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May 10, 1989: Demonstration of Ten Thousand Bicycles

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For a few days there it seemed that the successful student march of May 4 would be the last of the big demos and soon everyone would be back on campus attending classes again. Railing against this rather pleasant and natural inclination, strident wall posters at Shida and Beida called for continuing the student strike. One of the more florid campus wall posters that I managed to snap a photo of was a florid eulogy to the Great Hall of the People as a symbol of representative rule. The dark message, written on May 5, 1989 was at odds with the general euphoria in the wake of the May 4 March, for it predicted an outcome with blood flowing down Chang’an Boulevard. Brushed in ink on a large sheet of paper, written with such literary flourish that I needed help to decipher it, the poem was signed by an anonymous author who went by the name, “The Wild One.”

“*Drawing blood on Chang’an Jie until the dawn dawns red, smashing to bits the bona fide dream of the people.*”

On the morning of May 10, the student-rigged loudspeakers at the center of the Beijing University campus started crackling with a call to action. A Beida physics student explained they were calling on other schools to join Beida students in a new form of protest with Chinese characteristics: the bicycle demonstration!

We sat on our bikes under a tree near the front gate of Beida to observe the hatching of this new and unusual type of protest. The “marchers” rolled in from all directions, mostly walking their bicycles due to the utter congestion. Like earlier protests, which used patriotic anthems as a cover for covert political action, the demo on wheels could hide in plain sight in a city of a million tinkling bicycles.

The tree-lined road leading to the main gate on campus was by now attracting black bicycles like crows, watching and waiting for a sign to take flight en masse.

The long-legged Chen Li shifted restlessly on her bicycle as her mind wrestled with indecision. It seemed that she had almost made up her mind to join the demonstration when some annoying static over the student broadcast system brought to mind another problem.
Just who were the so-called student leaders? They hadn’t been voted into office. They had just sort of seized the initiative. Chen Li bristled at the idea of taking the lead from such presumptuous peers, wondering instead what her teachers would counsel. The problem with the student movement, it seemed to her, was that it was run by students.

It was one o’clock, at least a thousand bicycles were amassed on the tree-lined road leading to South Gate, but there was no discernible movement in a forward direction. Then a few minutes after the hour, a sudden crescendo of tinkling bicycle bells alerted us that the pent-up energy of the waiting cyclists was about to be unleashed. To the background of jangling rings, screeching brakes, flopping pedals and soft thud of rubber tires bumping into the spokes of other bicycle wheels, the demonstration creakily commenced.

Beida professors, some of whom lived in apartments near South Gate, were on the scene, talking to students and in some cases actively cheering them on, much to Chen Li’s delight. But most of the older campus residents kept their distance. Whether it was the wisdom of age or bitter memories of the Cultural Revolution not yet faded, many of them watched wistfully from the windows and balconies of the ramshackle teacher’s dormitories.

All at once, the mass of a million spokes and wheels, greasy chains and kickstands heaved into motion again. Enmeshed in a traffic jam at the starting gate, the metallic parade of creaking, entangled bicycles slowly lurched forward, balanced and propelled by feet, more often on the ground than on pedal. Because it took just a few wobbly bicycles to block a narrow path, the campus gate became a bottleneck, slowing egress even though the security guards did nothing to stop the flow.

Once we rolled off campus and hit the lightly-trafficked streets of Haidian district, the mass of bicycles speeded up in concert, a forward movement that felt truly liberating. All demonstrators, from flag bearers to group leaders, were on mount, so when we finally hit open road, it was possible to race en masse at a flag-whipping speed.

The plan as we understood it was to go around Beijing following the perimeter of the circuitous ring road, to breach Tiananmen Square and then to stage a protest at the People’s Daily compound on Chaoyang Road, but first we had to join forces with allies from other campuses.

“It’s a 40-kilometer circle,” I heard someone say, “When we get downtown, just follow the old city wall of Beijing.”

Chen Li was well aware of the iconic importance of the route, but she was no hot-headed activist. Unlike some late-joiners who pedaled with double the enthusiasm, she continued to show hesitation and review her options at each main juncture along the way. Twice we pulled out from the convoy at her insistence when it looked like there might be trouble from the police. I appreciated her caution, I was a bit worried myself. But what impressed me more was that she did not fall into lockstep behind the bossy “student leaders” up front who were by now commanding the metaphorical ten thousand troops. The only thing more surprising than the speed with which a handful of rash students took control was the willingness of so many intelligent individuals to become followers.

True, the march would not have taken wing if everyone adopted the cautious wait-and-see attitude the two of us did. And some of the students leaders at Beida, Wang Dan in particular, were considered to be thoughtful and reasonable, but the rapidity with which Chinese students fell into line and accepted group think troubled me nonetheless.

But as we cruised breezily down the car-free streets, meeting up with other wheeled university contingents, a kind of ragtag mass euphoria built with each addition to the ranks.

...
the leadership headquarters at Zhongnanhai on the way to Tiananmen. If the men in uniform had been sticklers about not allowing a left turn towards the Square, they showed little concern for what we demonstrators might do elsewhere. That was someone else’s responsibility.

Beijing’s grid-like layout of large east/west avenues criss-crossed by north/south roads made it nearly impossible to lose one’s bearings. It became immediately obvious when we turned south after a feint to the west that we were still headed for Tiananmen after all, only in a roundabout way.

