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6/4 Around the World

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Last August, we called on contributors and friends of the blog around the world to send in short reports on how the Olympics were being covered and received in their neck of the woods. Recently, we sent out a similar call regarding today’s anniversary. Here are a few of the responses we’ve received so far, pulled together into a piece that we think would make for interesting reading beside the very different “around the world” survey that David Flumenbaum has done and will keep updated over at the Huffington Post. Included here are some comments by people who contributed to our “Olympics Around the World” feature or have written for China Beat on other things before. We’ll link to those earlier pieces when listing their names below, and are also pleased to welcome a couple of newcomers to the mix, people whose writings have been mentioned on the site, but who have not written for us before.

James Farrer, Tokyo

My daily paper in Tokyo, the Asahi Shimbun (Japanese language version), has been running a series of very prominent articles all week on June 4th. One article that caught my eye on June 1 was an attempt to systematically track down and account for the most prominent leaders of the 1989 student movement. The article featured an informative chart with names and summary accounts of 21 former student leaders, seven of whom stayed in China and 14 of whom left the country. With the exception of Wuerkaixi, who lives in Taiwan, it seems all the others are in the US. None seem to have any connection to Japan or significant stays in Japan.

The article on June 1, as well as the article today (June 4), features interviews with Wuerkaixi, who lives in Taiwan with his Taiwanese wife, and works for a US company. Today, it is reported that he was refused entry to Macau, and was held up at the Macau airport before returning to Taiwan. He was travelling on a Taiwanese travel document. He reported that he had not seen his family in twenty years. Otherwise, there was a first-hand report about a group of former student leaders and some current activists who meet regularly in Beijing to discuss reforms, a story about the Tiananmen Mothers, and a story about Zhao Ziyang’s book. I have not noticed any large public events or ceremonies involving June 4th here in Japan, but it may be that I am not following the right news. (I don’t regularly watch TV....)

In general the coverage in the Asahi Shimbun is similar in tone to a liberal US paper, with articles primarily focusing on the voices of former activists. There is a wistful tone, a sense not only of lost possibilities but of a lost era of political hopefulness and, on a more personal level, of lost youth. The event is slipping into history much faster than we imagined it would.

Paola Voci, New Zealand

I will be watching for anything more in the news tonight, but so far very little in the mainstream media here in New Zealand. The largest newspapers obviously have some coverage of the 20th anniversary, but they are AP Reuters pieces ; TVNZ broadcast a BBC video on this topic. Even when included, it is never the first item in the world news (the AirFrance plane gets much more coverage). I am not sure whether something might be going on now in Auckland and Wellington. We will know tomorrow if any public event has taken place in these larger cities.

Here in Dunedin, 4 June is a day like all others.

Because today was my last lecture, I decided that at least I had to check how many of my students knew about what happened 20 years ago (of course many students were not even born then!). To my relief, only a couple had no idea about what 4 June and the Tiananmen Square protest meant. Most had some sort of knowledge that “a protest took place and people died”. We took some time in class to just go over some of the basic facts, some of the issues and the relevance that they still have in today’s China. That was my very small contribution to keep the memory of this tragic event alive and stimulate some discussion on its significance...
Chinese students associations on campus (either from mainland or Taiwan) do not seem to have organized anything to commemorate the event. At least nothing visible. But, the day is not over yet...

Since I came to live here, I felt that for NZ, China has a rather strange proximity and remoteness. Yet, I was expecting a little more discussion about China in the media today...to match at least some of the interest that the Olympics were able to inspire. But, at least so far, it seems as though, even without any CCP intervention, June 4 has been forgotten in NZ.

**Steve Smith, Italy**

In today’s *La Repubblica*, Italy’s second largest national newspaper and one with a left-of-centre bent, there is an interesting article by the award-winning journalist, Federico Rampini, who heads the Beijing bureau of the newspaper. It’s entitled ‘The Mystery of the Youth who Challenged the Tanks at Tiananmen’ and begins with a vivid description of the iconic footage, taken by photographers in the Beijing Hotel, in which a young man, jacket dangling from his left hand and clutching two plastic bags of shopping in his right, holds up the tanks rolling down Chang’an Avenue.

