

5-15-2009

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Cunningham, Philip J., "5/15/89: Looking for Gorbachev" (2009). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 534.
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5/15/89: Looking for Gorbachev

May 15, 2009 in Uncategorized by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)



This piece is excerpted from Philip J. Cunningham's manuscript of his forthcoming book, Tiananmen Moon, part of an [on-going China Beat feature of excerpts from Cunningham's book](#). Interested readers can see more at [Cunningham's website](#).

By Philip J. Cunningham

Setting up a shot in a methodical manner—tripods incrementally adjusted, white balance achieved, illumination enhanced—allowed for the recording of clean, well-lit images worthy of prime time TV, but much of it came at the price of spontaneity. That which we sought to observe was constantly reacting to us and regrouping due to our presence. Cameramen know all about this of course, and a long lens can, with some foreshortening, capture unadulterated spontaneity, but more than once we simply scrapped the shot when members of the crowd seized up or returned our curiosity in an obvious way.

Which brought us back full circle to the solipsism of the TV standup; one of the few tasks we could do convincingly was a phony setup in which one member of our crew talked to the red light of the camera hoping to simulate an intimate conversation with unseen viewers in faraway land in the not too distant future.

It was hard to get away from the feeling that television news was at least as much about “television” as it was about “news.” The starving students and their rowdy supporters on Tiananmen Square were, for our current purposes, but a colorful backdrop; BBC wanted to shine light on one of its own. But even that proved an elusive task.

To get the angle necessary to see both the correspondent and the crowd, and, if humanly possible, Mao's distant portrait floating somewhere in the foggy night air, we had to find some way to put the solidly built, silver-haired John Simpson head and shoulders above everyone else. But a plaza as wide and unadorned as Tiananmen Square offers few natural promontories other than the monument, which was already staked out by students and at this juncture off-limits to the crew.

After Eric, the cameraman, made it clear he needed something, anything, to elevate the correspondent, I procured, at length, two flatbed bicycle carts to serve as platforms, one for the correspondent, one for the cameraman.

The cameraman signaled he was ready to roll, which was John Simpson's cue to mount the flatbed cart and commence his standup. He squeezed past curious spectators in a reasonably dignified

manner, but he had to step out of the dignity of his persona in order to clamber up on the cart, one knee at a time, and rise, tentatively and awkwardly, to a standing position on the top of the slightly wobbly cart.

Eric was perched atop the other bicycle cart, which he and his soundman Fred had expertly aligned with John Simpson's temporary pedestal to obtain optimal background visuals, effective depth of field and a precise focal length for the standup shot. Yet even they, despite their workaday clothing and self-effacing work style, created through their silent labors enough commotion to draw a circle of onlookers.

As eager onlookers inched forward to see what was going on, they pressed against one cart or the other. Even the slightest wobble or shift in position caused the shot to fall out of alignment, ruining the setup, creating a new delay.

Fred, curly blond hair sprouting every which way from the black frames of his glasses and big black headphones, attended to technical difficulties in his usual calm and unruffled way, expertly handling both sound and illumination, while trying to detect the source of the trouble. He adjusted the lights, hoisting the sound boom in place while Eric and I tried to re-align the carts. The "talent" remained aloft, only slightly ruffled from two near-miss tumbles, his shiny, neatly groomed hair now mussed up from the effects of a light breeze.



Simpson did what any conscientious television anchor or on-air reporter would do, which was to focus on making himself as presentable as possible while silently practicing his lines for the unforgiving eye of his intended audience in television land, but in doing so, he made himself look, to his unintended local audience at least, like a madman on a soapbox.

The correspondent got about halfway through his stentorian address to an unseen audience when peals of laughter ruined the sound and a shake of the cart ruined the shot. Eric called "cut" and requested another take. Again the cart was bumped or shaken, again it was hard to keep the spectators quiet. What was an imperceptible movement to the rest of us, Eric saw magnified through the shaking viewfinder and concluded to be intentional sabotage. He made a grimace, turned off the camera, pleaded with me to address the onlookers, to demand that everyone be still.

Wary of issuing orders with no authority, at an illegal gathering where, to put it lightly, the forces of law and order were neither in view nor on our side, I super-politely requested those around me for their cooperation. Satisfied, Eric gave the correspondent the signal to start over again.

On the third take, a young Chinese man, perhaps inspired by sight of foreign journalists taping what appeared to be an important speech, lifted his own tape recorder, a cheap cassette player, high over

his head, his outstretched arm mimicking Fred's boom mike, shoving the tape recorder right in front of the important white man to better capture his important, if indecipherable, words.

"Cut!"

The subsequent take was also ruined, this time by a comically aggressive onlooker who was straining to smile for the camera. The take after that was nixed by the soundman, as two of the standers-by next to him started a loud, animated conversation the minute the lights went on.

