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# Border Crossing Into Tiananmen Square; still under lockdown twenty-five years on 天安門広場への越境　25年後、いまだに封鎖状態

**Philip J. Cunningham**

*What follows is an account of a return visit to Tiananmen Square in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the peaceful demonstrations and violent crackdown that I witnessed in Beijing in 1989.*



*Initially I had planned to go to Hong Kong, as I had been invited to join the well-publicized commemoration in Victoria Park where the people of Hong Kong have held a candlelight vigil for the lost souls and lost dreams of 1989 on an annual basis for a quarter of a century now. In past years I have marched with the conscientious objectors of Hong Kong, lit candles in the warm tropical air and drawn strength from the distant but principled and persistent expression of solidarity with the uprising at Tiananmen.*

*In Beijing during the weeks leading up to the anniversary, there were numerous police vehicles and armed guards at key locations, but most especially in and around Tiananmen Square where pedestrian access was tightly restricted. The Square is a beacon, the obvious ground zero for such an anniversary, but any veterans of the movement who would like to have visited in commemoration were either under house arrest, denied visa entry or were being so closely monitored as to make a respectful pilgrimage all but impossible.*

*It seemed eerily possible that not a single veteran of Tiananmen 1989 would be there this year.*

*I felt beholden to get as close to the scene of the uprising and the symbolic scene of the crime, as much for the survivors who couldn't go, as for the memory of the lost souls whose spirit has hovered in and around Tiananmen ever since.*

*Although the boisterous student demonstrations of 1989 were the most crowded communal event I ever took part in, I could not seek comfort in a group, as Beijing authorities were on the lookout for anything that smacked of an organized vigil.*



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*So I walked to the Square alone, but not unaccompanied. The faint echo of long-forgotten millions, the joyous outbursts of song, the plaintive cries for help and the wail of ambulances still rang in the air.*

*I had recently finished revising* Tiananmen Moon*, which records and recollects the experience of a month on Tiananmen Square in the midst of a people's uprising, just published in an expanded twenty-fifth anniversary edition, but predictably banned in China.*

*On June 2, 2014 security was extremely tight, but it was possible to spend half a day on the Square. The third of June, I went by the Square again only to find it eerily empty. On that date, which marked the onset of the violent crackdown of 1989, the Square was closed down for almost the whole day because of the "coincidental" scheduling of a state reception for a minor foreign dignitary, hosted at the Great Hall of the People. I went again onthe fourth but could only skirt the northern face of the Square, as controls were even tighter. The entry below was written in Beijing and first posted in Beijing using a VPN to access the Internet on June 3, 2014.*




I approached the Square from the ceremonial gateway of Qianmen and Zhengyangmen, which back in the old days of the Qing Dynasty composed the first barrier of the formal entrance into the Forbidden City. Nowadays it's still a gateway of significance; it's the point of entry to a quasi-forbidden public square.

In better times, when the Communist Party enjoyed the trust of the people, one used to just walk onto the Square, from almost any direction, at almost any time. It was wide, inviting and open to the public. I had flown kites there under blue skies, cycled there and rested by the monument at midnight, and had been there amidst a defiant crowd of one million. There were no fences and few guards. You simply walked in or rode around the Square on your bicycle

But ever since 1989, and the subsequent regimen of information control that renders taboo public discussion of a crackdown that



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still cannot be countenanced, the Square has been circumscribed and carefully fenced in from every angle.

On this hot June day, the only way to enter the vast Square from the south is winding and circuitous. One has to first go underground and pass through the easternmost entrance of the Qianmen subway station, where one is subjected to X-ray bag checks as a general security measure. From there one walks up a narrow staircase and emerges onto the southern perimeter of the Square, only to enter a maze of crowd-control fencing with signs warning not to jump the fence. After zigzagging through the chrome maze, there's a short breakaway abutting empty pavement and then a line of people waiting to enter the Square, bottled up by a security shack guarding another fenced-in area, passage through which leads to the Square proper.



I took my place on a long line that moved slowly, almost imperceptibly so. The way people were painstakingly being processed seemed a deliberate deterrent designed to keep the Square free of crowds; the pace of inspection appeared to be staggered out to slow things down, if not limit, entrance to the Square. I watched the Chinese day-trippers at the front of the line endure ID check, frisking and bag searches. There were about 50 people ahead of me, all Chinese, mostly stoic and docile, some hiding under umbrellas to keep away the hot rays, others smoking, which only made the wait worse.