The snakelike chain of cycles doubled back to head for our unspoken destination. Successfully overcoming the police roadblock doubled the good spirits; the collective mood was ecstatic and electric. The indirect route to the Square offered no obstacle to our forward motion. It was hard to believe that the traffic police were so dim-witted as to fall for the ruse, it seems more likely they were following orders to the letter without enthusiasm. Once they had stopped us from turning east onto Chang’an Boulevard, they didn’t seem to care where we went. It was as if they put up a perfunctory show of opposition to the march, not in real opposition, but so as not to get in trouble for not doing their job. Bureaucracy at its best!

When we got to broad Qianmen Avenue we veered east, making a nosedive to Tiananmen, as inexorably as if pulled by gravity. It was here, as the rows of onlookers thickened, as the cyclists pedaled harder, that Chen Li heard a variation of *laowai paobu* that she was kind enough to share with me. What were people saying at the sight of me today? *Laowai qi zixingche!* –Whitey rides the bike!

As we picked up speed, spirits soared. The flying wedge leading the pack thinned out to about five bicycles abreast, stretching the malleable procession in length. It was a race to beat the police to the Square, or so it felt as we hit our clunky bike pedals at an accelerating clip. This kinetic frenzy got the adrenaline going, there was no stopping our unauthorized procession now. Whatever residual indecisiveness my companion might have had was largely overcome by the inspiring sight of fellow cyclists boldly careening forward. Butterflies in the stomach took flight as we made the final invigorating plunge towards the Square.

As the bicycle procession reached the southwestern outskirts of the Tiananmen area, I couldn’t imagine pulling out, even if there were police waiting. I didn’t want to miss the thrill of streaming across the symbolic plaza in this swift, fluid convoy of thousands, holding aloft fluttering flags, wheeling it for free speech.

The mad dash across Tiananmen Square was the high point, a defiant burst of energy propelled us clear across the forbidden ground in a giant, diagonal slash. There were pockets of urban well-wishers and curious rural tourists who out of friendly support, or fear of speeding bicycles, stepped back from the bicycle course to form a line of observers on both sides. We sped along like chessboard knights across the graph-like matrix of the Square, starting in the lower left hand corner going two steps north, one step east, then one step north and two steps east, finally exiting on the upper right hand side.

The vivid pathway cut by us cyclists swooshing across the Square was volatile and transient; it lasted only as long as the last bicycle in the procession. Banners strapped to bicycles and some huge red flags were held high in the air, balanced deftly by skilled cyclists. The way the flags whipped in the wind created an air of excitement. The red headbands, representing blood, rebellion and speed, were perfect for the course. How else could we identify our cyclists in a city of several million bicycles?

From the vantage point of a gliding bicycle, it was a magnificent scene. Before us and behind us, red flags and school banners lashed the air and unfurled in the jet stream of rushing cycles. This gave the illusion that flags and banners, some strapped to bicycles, others held aloft by skilled cyclists, were flying above the crowd under their own power, like the magical brooms of the sorcerer’s apprentice.

As the vanguard zig-zagged in search of openings through the crowd ahead of us, I suddenly had to wonder. Where did all the spectators come from, anyway? At least some of the onlookers appeared to be supporters because they lined up, deliberately holding up traffic it seemed, to create a protective...
corridor for the demonstrators to slip through. By the time we reached the northeast quadrant of the Square, the banks of spectators were four or five deep on each side, shouting in unison and clapping in support.

The mood was defiant but confident, not only because the police had backed off, but because there was a sense of safety due to the tacit support of townspeople and the growing camaraderie of fellow cyclists. Thanks to the exhilarating movement across the square, all my doubts, and I think those of Chen Li, about whether or not one should get involved in such an event vanished. I, for one, was exactly where I wanted to be.

The speedy rivulet of bicycles got dammed up at Nanchizi intersection just beyond the Square, while the vanguard of group facilitators dealt with some obstruction and conferred on which way to go. Tires bumped against tires, and the mobile procession slowed, scrunched up into an immobile mass of protesters, some dismounting, others resting with feet on the ground for balance. Then the signal to continue reached us and was duly passed along, one voice at a time until what seemed like a million shiny spokes were soon creaking back in motion, revolving down Chang’an Boulevard, transporting the saddled riders to the diplomatic section of town.

And that’s when we realized we weren’t alone.

“Look, over there! Foreign journalists!”

As we rolled past the Beijing Hotel we could see foreign film crews scrambling to set up their cameras to capture this unusual and uniquely Chinese demonstration on film. Unlike the well-documented marches of April 27 and May 4, it seemed as if the foreign press had been caught unprepared by this one. But that was a relief in a way, for cameras have an unnatural effect on people on both sides of the lens. As the brusque men with big cameras scrambled up their ladders, taking aim at us, I could sense a kind of shy pride laced with a touch of humiliation. We were targets being hunted by big roving lenses, reduced to a kind of native wildlife.

It was hard to determine if being on TV was good news or bad news. Had the press been tipped off by the government about an imminent crackdown, or had they been tipped off by the students about the illegal rally?

We kept our eyes on the road, generally ignoring the cameras and sped along on our way. I heard student cyclists complain that a bunch of journalists had shown up the other day at the last minute, when it looked like the police might stage a crackdown, and had they left just as quickly when the crisis passed. To see newsmen arrive on the scene was a bit like sighting vultures; they were just doing their job, of course, but their appearance was often a sign of trouble.

So what was I to make of BBC’s offer of a few days freelance work—interpreting, taking news crews around Beijing—in preparation for the Gorbachev visit a few days hence? I had no press accreditation, so it was a strictly off the books arrangement, a few days work at the local hire rate. I had to wonder if running around with the foreign media was a worthwhile opportunity or mere opportunistic voyeurism, a professional way of looking for trouble.

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