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## 1989: A Lively Dinner in a Quiet Week

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*(from the 1989 journal of Philip J Cunningham)*

May 7, 1989

The Yang's spare living room was transformed into a vibrant cultural salon, with Gladys and Xianyi taking their habitual places in twin armchairs, bringing to mind a kindly old king and queen holding court. The rest of us, lined up on a long couch against the opposite wall behaved like loyal subjects, beaming with respect and admiration.

The Yangs had been through unimaginably hard times, including solitary confinement during the Cultural Revolution, but remained true to one another through thick and thin, emerging with a rare degree of contentment, humility and self-knowledge. They did their best to make light of their significant literary accomplishments, and though rocked by cruel vicissitudes of fate, they could joke and tease one another about it, perhaps a secret to their health and the enduring affection they held not just for one another but the country they had chosen to call home.

"The first time I met Mao..." Mr. Yang, said with a clipped British inflection, sounding rather like a seasoned raconteur who needed no prompting to start telling an oft-repeated tale, "the Chairman asked me if it was really possible to translate Chinese into English. He was really puzzled by that. Mao had a good mind, but he was not skilled at foreign languages..."

"Xian-yi," Gladys interrupted. "Why are you speaking in English again? Everyone here understands Chinese!" Gladys scowled at him like a mother trying to discipline a wayward son.

Mr. Yang gave her a mock angry glance and continued on in his nearly perfect, academic English. "Can you believe I met this woman 40 years ago at Cambridge and we are still together?" Mr. Yang made a face at her and poured himself another drink.

"That's enough, Xianyi," Gladys reprimanded. "Didn't I tell you, Philip, you shouldn't have brought the whiskey? Once he starts drinking there's no stopping him." Gladys turned to her husband and added, "You stubborn old man."

"You like me because I'm so good looking, isn't it?" Mr. Yang retorted with a wry smile, and turned to me again. "When you make a movie about me you must let me play the leading role, otherwise...I'll have nothing to do with it." "Can you play guitar?" I asked, picking up on the teasing mood. "How would you like to be in CHINABEAT?" All of a sudden I realized I was talking in the same wise-guy kind of way that was good for getting a rise out of my own grandfather. With some people the best defense is a good offense.

"When do we start filming?" he asked. "Did you see the lights and cameras here before? I'm a star already!" Mr. Yang then leaned over the armrest, issuing loudly whispered instructions to his wife.

"Give Philip some whiskey!"

"You know Philip doesn't want to drink, Xianyi."

"What do you mean he doesn't want to drink?"

"Leave him alone, you drunken old man." Yang reminded me of my maternal grandfather, an Irish rebel in his youth, who eventually became more stridently "American" than native-born Americans like myself. I turned to the Chinese gentleman who reminded me much of a certain Matthew Hayes of County Wexford to bring up a question about a hot political topic that had been conspicuously ignored up until now, fully expecting to get hit with a barrage of criticism of the sort I got from my grandfather when I told him I had marched in protests against US imperialism.

"Yang Xiansheng, so, like, what did you think about the May 4th demonstration?"

"What do you think about it?" He handed the hot potato question back to me without revealing his own feelings. I took his evasive answer to mean that he, a veteran and a victim of earlier idealism-tinged mass movements, wanted no truck with the student protesters.

"Well, I participated in the May fourth march to Tiananmen..." I said, with a mixture of trepidation and willful defiance.

"Good for you, that's the spirit!" Mr. Yang smiled, nodding with approval. I could not believe my ears. The courtly and ceremonious Mr. Yang not only saw the demonstration in a positive light, but seemed to endorse the idea that it was perfectly reasonable for someone like me, an American, a *laowai*, to march with the Chinese students. Soon everyone in the room was talking about the student unrest, the Yangs, in particular, speaking out with undisguised enthusiasm.

"China needs more friends like that," Gladys added.

"This has got all the political analysts at the embassy going crazy," said Australian diplomat Richard Rigby, who arrived for after-dinner drinks with his wife Taifang. "It's getting harder and harder to keep up with all the changes..."

"China is changing so fast," the apolitical Cheng Lin offered, taking the safe ground of stating the obvious.

"I support the students," lamented Hou Dejian, who seemed simultaneously fascinated and pained by the topic. "But I feel too old." Hou, like me was thirty-something, and it made me wonder if age as much as nationality was a barrier that should give one pause before getting involved street protests.

"You all seem young to me," Mr. Yang injected, offering the reassuring perspective of age and experience.

"Today's young people are very patriotic," Gladys reiterated with conviction. "What they are doing is good for the country!"

**Tags:** 6/4, Hou Dejian, Philip J Cunningham, Tiananmen, Tiananmen Moon, Yang Xianyi