begins with the following words (in my hasty and awkward translation):

The morning sun lit the Square once again. Nothing happened. No troops were in view. Then there came news from all quarters that this morning, at the main crossroads in the suburbs, local residents spontaneously hit the streets, formed human walls, and blocked the troops from entering the city! I was surprised and extremely moved to hear this news. Who would have thought that Beijing’s residents could do such brave things! Beijing residents were just great! Because the hunger strike had ended, the medical personnel sent to the Square by the Red Cross began to withdraw today. The two young girls who worked as nurses in our broadcast station were leaving too. They were reluctant to go and asked us to sign our names on their white uniforms and hats, saying that they didn’t know when we could ever meet again.

The other source is a photo exhibit I found here. The photographer was Kiang Hei. I communicated with him a couple of years ago but have since lost touch with him and haven’t been able to find out the circumstances under which he took these pictures. But the pictures are soul-stirring. For anyone who was there on the scene, they would instantly bring back the sounds and silences and the joys and desolation of the time. Who was the woman in this picture? What was she saying to the young man facing her, with others in the background listening attentively? The characters written on the yellow paper mean “Children are the future of our country’s democratic movement.” The children of 1989 have grown up. Are they living up to these expectations? The bulletin boards shown in the photograph here look like those in the famous sanjiaodi (Triangle) area in Beida. I passed that area whenever I visited Beida. Eventually, as China forged ahead with its market transformation, the same bulletin boards became plastered all year round with advertisements of TOEFL and GRE preparation classes. Then in 2007, these stands, so closely tied to Beida’s political history, were demolished.

These are not the only traces of 1989 in cyberspace. But they are particularly unforgettable.
Tags: 6/4, Tiananmen