

# WHAT THE TIANANMEN MOTHERS OFFER CHINA

BY PERRY LINK

While Chinese society wallows in a cynicism brought on by decades of official lies and abuse, the courageous defense of truth and love offers a bulwark for a unifying moral framework.

Two days after the June Fourth massacre, when the blood on the streets of Beijing had already dried, but before the dutiful scrubbing of it had begun, Professors Fang Lizhi and Li Shuxian received “the personal invitation of President George [H.P.] Bush” to stay in the U.S. embassy in Beijing. This stay turned out to last more than a year, during which the couple’s specific location, living conditions, feelings and thoughts were all shrouded in mystery. The diplomatic buzz over them was intense and acrimonious; by contrast their own silence and unknown condition lent them an air of transcendence. As any sage knows, to remain silent when others are hoping to hear one’s words can create an aura of special wisdom. This aura fell upon Fang and Li even though they were not seeking it.

The only way a friend like me could reach them was to write to a post office box number in Washington, D.C., from which State Department couriers could pick up mail and see that it got delivered. This worked. Moreover it was cheap. Only 25 cents, the domestic first-class rate at the time, got the letter all the way into Fang’s and Li’s hands in the bowels of an embassy building in Beijing. This little fact in itself was exciting. It felt almost like getting a message to Mars.

Sharing this excitement, Bob Silvers, splendid editor at *The New York Review of Books*, asked me if he could invite Fang to write an essay from Neverland, as it were. I asked, and Fang sent us a piece called “Communist Techniques of Amnesia” (*gongchandang de yiwangshu*), which I translated and the Review published.<sup>1</sup> All this went smoothly. But I must admit that, at the time, I found Fang’s choice of topic a bit odd. His theme was that the Communist Party of China crushes one generation after another of Chinese free-thinkers, and that each crushing is easy because one generation never remembers what happened to the last. The students at Tiananmen did not know much about the “Democracy Wall” activists of ten years earlier (or their eventual fates); those activists, in turn, were not very aware of the

“1957 rightists.” The recurrent amnesia arose from no particular problem with Chinese brains or Chinese culture, Fang argued; it was the result of planned tactics by the regime.

“All probably true,” I thought. But why did Fang find this issue so salient at a time when world opinion was ablaze in revulsion at the massacre? Tiananmen was receiving plenty of attention—indeed much more attention than Fang and Li, in their sequestered state, could handle. Why was “forgetfulness” a problem?

Now fifteen years have passed. “The waters have receded and the rocks protrude,” as the Chinese saying puts it. Fang was right, indeed prescient. The world has largely forgotten the massacre. More importantly, it overlooks the continuing violent nature of the political regime that caused the massacre, that still applies violence behind the scenes, and that would no doubt risk another spectacular massacre if it concluded that its grip on power required one.

Not just the outside world, but the young in China, too, have fallen into amnesia. College students have heard vague reports of the massacre, but tend not to care, preferring fashions, video games, stock prices and e-chats. To the extent that they have views on larger public issues at all, they frequently coast on a thin fuel of adolescent nationalism—a motivation that usually suits their rulers just fine. They are largely untuned to the plight of the poor and oppressed in their society. Eerily, they also show little sign of realizing that if—for whatever reason—they themselves were ever to seriously cross purposes with their rulers, those rulers would certainly squash them as earlier generations have been squashed.

The regime’s tactics of amnesia began right after the massacre with language manipulation. The first step was truth-inversion: army units using tanks and machine guns to slaughter unarmed citizens were officially described the following day as “heroes of the people” controlling “rioters” and pacifying “dregs of society.” The next step was diminution: over the course of a decade the massacre became a mere “incident” (*shijian*), then shrank to a “fuss” (*fengbo*), then petered into a wisp of practically nothing. A friend from Hong Kong wrote to me in this past April that she had visited an Internet café in Guangzhou and was happy to find articles about the Tiananmen Mothers accessible there online. Accessible, she said, but little noticed: youthful Chinese netizens were busy with computer

games and money schemes. When she asked them about Tiananmen they looked at her blankly. A massacre? What?

Some very unsubtle methods of censorship have contributed to this forgetting. Textbooks, museums and the media simply omit the massacre. Web sites on the topic are blocked; foreign broadcasts that discuss it are jammed. In a recent ruling (a general ruling, not aimed only at the massacre), all call-in shows in China, in order to “ensure the guidance of public opinion,” must use equipment that allows 20-second delays before any expression from “the masses” can reach the airwaves. Radio stations that lack the requisite equipment are not allowed to do call-in shows at all. Somehow the remembering public, if it wants to speak out, must struggle past all these barriers.