Seeing the exasperated faces of the BBC crew, I formally addressed the crush of bodies around us, hoping to win some cooperation. In response I was told that we foreigners were offending the dignity of the Chinese people due to our arrogance.

"*Tongzhimen...Comrades*," I said out of textbook habit, then softened it to reflect changing times.

"*Peng-you-men*. Friends. Please help us here tonight," I offered, desperately trying to strike the right tone. "We are making a news report for BBC English television. Would it be possible for everyone to be quiet and still for just a minute?"

"We can talk if we want to!" A voice shot out from the back.

"Of course you can," I sallied back. "But please, talk quietly."

"This is China!" he said indignantly. "You're foreigners."

Because this xenophobic line of thought, with its unhappy echoes of foiled past encounters truly irritated me, I turned my back on the man, which riled him up all the more.

"I demand that you translate everything the 'old Whitey' is saying," a man in a cheap Mao jacket said, giving us the look-over with a jaundiced eye. "Otherwise we, that is, we Chinese, we will not cooperate!"

"Hey listen, friend." I said sarcastically, my patience straining. "I will translate for you, but after we are finished filming, okay?"

"We demand you tell us now!" he shouted, rallying for support.

"Where are you from?" asked another young man.

"It will only take a few minutes and then we will have lots of time to talk," I promised. "Okay?"

"Foreigners!" a new voice rang out.

"Look at old Whitey up on the cart!" shouted another, followed by a caustic laugh.

With at least a hundred people now pressing in on us in a deeply congested corner of a plaza containing, all told, over a hundred thousand demonstrators, we were vulnerable, at the complete mercy of the illegal assembly.

...

"*Today a crowd gathers in peaceful protest at Tian-an...*" Simpson started. "Hello! Hey, -who's shaking the cart?" After almost getting knocked over by a particularly violent thrust, Simpson regained his balance but not his composure.

The deliberate thrust against our man felt like an attack on all of us. "Who did that?" I asked sternly, studying the faces closest to the cart. My interrogative glance was met with indignant protestations of innocence, sullen stares, and a few weak smiles.

"What is your relationship with the foreigners?" I overheard someone quizzing the bicycle cart drivers. The vigilante-style interrogation that followed left both drivers looking shaken and worried. One driver approached me sheepishly, saying he'd like to get his cart back. I indicated I understood. The other driver sportingly agreed to wait, and even went so far as to ask the trouble-makers for their cooperation. He did so in a culturally sensitive way, asking his fellow citizens to quiet down so that the laowai would get done already and he could go home to eat, but it didn't placate everyone.

"Oh, you're a fine one, telling us to shut-up because you are in the pay of the foreigners," challenged a young man with an unruly mop of hair.

"That's it," chimed another. "How much are the laowai paying you?"

"How much, traitor? That's what we want to know!" another unfriendly voice cried out.

The almost magical, all-encompassing harmony I had experienced moving amidst the student-dominated crowd in the past two days had evaporated, causing me to wonder how much of the harmony had been in my mind.

...

"So, how much is the foreign boss paying?" shouted a threatening voice.

"Yes! How much? How much?" echoed several others.

Oblivious to the content of the arguments storming around them but hyper-sensitive to vibrations as perceived through the lens and microphone, the crew gamely tried to accelerate the shoot, attempting to race through the short standup while I worked the crowd. At last, Eric, who struck me as being a most sensible and patient man, started cursing under his breath.

"Phil," he whispered, "There's someone doing it on purpose. They wait until the lights are on and then they deliberately shake the cart. Can you find out who it is?"

I carefully watched both carts, but honestly couldn't pin down the culprit. As it was, I was hearing pre-emptive pleas of innocence.

"It wasn't me. Nope, wasn't me. Wasn't me either."

It was on the ninth or tenth take that I heard a shockingly stupid rumor going around. The distinguished-looking Caucasian man up on the cart was said to be a famous politician. A really famous one.

"That's Gor-ba-chev!" a voice cried out, as if in confirmation. "Look, they're interviewing the leader of the Soviet Union!" A momentary hush was followed by a wave of excited murmurs and a forward thrust of onlookers. Then there was a sudden, total breakdown in order as the Soviet leader's name was chanted in Chinese.

"Ge-er-ba-qiao-fu! Ge-er-ba-qiao-fu! Ge-er-ba-qiao-fu!"

Something hit the cart hard, knocking John Simpson off balance. He broke his fall with an outstretched arm, tumbling safely into the arms of the crew. Pale and shaken, he tried to regain his sangfroid by batting the dust off his jacket. "Can someone tell me what is going on?"