We were guided like farm animals in a fenced-in corral, there was only one way in and you couldn't deviate from the path. The final bottleneck involved individual security checks as thorough as a border crossing or an airport, as individual IDs were checked against a police database on a handheld computer.

After a fifteen-minute wait in the hot sun, I got to the front of the line where I was singled out by an unfriendly guard. He pulled me aside, took my passport and instructed me not to move. I moved to the side, testing his resolve, but also to get out of the sun. From the shade of the police booth, I waited and watched the procedure by which each visitor was asked to produce ID, answer questions and get frisked. All bags were X-rayed and some were hand-inspected as well.



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My shoulder bag contained a book and little else, but I knew the book would get looked at. I was reading *Shijizhilian*, about the Chinese revolutionary poet Xiao San. Written by his German-Jewish wife, Eva, who I met while a student in Beijing in the 1980's, and translated into Chinese by his son Victor, a Beijing friend, it offers a largely positive view of China through the lens of a cross-cultural marriage. Xiao San was a school friend of Mao Zedong, though the book's harrowing description of how the couple was arrested and thrown in prison for seven years during the height of the Cultural Revolution certainly raises uncomfortable questions about what it meant to be a friend of Mao, and the sanity of Communist Party leadership in general.

Had I been carrying my own book, *Tiananmen Moon* the title would have been arresting enough to get me turned away, if not detained and investigated. It is banned in China. Even with a book about a communist poet in hand I could see it was no simple matter to get through. Those behind me on line were inspected and let in, one by one, while I lingered uncomfortably to the side. The cop who collared me probably equated foreigners with trouble, as in journalists, but it could have been the black shirt I was wearing, too.

Why would anyone with innocent intentions wear the color of mourning for an event that's been officially erased from history?

The atmosphere was lackadaisical yet laced with unspoken tension. Deprived of my passport, I was left face to face with an array of security personal who lorded over the hoi polloi day-trippers with the bespoke imperiousness of gatekeepers, taking their time, and singling out certain individuals for more intrusive checks than others, turning some away, letting others through. The uniformed agent who held my passport started muttering to me in incomprehensible English. And then in very comprehensible Chinese, he addressed the crowd. "Is anyone with him or is he alone?"



Nobody knew the foreigner. Theonly thing that was clear was that I wasn't going anywhere soon. The guard gestured that I should step next to the police booth, barking some incomprehensible words in English. I told him I



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couldn't understand what he was saying, he said he was calling in a supervisor who spoke better English. I said why don't we speak in Chinese and save some time? He asked me if I was a journalist. I explained I was not on a journalist visa, I was on a personal visit, but he wasn't satisfied with my minimal explanation. He got busy on his phone, and his handheld database device, apparently trying to see if they had anything on me.

As the crowd shuffled past me for obligatory bag inspections and ID checks, the cop started to walk away with my passport; I asked him to return it before stepping out of sight. He halted, glaring angrily. Meanwhile, a tall older man brushed against me, cigarette dangling as he waited his turn to enter the security booth. I asked him to please not smoke next to me. The cop was taken aback. "Who are you telling him not to smoke? Even I don't have the right to tell him that. He can smoke if he wants to."

Rights. The right to smoke in a crowded public place was upheld while the right to visit a public square was held in delicate abeyance.

The cop and I continued to regard one another as if in a face off, each waiting for the other to blink. He clung close to me, as if he had collared a prime suspect. We whiled away the time, exchanging terse comments, me pressing him to speed it up, him clutching onto my passport, which was as good as holding me on leash. I asked, do you like doing this? Isn't this boring (wuliao) and he snapped, what job isn't boring? I said last time I visited the Square was not much security, what's with this, something about 6/4? He stared knowingly, a thin smile breaking on his tight lips, but didn't answer. The short repartee that followed earned a suppressed grin, but no rapport.

The supervisor arrived at last, and with it the promise of closure, one way or the other. "This is the guy, he speaks Chinese (shi zheige ren, ta hui shuo zhongwen") the indignant inspector said by way of introduction.

The supervisor was slightly pudgy, bright-eyed, bespectacled and confident. He smiled in greeting; I smiled in return. He was relaxed and pleasant, rather what you'd hope an officer of the peace to be, in comparison to the ball-buster beat cop who was now assiduously hand-copying my passport data on a piece of paper. The supervisor asked amiably, visiting people? Yeah. Where? Shida. Are you a reporter? No, I am not a reporter. A teacher? Yeah, you could say that, but not at Shida.