But who are the rememberers, and how can they even try to speak? To be fair, any full survey should begin (by imagination only, of course) with the dead themselves. It is tautological that the dead cannot speak, but useful to imagine what they might say if they could see the ping-pong video arcades that now cover the sites where they lost their lives. Next are the many people who are alive but intimidated. Pu Zhiqiang reminds us elsewhere in this issue that the least audible voices on the massacre today are those of the ordinary workers and common folk of Beijing (“social dregs,” to speak officially) who supported the students, whose names we do not know and who still mourn, in silence, their dead and wounded. They and many others remember the massacre and discuss it in private. But private talk on sensitive topics in China is covered by a stifling blanket of self-censorship against public expression. This rule is based in a fear that has become so customary that it seems almost a natural part of daily life. To defy it can seem counterintuitive, even stupid. Dissidents report that family members often upbraid them for speaking out—not because of any problem with the truth or moral principle of what they say, but because the act risks detriment to the family.

## The Tiananmen Mothers movement is a lonely thread of truth across a fetid swamp of suppression and lies.

This context of self-censorship is what makes the Tiananmen Mothers movement so extraordinary. It is a lonely thread of truth across a fetid swamp of suppression and lies. There are several reasons why the rare people in this movement (including some men as well as women) have been able to poke through the web of lies and “live in truth,” as Vaclav Havel puts it. First, they own an irrefutable moral authority from having personally lost children or other relatives in the June Fourth mayhem. Moreover, the regime finds it hard to attack them directly because most were not “dissidents” to begin with; they had been dutiful members of the system, indeed sometimes leaders, before murder jolted them free. And finally, of course, simple courage has been essential—especially for Ding Zilin, Zhang Xianling, Huang Jinping and the others who have taken leadership roles. Chinese people know well that “the first bird to stick its neck out gets its head blown off,” and that it is always easier to follow a lead than to take one.

What benefits has this movement brought to China? The first, and most concrete, has been comfort (and sometimes modest aid) to dozens, and eventually hundreds, of family members of June Fourth murder victims. In order to comfort victims, one first needs to find them, and that task has not been easy. The government naturally opposes such searches, and victims’ families themselves are often reluctant to come forward. They need to weigh the value of comfort against the danger of standing out—and thereby inviting further punishment. (Communist Chinese culture is one of the few in the world in which A can slap B in the face and B is expected to apologize.) Many families opt to lie low. But for those who do accept support, the against-all-odds quality of the experience only enhances it. The Tiananmen Mothers “carry charcoal through a blizzard.”

That aid, though, is only a small sliver of what the Tiananmen Mothers movement can offer China. Far more important, potentially, is the use that society as a whole can make of the basic values of the movement. This point needs some explanation.

For more than three decades, China has experienced an obvious decline in what might be called “public ethics.” In the 1950s and 1960s, Mao Zedong launched conscious attacks on traditional Chinese social morality, and these took their toll. By the late 1960s many young Chinese had concluded that “the Four Olds” truly did “stink.” But much more devastating—truly a body blow to Chinese ethics—was something that Mao did inadvertently. He put out new, super-idealistic verbiage of public morality that repeatedly collapsed and exposed its fraudulence, leaving the Chinese people in profound cynicism. “Serve the People!” sounded wonderful, and many Chinese in the early 1950s not only applauded the ideal but sacrificed for it. But then, in the 1957 Anti-Rightist Movement, Mao decided to kick some of China’s most sincere idealists in the teeth. His next present to the Chinese people was the Great Leap Forward and the famine that it created during 1959–61. Easily the largest man-made famine in world history, this cataclysm was caused almost entirely by the forcible application of crackpot science in the form of inspirational slogans. For the Chinese people a gap opened, in Liu Binyan’s memorable phrase, between “two kinds of truth”—the kind that filters down through the newspapers and the kind that arises out of daily life.

In the mid-1960s, Mao again made instrumental use of Chinese idealism. The stodgy bureaucrats in his governing system had already stimulated considerable popular resentment, and Mao decided to use them as targets to inspire naïve Red Guards to quit school, head for factories and farms, “serve the people,” “smash the dog-headed enemy,” “create a new Socialist Man” and so on. All this felt highly “moral” to the youngsters at the time. But soon they, too, discovered a huge rift between ideal and reality: poverty and oppression in the villages, dirt and blood in “class struggle,” and lies—and then more lies about the first lies. The Red Guard generation fell even harder than its predecessor. They felt cheated and angry. In the long run their disillusionment has had a bright side, because they became the first generation in Communist China to reject received wisdom and to learn to think for themselves.

Even today people in this generation stand out for this quality. (One strand of hope for China today is that this generation, now in its fifties, might be able to wield more influence within Chinese governing circles before long. Mao would turn in his grave—oops, sepulcher—at this unintended version of what he called “make revolution,” but so be it.)

