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The Hunger Strike Begins

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The idea that the campus was under student control struck me as a dangerous illusion. Bright and others said campus life had changed for the better, and in the aftermath of May 4, I could see evidence of the soaring change in spirit. But what if the whiff of freedom turned into a mockery of the same, a transient window of openness that served to make people implicate themselves? It had happened before in the 1950s, when Mao urged "a hundred schools of thought to contend," only to punish those who expressed themselves too freely.

To date, the campus strike was having its desired effect of keeping people out of class, but cutting class does not a revolution make. Sleeping late and not doing homework is a temptation few students can easily refuse. The non-action implicit in not going to class had to be accompanied by some kind of action to have any meaning at all.

The courtyard was abuzz with loud announcements blurting out of the hijacked, jerry-rigged amplification system. What might in theory be freewheeling talk akin to the ramblings of a college radio station was instead sounding uncompromising and strident, like a new party line. The drive to convince the moderate student body not to attend class, having largely succeeded, cleared the way for more radical action. The buzz was all about a big hunger strike.

As the BBC crew continued to track down colorful visuals, I approached a forlorn-looking young man who was sitting alone amidst the swirl of activity kicking up in the middle of the dusty courtyard. He was wearing a white headband with two black characters inked on: *JUE-SHI.*

"Why do you write ‘refuse food’ on your headband?” I asked, adopting the tone of a reporter without really thinking about it.

"The government just ignores us. We want dialogue. Maybe if we starve ourselves they will pay attention,” he said.

There was something off-putting about his explanation. It was unfathomable to me that a young person would starve to death as an attention-grabbing stunt. Here the stated cause was laughably hollow—risking the ultimate sacrifice for a chance to talk with Li Peng. I pressed the would-be martyr on the matter, curious about his personal reason for joining.
"I don’t know," he said dully, no doubt taken aback by the volley of questions from the inquisitive foreigner. "It’s not personal."

“What if the government ignores you?” I moved closer to him and lowered my voice, aware that our conversation was attracting curious ears.

“We demand dialogue and a reversal of the unjust April twenty-sixth editorial!” he declared with unexpected volume, to the approval of his contemporaries who were now tightly squeezing in around us.

“What if there is no dialogue?”

"Then we die," he said, winning somber nods of approval. His performance gave me the goose bumps.

I moved on, but subsequent conversations with other individuals quickly turned into group affairs. It was sad and frustrating to meet such earnest young men and women, all apparently willing to put their lives on the line, only to hear them give pat answers, sometimes even grandiose answers, magnified by peer pressure. Did those nodding in approval realize they were urging psychologically confused, approval-hungry classmates to court death? To what end?

Things were polarizing rapidly, making me feel hopelessly lost in the middle. Overturning the unjust verdict of an incendiary newspaper editorial was an aim both discreet and desirable, but what could possibly be the end goal of “dialogue?” Who was to say that dialogue had been achieved, or not? If hunger strikers started to drop, where would it all end?

The May 4 rally and the May 10 protest were framed largely in the name of free speech. Both events were peaceful, good-spirited and I supported them wholeheartedly. I had plunged into a turbulent sea of confusion in both instances, trusting the instincts and judgment of friends. The result was uplifting; I was pleased to lend moral support to a movement driven by good cheer and an idealistic outlook. But now things were taking a potentially destructive turn, for a hunger strike implied a kind of self-inflicted violence.

A hunger strike also introduced a ticking time bomb into the equation; things must be resolved in less time than it takes to die of starvation. It subjected both supporters and “the enemy” to emotional blackmail, not unlike a person who threatens suicide to manipulate or punish others for their lack of attention. Short of capitulation, terms of which were left dangerously undefined, on the government side, the unspoken end result would be death. This was no celebratory parade calling for free speech and cultural revival; it was a veritable death march.

Sitting on the steps of the small monument in the middle of the courtyard I watched as more and more grim-looking young men emerged from the residence hall wearing white headbands emblazoned with *JUE-SHI* painted in black. The strikers gathered around the monument in the middle of the rectangular quad, bringing to mind the way the protesters in recent days had gravitated to the Monument of the People’s Heroes, which commemorated martyrdom in Mao’s calligraphy, in the very heart of Tiananmen Square.

Headbanded delegations of students from other colleges began to arrive, giving Shida the doom and gloom of a kamikaze camp. Whither the joyous, life-affirming spirit of May Fourth?

