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5/18/89: Working Class Heroes

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This piece is excerpted from the manuscript of Philip J. Cunningham's 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

New, creative links were being made, reflected in the flags and slogans draped on industrial strength trucks with factory logos packed to the brim with red-sashed workers.

WORKERS SUPPORT BRIGADE!

WORKERS UNITED WITH STUDENTS IN SUPPORT!

But the really eye-catching, breath-stopping slogans took aim at the most powerful man in China.

XIAOPING GAODE RENREN FENFEN BU PING

"Wow! You see that Lotus? It says Xiaoping is ruining it for all of us!"

Quite a few posters and political cartoons were openly critical of Deng, representing a logical but politically dangerous turn of heart. But the most novel element today was the large number of Mao portraits. Militant workers proudly held portraits of Mao aloft. Mao? Where did they dig Mao up from? Was this Cultural Revolution nostalgia or an oblique way of insulting Deng, who was thrice-purged under Mao?

Open-back trucks crammed with factory workers were festooned with flags. Nearly all the banners proclaimed "shengyuan xuesheng" in one form or another, it was the orthodox and politically correct way of mouthing support for the students.

"It's like a second Cultural Revolution!" I suggested. Lotus who had visited China during the middle of that turbulent period, found some validity with my hyperbolic statement. The crew was unconvinced.

"The workers, the Mao posters," I said, letting the hot sun and the steamy heat get to me, as the last of the puddles from the morning's rain evaporated. "This might even be the work of the old leftists, who resent the capitalist tendencies of Deng's China. Deng's the target. It's unbelievable!"

A few feet away, the drivers were involved in a noisy argument about matters less abstract. The bald-headed tout, a bully if there ever was one, was intimidating the vendors who he claimed had overcharged him for the price of the yogurt and orange drink. To a seasoned operator such as he, bargaining down a price was clearly a one-way street. Pay less when paying others, demand more when getting paid.

My sudden appearance quieted the argument. I asked each man present what he thought of the huge gathering around us.

"Very good," said the bald, burly driver, answering in English, sticking his thick thumb up in the air.

"Like this!"

His cohort, whose suspicious darting eyes and unshaven, unkempt appearance gave him the air of a character who had just escaped from a mental hospital, turned to the lead tout for a cue, then shook his head up and down in hearty agreement. "Like this," he said, thumbs up. "Good money and no police!"

The good money was obviously a reference to us. As for the police, I guess he was right. I hadn't seen a man in uniform in days.

"Shut up, you fool!" the bald man said in reprimand to his mate.

A short distance away the BBC guys chatted with Lotus, and through her, with my driver, a paragon of politeness in contrast to the two foul-mouthed touts who had glommed onto the crew at the hotel entrance. The lead tout, pleading lunchtime, had made it clear we were going nowhere fast, so I decided to walk around a bit."

The ground was getting dirty underfoot, the Square had an air of neglect, litter everywhere, the air redolent of urine and the stench of chemical disinfectant. It smelled like a disaster waiting to happen. How many rotations involving how many millions of footsteps could this huge, human cyclone undergo before people got hurt, sick or trampled?

The morning rain was the first of several bad omens for the demonstrators of Tiananmen who had enjoyed fresh air and cooperative, sunny skies for several weeks now. The protester's resourcefulness seemed to know no limits, however, and a fleet of buses were soon driven to the Square, providing a safe, dry shelter for the weakened hunger strikers. In a way that was strangely consonant with radical Christianity, it was the weakest people who were most important; the sick, meek and emaciated were the VIP's in this world of tables turned, temples spurned.

As the movement grew more complex, simple slogans seemed to suffice:

PEOPLE'S CRY!

PEOPLE'S VOICE!

PEOPLE'S TORMENT!

Hidden dangers abounded. The pavement prone strikers lowered their resistance to infection, and not a few people still on their feet also were walking time bombs due to stress, long hours, poor hygiene, forced proximity to countless germs and exposure to the elements. Rumors of a cholera outbreak were

taken seriously, as were rumors that the sanitation complaints were a government ploy to get people off the Square. With such a dense mass of people living in slum-like conditions with no running water, a contagious illness could reach epidemic proportions in no time.

The Square was thickly carpeted with people, but with water strikers nearing death, the celebratory element was gone, even the chants sounded rote and annoying. The movement of masses of people wasn't as fluidly cooperative as before. You couldn't walk without annoying others, sometimes you couldn't walk at all, but had to endure being pressed against strangers, shoulder to shoulder, belly to back, stepping on and being stepped on. At one point, frustrated by the jostling movement, and foul air, I stretched up on my toes to see what was causing the delay when I suddenly found myself lifted off my feet, pinned and suspended an inch or two off the ground.

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I crawled under the rope and the human chain momentarily lifted their tightly interlocked arms to let me in. As soon as I passed, the arms interlocked again. The crew, good friends who worked together on a regular basis, watched with stunned indignation.