He took my passport and the notepaper from his testy subordinate, studied at my visa and then pocketed my passport, handing me the police notepaper by mistake. I said, no thanks; I'd rather have my passport back. He grinned and quickly corrected himself, saying I was free to go on. In parting I said your subordinate needs to learn more about visas; he doesn't know about visa types, and it's hot standing here in the sun and he's wasted a lot of everyone's time. The inspector was appropriately humble in front of his supervisor; he looked at me with a thin-lipped smile and said he would study more (xuexi, xuexi). Then my passport was checked by a female inspector, my bag X-rayed and subject to a hand-search. The book was thumbed through with curiosity, as if to ascertain that the contents corresponded to the cover, and then I was "free" to walk out onto the empty pavement of a vast downtown plaza.



As I stepped into the clear, I could see that Tiananmen Square was ringed with heavy security every direction of the compass. I pressed forward, at once giddy and downcast to find myself at last on a public square where police vehicles were parked and idling in every nook and cranny. The street facing museum



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and running the length of the square was entirely closed off to traffic, other than crowd control busses and security vehicles. There were policing techniques that were new to me, at least as seen on the Square. Police patrolled the perimeter with hefty-looking guard dogs.



Mounted cameras seemed to whir from every other pole, and the metallic sheen of temporary fencing, in addition to the more permanent fencing that has been put in place over the years, gave the open vista of the people's plaza a confining, penned-in feeling, like a giant prison yard.

Men in uniform patrolled and watched at every juncture, sometimes they would approach people already on the Square for a follow up security check or interrogation. I saw only five foreigners on the Square in the two-and-a-half hour period that I wandered around. Three of those foreigners, blond and female, were stopped and interrogated in the middle of the Square. Hadn't they passed enough security just to get in? They looked a little scared so I approached them to ask if everything was alright, which of course prompted the cops to turn their sights to me, asking if we were together. A female officer ushered me away when it became obvious I wasn't part of the three-person "cell" they were questioning. Content the three foreign ladies were not being unduly abused, but only experiencing communication difficulties due to the implied conspiracy of visiting in a group, I moved on, aware of being observed from many different angles, from prowling security staff on foot and on wheel, some carrying weapons of war, others with dogs on leash.



Being solo didn't avert the stares, but at least I could evade trumped up charges of conspiracy.

Empty busses and police vehicles idled and sat in the setting sun, ready to process detainees in batches of hundreds, if necessary. But the



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crowd was thin, a few hundred scattered tourists at most, and there wasn't a whiff of a political expression anywhere. Nothing much happened, but every move was monitored. Why it was even hard to take a selfie without a police vehicle rolling into view.

There were conspicuous plainsclothesmen studying new arrivals at entrance staircases from underground passages, on the north face of the Square, even though visitors had already passed through a series of checkpoints on the way in.




The centerpiece of the Square, the Monument of the People's Heroes was unapproachable; fully fenced off and guarded. Just the mere act of pointing my phone camera at the stone obelisk that had served as the epicenter of the historic demonstrations provoked attention from security personnel.

There were "garbage collectors" riding around on electric scooters, clutching mobile phones in hand. The frequency with which they passed me when I paused to take snapshots suggested their cleanup duties extended to reporting on "unkempt" individuals as well.

I found a few local tourists sitting in the shade of a stationary police van and I joined them. Sitting down felt good, it reminded me of being on the Square day and night in '89, the way voices echoed off the stone, the way the sky seemed so vast and unreachable. By chance I had chosen a spot along the central axis, not far from where the Goddess of Democracy statue had once stood.



The crowd was sparse, mostly provincial visitors judging from accents and attire. There were two affable Tibetan monks, or perhaps I should say two Potemkin monks, for there was something slightly unreal about their getup.

One wore a rainbow beanie cap umbrella on his head, and they both exuded cheer despite the tight security. Giddy about being in the capital



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of their motherland, or something else?

The early June sun was hot and unforgiving, but the constant monitoring and suspicion of any kind of human interaction made for a cold reception. One of the handful of Caucasians traipsing across the Square by chance came to be standing next to me at the railing overlooking the boulevard and Mao's portrait on the other side. The mere, inadvertent proximity of two foreign men quickly raised pert stares and suspicious movements from the well-built T-shirted scouts prowling across the north side of the Square. It's as if they saw us as co-conspirators.