“The scene”, Rampini writes, “seems unreal. The tanks are stopped one after the other in Indian file by this slender figure who seems to dominate them. The driver of the first armoured tank makes a manoeuvre, trying to drive around the young man from the right. But he appears in front of them once more, extending his arms as if he is taming a wild beast. The young man then takes a leap and climbs on to the tank to talk to the soldier who is visible through the tank grille. ‘Turn back! Stop killing our people!’ is the cry that witnesses remember him exclaiming. Then it is over in a flash: the young man gets down from the tank and friends surround him in order to allow him to escape.”

Rampini begins his reflections by asking what happened to this youth. He talks to Xu Youyu 徐友漁, liberal dissident and a signatory of Charter 08 (零八宪章) who explains that many feared he had been arrested or killed, but that in the twenty years since the event legends of all kinds have grown up around him, notably one that he had plastic surgery to avoid discovery. If Xu knows more than this, and Rampini implies that he does, he is not telling.

This, however, is just a spur for Rampini to go on to reflect on how the incident shed light on the strategy of repression pursued by the authorities both during and after the Tiananmen events, in respect of whom they targeted and how they targeted them. The young man was lucky to escape because he was close to Tiananmen, the sacred centre of Communist power. According to Xu, heaps of bodies crushed by tanks could be seen in districts further from the centre such as Fuxingmen and Muxidi, giving a certain ironic half-truth to the claim of the authorities that “no one was killed in Tiananmen.”

The crucial point made, however, is that repression came about not only in the form of 700 to 3000 killings that occurred during the suppression of the insurgency, but also in the form of arrests, condemnations and deportations during the months that followed. Lists of those most wanted and those who must be blacklisted from employment circulated in all work units. Zhang Boshu 张博树, another signatory of Charter 08, recalls that he was lucky because he was not a member of the CCP, since party branches were under particular pressure to turn over members who had been involved in the protests to the security organs. Zhang believes that party members sympathetic to Zhao Ziyang were a particular object of detestation for Deng Xiaoping, who accused him of having split the party in two.
Rampini stresses the very different fates that awaited worker and student protestors. As early as 8 June, the Shanghai Public Security Bureau arrested 13 workers, three of whom were immediately shot by a firing squad. Of the 48 public executions that took place in Beijing in succeeding days not a single one was a student. According to Rampini, “the grand operation to bring about the recovery of the elite had got underway, the long march to coopt intellectuals and students had begun.” The lesson that Communist leaders learned, he suggests, was that they must never again find themselves opposed to the most educated and modern section of society. He ends by quoting Zhang to the effect that twenty years on, there is no alternative force to the CCP on the horizon: “There does not exist a movement that could lead a peaceful transition to democracy. It is from within the Communist party that this push for change must come.”

**Prasenjit Duara, Singapore**

*Straits Times*, June 4, 2009 has an op-ed by Goh Sui Noi—“Legacy of June 4 leaves grounds for optimism”—which argues that June 4 has left a good legacy for development of democracy in China—both from supply side of ex-activists and demand from the ignorant young students. [Editor’s note: You must be a subscriber to the *Straits Times* to access this piece, but here is the synopsis from the website: “Professor Huang Jing’s class of 17 students at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy swelled to more than 30 earlier this year on the day he taught about the June 4th incident.”]

**Mark Magnier, India**

There was relatively little coverage or evident interest in the Tiananmen anniversary in India. Television largely ignored it, preferring to focus instead on Obama’s speech to the Islamic world and a local medical school scandal. A few newspapers ran op-eds by China specialists and a couple of publications with China correspondents had articles buried well back in the paper on how China was battening down its hatches for the 20th. But that was about all I saw.

One of the more interesting pieces I saw was an editorial in *Mint*, a progressive business paper. In an item entitled “Tiananmen: 20 years later,” the paper discussed the link between political and economic freedom, concluding that, while China may be hoping to create a new model of the latter without the former, in the end they must go hand in hand. “The Communist Party, it would seem, is now trying to delay the day when these contradictory elements are forced into a synthesis,” it wrote. “But without the vent democracy offers citizen grousers, this synthesis can only be a violently unstable one.”

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Tags: 1989, 6/4, Tiananmen