I didn't want to say that the rumor of the Soviet leader appearing on the Square to mix with Chinese protesters was a positively explosive development, plus Simpson wouldn't understand how he could possibly be confused with another white man who looked so different from him, so I let it go.

The rhythmic incantation about Gorbachev, though apparently incomprehensible to the crew, was alarming enough that they knew it was time to beat a quick exit. I emptied my pocket, handing each of the drivers a wad of small bills, crisp FEC notes mixed with wrinkled renminbi.

"Are you trying to buy us Chinese with your foreign money?" an eagle-eyed spokesman for the masses asked maliciously. "Foreigners! Imperialists. Ha!"

The drivers, now completely intimidated, refused all money, hastily mounted their bikes and slid away into the darkness, begging cooperation as they pedaled against the inward push of the throng. It was terrifying to realize that just a handful of malicious hangers-on could put so many decent people in jeopardy. At a time of uncertain political outcome such as this, it didn't take much to manipulate the mood of listless bystanders, and I despaired to see how a small misunderstanding could trump the overall mood of solidarity.

"You see that? The arrogant foreigners used the cart," one of the more devious troublemakers said in accusatory tone, after scaring the drivers away. "And didn't even pay!"

"They are taking advantage of the Chinese people!" yelled his co-conspirator.

"Who the hell are you?" I shot back in rude Chinese. By now I had had it. I didn't want to fight, but gambled that a strong response might get the wise guys off our backs and stop the conflict from escalating. We were surrounded, so if the crush got any more hostile, it might be hard to extract ourselves without a bloody fight.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that," the man steamed angrily. "This is China!"

"China? China has nothing to do with it," I shouted back. "The problem is you. What kind of thing are you?"

I had really lost my cool, and it was wrong to use such a coarse expression, even though I heard Chinese use it among themselves. The situation had deteriorated in a way that needed no translation. The BBC crew wasted no time in packing up and packing off while I tried to hold my ground in an intemperate verbal exchange.

Just as my crew was on the verge of extracting themselves from the scene, a middle-aged man with a thin beard came up to me, effectively blocking my exit. He spoke fluent, educated English with a soft American accent.

"You should not have talked to that man like that!" he chided me.

"He shouldn't have made so much trouble for us!" I answered in Chinese. "Who does he think he is?" And who do you think you are, I might have asked.

"Your Chinese is very good, but you must be careful," the soft-spoken man said, continuing to speak in impeccable English. "This is a very special night for the Chinese people."

"What do you mean? That guy was bothering us."

"It is very important that people like him be here," he said. "They may seem rude to you, but they support the students. It is especially dangerous for common Chinese to be here."

Who deemed it important for the “common people” to be here tonight? The man passed for what in China is called a “knowledgeable element” or intellectual. He was clearly educated, confident, and had something of a superior air.

Who was he? He reminded me of Zhu Jiaming, a Zhao protégé I had met at the University of Michigan, and was not unlike other brilliant young intellectuals in government think tanks such as the Academy of Social Sciences, many of whom had studied on American campuses. Was he one of those reformist intellectuals working behind the scenes for Zhao Ziyang?

“And if I may, just what unit are you with?” I asked in Chinese, to the apparent delight of a few in the now momentarily subdued mob who had been straining to understand the exchange in English. The soft-spoken man had a definable presence, an unassailable font of self-assurance, almost a cockiness that reminded me of film director Chen Kaige. His erudition and elitist élan could not be completely disguised by his untended facial hair or his baggy trousers and plain shirt.

“Never you mind that,” he said dismissively, steering the conversation back into English, “But I know your country, I did research at the University of Chicago.”

“Why are you talking to me in English?”

“I don’t want them to understand.”

“So where do you work?”

“The Academy of Sciences,” he said. “And you? Tell me about yourself.”

“Well, we’re from BBC,” I said, turning only to discover that my colleagues were out of sight. It was my responsibility to get them back to the Great Wall Hotel, after which we could safely commiserate about the dangers of the mob over cold beer in the lobby bar.

A familiar feeling swept over me, pulling me two ways at once. I wanted to talk more to this enigmatic man who had been observing us and the people’s reaction to us with insight and attention.

But I had agreed to take the crew to the Square and worried, probably unnecessarily given their finely-honed vocational resourcefulness, about them finding their back to the hotel without a word of Chinese between them, so I pulled myself away.

“It’s interesting talking to you,” I told the self-possessed intellectual. “And I’d love to chat more, but I gotta catch up with the crew. See ya.”

On the way back, I explained to the crew that John Simpson had been mistaken for Gorbachev, and we all got a good laugh out of an otherwise harrowing experience. If our ace reporter had been frustrated by the failure to do a proper standup, or if his ego had in any way been bruised by the public humiliation of being forced off the cart, at least he could console himself with the thought that he had been mistaken for a great man.

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