"Can he come in too?" I asked my student guide, feeling sorry for Brian. He was a good journalist, the first person at BBC to befriend me. His gregarious warmth and generosity compensated for his temper.

"Yes, if he is with you," he consented.

"Brian? You can come in now," I said. "We can talk to them for five minutes, but no cameras."

"No cameras? What's the bloody point of going in if we can't take our gear?" he yelled. "Tell him that's nonsense! How come ITN could bring their cameras in?" Brian's face reddened again. He threw his hands in the air in exasperation and stomped away.

"Let's get out of here!" he yelled to the camera crew.

His words were followed by the murmur of equally indignant voices saying things about a laowai that I didn't want to hear. Lotus took it all in with her usual smiling equanimity.

I stepped forward, careful not to trod on any of the blankets and sleeping bags. Before me were sprawled a dozen limp bodies that belonged in a hospital.

A thin, handsome man with a high-cheeked, angular face caught my attention. His body was motionless and emaciated but his eyes were bright and alert. He wore a green shirt.

"You suffer. I admire your courage," I said, respectfully, lacking the chutzpah to scold him and his fellow strikers for their stupidity. Instead of telling them to go home and have some hot chicken soup, I told them a little about myself.

"My name is Jin Peili, I study Chinese, do you know the Insider Guest House at Shida?" Not knowing whom to talk to, I addressed them as a group, but my eyes kept going back to the man with the bright eyes.

A young man in the middle of the row of fatigued bodies, smudged-up glasses dangling low off his gaunt, angular face, was the first to answer. "I am Han. Where did you learn Chinese?"

"I learned Chinese from my friends."

"Please tell others about what you see. We seek dialogue with the government"

"I understand."

"We are willing to die for our country," he whispered.

That gave me the chills and I was unable to respond with a sensible comment. A déjà-vu refrain of I can't believe this is happening to me raced through my mind. This is my life, is this really happening?

"Can you hear the cry?" Han asked. "Can you hear the cry of China?"

His plaintive call gave me a lump in the throat and I remained speechless. Seeing his arm reach upward, I took his hand in mine. The sharp-eyed student guards looked on, smiling weakly. Some strikers watched us, attentively, while others, though awake and conscious, stared blankly as before. I was greeted by yet another striker who asked me how long it took me to learn Chinese, a familiar and friendly question that seemed outright absurd coming from a student who wouldn't be studying anything anymore if he followed his act of sacrifice to its brutal conclusion.

I continued to field questions, the familiar set of questions a foreigner learns to deal with like it or not, and as I spoke, I could detect a few smiles out of the corner of my eye. Maybe I said something wrong or mispronounced something with a funny accent. Even in their dismal emaciated state, they could get a kick out of hearing a "laowai" speak Chinese.

Did the death wish of the water strikers ennoble the student movement or darken it with disrespect for life? Did widespread popular support, the non-stop swirl of sympathizers and admirers unwittingly put pressure on the elect heroes to do themselves in? If making jokes at my expense got them back on a more normal track of thinking, I couldn't begrudge them that.

The peer pressure was palpable on May 13 when the hunger strike began, how much greater it must be now, with a nation electrified and millions marching in their name?

There is no graceful exit from a hunger strike that does not achieve its aims. Dui-hua, or "dialogue" is the stated aim now. But what constitutes dialogue and who is to say whether or dialogue has been achieved? The whole hunger strike struck me as a form of political poker, each side trying to bluff the other into making a concession first. I am sure at least some of the students joined the strike impulsively and felt for them. They might have second thoughts or regrets but no easy way out given the immense peer pressure. It was scary.

While I was talking to Han, a delirious young man who had been propped up against the door slumped over, head hitting the ground. White-shirted medics put him on a stretcher rushed him into the waiting ambulance. A few minutes ago, my parched throat craved water, now I felt like throwing up. Watching the medics attend to the most recent victim of dehydration, I felt some consolation in the fact that he would be raced to the hospital along the roped off lifeline and force-fed intravenously, diminishing the chance of death.

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I gave up any thoughts of further exploration and slowly worked my way back to the BBC rest spot across the road from the entrance to Zhongnanhai where the water strikers had staked their ground. Sweaty and disheveled, the BBC crew was biding their time in the shade of a tree. My driver was by himself, keeping a deliberate distance from the other two. He greeted me warmly, though I had hardly spoken to him, and offered me a hand as I clambered up into the passenger seat of his cart. He took a position facing me, reversing his position on his bicycle seat and leaning back on the handlebars to strike a delicate balance.

"You know much about China, don't you?" he said, using the disarming compliment, "zhongguo tong." "Sometimes I wonder. So, what do you think of all this?" I asked.

"I was in the Tiananmen incident in 1976," he said. "I know all about such demonstrations. At that time, the crowd was truly of one mind, we spoke the truth. But soon after the demonstration I got arrested. They herded us across the Square and locked us up in the Worker's Park next to the Forbidden City."

"Over there?" I pointed to a tree-lined wall far in the distance.