We had stumbled upon this radical stab for attention quite fortuitously, a combination of BBC’s search for a non-existant “Democracy Wall at Xidan,” Min’s erratic driving and my curiosity to see what was happening on my home campus. I mingled with the strikers and their supporters, aware I was being watched more closely than before, but curious to see where the idea of a hunger strike came from. I couldn’t think of any examples in Chinese history, though India had elevated the hunger strike to an almost spiritual art. I had just seen some quotes by the progressive Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore in one of the student posters but no mention of Mahatma Gandhi. Where the student admirers of Tagore aware of his famous criticism of Gandhi, saying that even non-violent tactics were a hurtful weapon of sorts?
None of those queried could point to a precedent for this type of protest in China. The strikers I talked to tended to give knee-jerk answers to my questions, to the tune of dialogue or death, unwilling to consider the implications of the strike in honest terms or even begin to question decisions made by their “leaders.” It bothered me to see such courage coupled with an unquestioning attitude. To me, these young patriots had lost perspective and were fired up by peer pressure to take part in a dangerous “quest.”

As with the kamikaze pilots of Japan and the daring guerilla martyrs of the Chinese Revolution, extreme devotion coupled with intense social pressure made it possible to cast a false glow on pointlessly suicidal activities. But I was baffled that otherwise privileged students in a nation that had known much too much hunger should starve themselves for any abstraction, let alone such a poorly conceived one.

Brian found me, asking if I had lined up some students to interview.

“Well, it’s hard to say. I just talked with a few students over there. They are on a hunger strike,” I explained. “They demand dialogue with the government. There one of them, see, with the headband?”

“How good is his English?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t speaking English.”

“What’s the point of talking to someone in Chinese?” he said, which I thought was a pretty incredible statement to make in China. But he had a job to do, an overseas audience in mind, whereas I was indulging my own curiosity.

“Well, I say we have enough. We’re finished doing the posters, that’s what we came for, isn’t it?”

“But I think this is a good chance to talk to some of the hunger strikers.”

“Phil? We can talk to them later.”

We were on the verge of going back to the hotel for lunch when I learned that the hunger strikers were signing “wills” and making pledges to maintain group unity, to be unswerving in their determination to the death. The courtyard was now swirling with students wearing the ominous white headbands. Then I saw a familiar face among the hard-core strikers.

Lily! What was she doing with the radical contingent?

My gut reaction was that Lily, a simple honest soul from a small farming village, an appreciative young woman who didn’t hide her thrill to be attending a university in the national capital, was caving in to peer pressure. Bright and Jenny had the self-esteem and instincts of self-preservation to avoid the trap of something like a hunger strike, but Lily? I approached her stealthily, aware that she was surrounded by strike organizers. When she spotted me she couldn’t suppress a cordial smile, but watchful stares from her peers signaled that she ought to assume a less communicative, more appropriately solemn demeanor. She wasn’t free to be the Lily, the delightful woman of an impoverished province who I liked and knew. She was now an anonymous comrade, a patriotic hunger striker.

We talked briefly, but the conversation was limited to platitudes. She had never been particularly articulate about politics to begin with, and my presence, a foreign male hanging out with a TV crew of unknown provenance made her extremely self-conscious. I made reference to people and places we both enjoyed, hoping to jump-start a conversation, but she had lost her normal playfulness and sense of humor. When I pressed her as to why she was going on a hunger strike, she gave me the same pat answers as everybody else.

“We want open dialogue with the government.”
"Oh, come on, what do you really want?"

"Hmm, I’m not sure, but . . ."

One of Lily’s head-banded comrades intervened silently, poking his head into our conversation with the precision of a directional mike. I gave him an exasperated look, hoping to continue a bit longer.

“What were you saying?” I pressed for an answer.

“We want a reversal of the April twenty-sixth verdict!”

I had to wonder if she was fearful or if she already felt the effects of fasting since breakfast. Most Chinese students I knew couldn’t even skip a meal without feeling ill effects, already her lips were parched and dry. I really felt bad for her and tried to “reach” her but couldn’t get through.

There was some kind of indoctrination going on, but that’s not to say there was a mastermind or the process was coercive in any way. Rather, for students such as her who had endured years of rote-learning, and considered it a privilege to be in the city, there was readiness to take cues from the environment and allow a kind of auto-indoctrination to kick in. In the end, all I could do was wish her luck as she went back to her group and I went back to mine.

A short while later there were excited shouts.

“Beida is here!”

“Political Science and Law is here!”

“Shida! Get ready for the march,” a cheerleader shouted. “Assemble into your groups!”

The hunger strikers and supporters from other schools came pouring onto campus. Once again a mass of students converged on the sports ground. Once again the dusty basketball court was transformed into a sea of enthusiastic young people waving red flags to the singsong rhythm of rote slogans, redundant chants and crackling voices on megaphones. Beida, Qinghua, Political Science and Law and People’s University contingents gathered and joined forces to map out a joint strategy.

The final march to the Square was about to begin.

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