I said hello to a few people, and got one smile in return, but that was about it. Otherwise there was an unusual degree of sobriety and silence about scattered, apolitical crowd. The sober mood was pierced by the occasional awkward "hal-low" shouted by provincials with limited English ability, and one practiced "Hello-where-are-you-from?" routine from two enterprising bargirls who had braved the security measures to seek prey in a captive location. "We are from Harbin. “What is your country?" I humored the perfumed pair long enough to sense a routine, and then brushed them off; I had been interrogated enough for one day. A few minutes later they closed in on the other foreign man, asking, “What is your country?” and other standard questions. Before I walked out of earshot I heard them suggest he join them for a beer, probably at a bar of their choice with extravagant prices, or so goes the scam.

The only “people’s heroes” in the vicinity were embalmed, as the one in Mao's tomb, or etched in stone, commemorating revolutionary events long before the unspeakable event that stained the Square in 1989.

The open vista on the north side of the monument has for some time been blocked by two gargantuan high-tech video boards that flash scenes of beautiful China and the latest lame slogans exhorting unity in one form or another. The screen on the west flank neatly blocked the spot where the hunger strikers gathered a quarter of a century ago.

Nestled in the southeast corner of the monument, where the students briefly had their headquarters in the broadcast tent, stood an empty guard booth and a “do not enter” sign.



About the only sign of normalcy was seeing families with small kids, who as ever, romped about without apolitical abandon and urinated openly on the Square, and one could hardly chastise them. To return from the long trek to the public restrooms would have involved another security check.

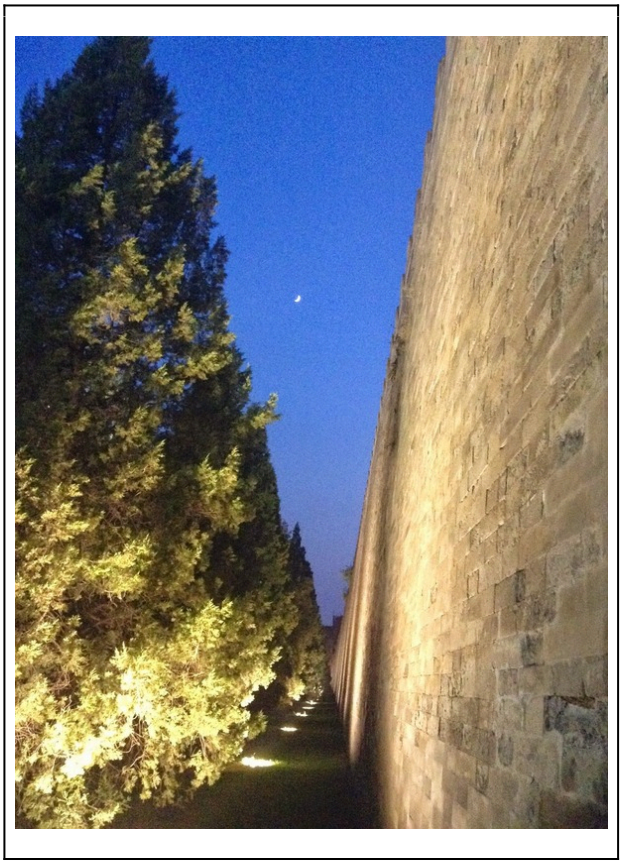


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There were several police scooting around on Segways.And then there were periodic brisk marching formations of men in khaki, dressed to impress but going nowhere in particular.

There were armored vehicles and tow trucks and black-windowed vans and green army trucks, all idling all the time. It was like China's version of the out-of-control, out-of-proportion US security state, no expense spared to keep Tiananmen under wraps.

I lingered on the perimeter of the sterile, fenced-in Square to watch the sun set and red flag go down. I thought about how political lies, fear of truth and denial of history continue to hurt and haunt China.



And then I walked. I walked out of the prison pen that is Tiananmen and back into the real world. I ambled along Changan Boulevard, and then went north to Donghuamen. From there I threaded through the portion of the Forbidden City open to the public, which, for all the horrors of imperial history, was tranquil, majestic and at peace with itself.

I walked past the secretive compound of Zhongnanhai, where the living leaders of China were safely guarded with a fraction of the manpower and hardware deployed to make sure nothing happened on the cold paving stones of an empty Square. I circled past Beihai and Jingshan Park and walked on past the bars of Houhai and boutiques of the Drum Tower district where it was just another raucous fun night for youthful revelers with no memory and little knowledge of Tiananmen in 1989.

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*Philip J Cunningham is the author of* Tiananmen Moon*, which was recently released by Rowman & Littlefield in a special expanded edition for the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989.*



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