"Yes. I was lucky, I only went to jail. Some disappeared, some were executed. The government decides life and death," he intoned with a whisper, looking around before going on, "I spent the next five years in prison. After prison I could not get a job; that is why I drive a trishaw today."

"What about the other drivers?" I asked. "Had they been political prisoners too?"

"Ha, those two jokers?" he said with disbelief. "They don't know the first thing about politics. They are nothing but common criminals."

"What kind of crimes did they commit?"

"The fat, bald one, he raped a woman. The one with the beard is a robber, he beat up someone, almost killed him," he explained. "They both just got let out of jail."

The Open Door was one thing, but opening the doors to prisons was not necessarily in the interests of liberalization. It made me wonder if the Square was being deliberately sowed with social deviants to whip up some trouble. Governments have done stranger things to manipulate crowds and create pretexts for iron-fisted rule. Eyeing the tout and his sidekick with a new appreciation, I thought it a good idea to get the crew back to the hotel before things got really weird.

We plotted a roundabout route to the hotel, edging along a long pedestrian-choked avenue, going south to head north, essentially circling the Square for expediency.

We cut close to the sidewalk in front of the Great Hall. Here crowd density was uneven, allowing for spurts of movement followed by pile-ups. Perhaps drawn by the symbolic power of the Great Hall, there were assorted curbside speakers addressing the sensation-hungry throng. A man in a neat suit stood on top of an abandoned car, sharing articulate thoughts with bystanders. An older unshaven man wearing a ragged Mao jacket commanded a rapt audience of his own with boisterous nostalgia for the good old days. A few times the delay was sufficient to prompt the crew to whip out their gear. Subsequently our presence would then serve to augment public interest in whichever speaker was lucky, or unlucky enough, to fall under the focus of our lens.

The gray-haired soap box orator in the tattered Mao jacket responded to the gaze of our camera by climbing up on the top of a trishaw, waving his hands at us in a ritualized, almost theatrical way, not unlike the way officials did on TV.

"Foreign friends. My greetings," his voice boomed. "Where are you from?"

"We are England television," I hollered back, self-conscious with so many eyes on me.

"I thank you for being here. You are a good friend of the Chinese people," he said, in slow, simple Chinese of the sort used for children and foreigners.

A few random bystanders cheered and clapped.

"I will take you anywhere you want to go, for free," he offered, pointing to his flimsy vehicle. "I don't want any money!"

The lead driver, who I now knew to be a dangerous criminal, moved closer to me to see what all the commotion was about. I tried looking the other way but he gave me a ten-pound tap on the shoulder to command my immediate attention.

"Don't listen to that guy," he growled, "He's a lunatic!"

"How do you know?"

"Just look at that mother-effing driver preaching up there," the burly man added, poking me in the ribs. "The guy's definitely crazy!"

Eric took his eye from the viewfinder to look up, sensing trouble, but I told him to keep on filming.

"I may be....but...a-common-maaaaan," the orator in the Mao suit up front said with a vibrato worthy of Martin Luther King, "but I have the dreams of an em-peh-ror!"

He repeated this refrain, priming the audience. Each time his voice reached a crescendo, he raised his arms to the sky and those gathered round him cheered wildly.

"Our foreign friend here, right there, he can speak Chinese," he announced, pointing at me. "Tell us, friend. What is your name?"

I mumbled shyly in Chinese. He told me to shout it louder. "Jin Peili!" I said, reluctant to be drawn into his performance. It was like being tapped by a magician looking for volunteers.

"Jin Peili, -I will work for you! All day! For nothing!" the man sputtered, with emphatic flourish and impeccable timing. "We want the world, the people of the world, to know about the generous spirit of the Chinese people!"

The man in the Mao jacket served up a string of platitudes with verve, plainspoken enough to find receptive listeners, compelling enough to stir the spectators gathered in our favor, though an angry racist rant, delivered with similar panache might also find a ready audience.

Both the dumb foreigner treatment and the honored foreign guest routine reminded me what a cultural tightrope we walked, working such an anarchic crush. We were lightning rods for all kinds of touts and taunts.

The greedy tout insisted we move on, as if the lofty talk of volunteerism might hurt business. He coaxed our convoy of rickshaws to pick up speed, careening this way and that. Twice the lead driver and his sidekick got in arguments with pedestrians and cyclists who had almost been knocked down. One time the bald man slapped a protestor pointblank because he had the temerity not to move out of his way fast enough.

Yet for all his impatience, the same tout also demanded frequent rest stops and cigarette breaks, all the while cooking up angles to up the fare. As a result, the unassociated cart I shared with Lotus, got way ahead of the others because our driver was content to peddle slowly but steadily without a break.

We passed incoming delegations of farmers, workers, intellectuals and merchants parading in support of the students, even military supply factories got into the act. One key stratum of Chinese society that had not yet joined in, however, was the military. If that happened, it would be as good as setting off a chain reaction, signaling that the overthrow was all over but for the shouting. The people would truly love an army that loved the people.

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