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6/4 Reader

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A set of links to readings about 6/4 from various sources:

1. A short and straightforward documentary from Al Jazeera (in English), posted at YouTube in two parts: Part I and Part II. This documentary has notably less emphasis on the influence of Western-style democracy than the average (Western) doc on the subject, and more on the opposition to authoritarianism...

2. Mara Hvistendahl has written a piece for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on a well-trod topic—the shifts in China post-89, particularly among those of the 6/4 generation. Yet, Hvistendahl, in addition to getting the basics right (unlike others we could—okay, we will mention), phrases the current tensions between those who want to remember 1989 and those who have already forgotten it in a compelling way:

   Even the staunchest critics of China’s regime acknowledge it now allows discussion in areas that were once off limits. After his release from prison, Zhou became an investigative journalist, tackling sensitive issues like food safety, and only sometimes encountering government intervention. At the same time, some contend that economic growth has merely allowed the Chinese government to fine-tune its control of dissent. As the government’s spending power grew, so did the carrots it could offer for obedience. “The government has great ambition for scholarly work that can make considerable breakthroughs, like shooting satellites into outer space,” says Wang Chaohua, who edited a volume of work by Chinese intellectuals titled *One China, Many Paths* (Verso, 2003). “But to do work in the social sciences and humanities, you need to have a real independent spirit, and that isn’t what the government wants to see. So you have a lot of political intervention.”

   Intellectuals who follow the state line are rewarded with trips abroad and generous research grants, critics say. “There are many research programs now that are sponsored by the government,” says Wang Tiancheng, a former law professor at Peking University. “It’s a type of corruption. They’re buying scholars.”

   Wang, now a visiting scholar at Columbia University’s Center for the Study of Human Rights, knows that power play firsthand. He spent five years in prison in the 1990s as one of the “Beijing Fifteen,” a group of intellectuals persecuted for their opposition to one-party rule. When he was released from prison in 1997, no university would hire him. “If you don’t go along with the Communist Party, if you don’t censor yourself, you’ll lose out on many benefits, including promotions and honors,” he says.

   If the *Chronicle* version is not available (usually their content is only available to subscribers), the full text was reposted at Howard French’s blog.

3. One of the most extensive profiles of the 1989 leaders that we have seen in the press: at *The Guardian*, Isabel Hilton profiles not just Wuer Kaixi and Wang Dan but also Wang Chaohua, Shen Tong, Diane Wei Liang, Wang Juntao, Chen Ziming, Ma Jian, and Shao Jiang.

4. Hat tip to Danwei (a long time ago), for pointing to “Standoff at Tiananmen,” which is chronicling the events of 1989 day-by-day.

5. James Miles, who was the BBC’s China correspondent in 1989, recalls the events in an audio recording.

6. Jeff Wasserstrom published a piece in *The Nation* last week, “Tiananmen at Twenty”:

   One reason to keep dwelling on 1989 is that common misunderstandings about that year persist, in China and in the West. For example, many Americans still think protesting students were the main victims of the massacre, even though the majority of the dead were workers who had turned out to support the educated youths. Many Americans also misremember those students as people who wanted to bring Western-style democracy to China. The reality was much more complex.
The students did celebrate the virtues of minzhu (democracy), but they spent even more energy denouncing corruption. And while their outlook was cosmopolitan, they were intensely patriotic. They presented themselves as carrying forward a longstanding Chinese tradition: that of intellectuals speaking out against selfish officials whose actions were harming the nation. In addition, the students’ grievances were not all purely political. They complained about the party’s interferences in their private lives and about its failure to make good on economic promises (Wuer Kaixi, a leader of the student movement, noted that a desire to be able to buy Nike shoes and other consumer goods was among the things that inspired members of his generation to act).

China specialists have another reason to revisit 1989: to stay humble. We pride ourselves on our deep understanding of China, but each of us was surprised by what happened twenty years ago—if not by the fact that a massacre occurred then by how long it took for the tanks to roll; if not by how many people risked their lives to fight for change then by the role rock music played in the protests.

7. NPR recently broadcast an interview by Louisa Lim with Jiang Rong (the author of Wolf Totem), which touches on the events of 1989 as well.

8. The Economist examines memories and remembrances of 6/4’s anniversary:

The party has also tried to deflect attention from the army’s contribution to the slaughter. Twenty years ago the official media repeatedly sang the praises of dozens of soldiers killed during the “counterrevolutionary rebellion”—and posthumously considered “guardians of the republic”. Now they are all but forgotten. Meanwhile, public support for the armed forces, which was badly damaged in 1989, appears to have rebounded. The army’s rapid response to the deadly earthquake in Sichuan Province a year ago, a gift to party propagandists, played a part in this. When tanks roar through Tiananmen Square on October 1st in a grand parade to celebrate China’s national day (the second such display since 1989), they will be greeted with widespread approval from a nation hungry for symbols of China’s growing power.

Tags: 1989, 6/4, Tiananmen