After Mao’s death a toned-down version of idealistic socialist language held on for another decade or so, but it had become a transparent shell game. People in the 1980s manipulated it to try to get what they wanted out of officials (who were still obliged to pretend that the words meant something), but no one took the ideals at face value.

During the same years, and with the blessings of top leaders Deng Xiaoping and then Jiang Zemin after him, “make money” emerged as the overwhelming public value in China. A “wild West” form of unbridled competition made corruption, fraud, breach of contract and embezzlement of public funds the order of the day. The urban economy has boomed and millionaires have mushroomed, while the poor are in many ways worse off than before. Connections, lies and violence keep the engine of growth humming along.

And where does this leave “public ethics”? The ruling elite has made corruption and rip-off acceptable; an oral grapevine of rumor and anecdote spreads their example nationwide; people at lower levels have concluded that ethics are stupid in a world where the big rollers are foul, so they, too, trick, cheat and steal.

Yet moral devastation has still not completely won the day. Ethical ideas lie deep in Chinese culture. Notions of “being a good person” and “behaving properly” remain embedded in the grammar of everyday Chinese language, where they subsist even if unnoticed and survive even if baked for decades under the scorching sun of harsh government. What’s more, the Chinese impulse to do good, although deeply “Chinese,” is not just Chinese but a fundament of human nature that philosophers as various as Aristotle, Mencius, Wang Yangming, Hume, Kant and many others have observed. It is hard to imagine that descriptions of “moral intuition” could be as coincident as are Wang Yangming’s and David Hume’s without there being something in human nature—not just Chinese or British nature—that both philosophers were noticing.

In any case, in the midst of China’s ethical collapse, many Chinese people have also been groping—from off the mat, as it were—to try to re-build an ethical world. The Falungong spiritual movement upholds “truth, goodness and forbearance.” Buddhism, Daoism and popular religion have all made comebacks. Christianity in China in the last quarter century has gained at least twenty times as many followers as ten thousand American Protestant missionaries were able to produce in the hundred years between 1850 and 1950. (Mao again might wince; might he have done more to spread Christianity than the missionaries themselves?) But all of these “values” trends remain tentative and weak. Any relatively organized group—like Falungong or the “non-patriotic” churches—is crushed because of the Communist Party’s absolute intolerance of any organization it does not control. And there are deeper questions, as well, about what kinds of values might be best suited

to become the new “public ethics” of China today. Are the traditional Chinese religions the answer, or are they too un-modern? Is Christianity too foreign-flavored? Chinese people aren’t sure about these questions, and as they not allowed to discuss them in public, a “values vacuum” persists.

And this is why I believe the Tiananmen Mothers have the potential to make a very large contribution to China. Their movement promotes and exemplifies two deep values—truth and love—that could do much to re-anchor a Chinese nation that has become morally adrift. The Tiananmen Mothers’ commitment to truth has been fired in the hottest cauldron of all—explicit public contradiction of the lies of a violent government that holds decisive power over them. The love that they highlight is the kind called “mother’s love,” a love so deep and so universal that it is clearly observable not only in all cultures and historical periods but even in animals—in a doe protecting a fawn across a roadway, for example. For the Tiananmen Mothers, parental love takes on an even greater penetrating power because the children in their case were killed. Can anyone, after all, imagine anything more painful than to watch the violent death of one’s own child? (Any parent, in any culture, will know the answer. Non-parents will not have trouble guessing.) Is there any more deep, solid and unambiguous value around which a confused Chinese nation might rally?

China’s great modern writer Lu Xun raised this question nearly a century ago. His classic story “Medicine” tells of a sick boy who dies of an indeterminate disease despite his parents’ superstitious belief that feeding him human blood might cure him. The blood, it turns out, is fresh from an execution ground where another young man, an idealistic reformer, has had his head severed because he opposed the ruling authority. Both boys have surnames that suggest “China,” and they symbolize two visions of China in balanced, almost yin-yang, opposition: one old, the other new; one superstitious, the other enlightened; one eating blood, the other with blood eaten; and so on. The parallel extends to many levels that can only be appreciated by reading the whole story. In the end, though, a different, somewhat surprising, over-arching value emerges. It is broad enough to span the story’s opposite poles; it is mother’s love.

Both boys have mothers; both mothers are in grief; the two mothers meet on a footpath that separates two graveyards—one for paupers, where one boy lies, and the other for executed criminals, where the other rests. Several symbolic differences between the two boys are still visible in this graveyard scene, but in essential respects the two mothers are the same. Their love is of the same kind. Their loss is of the same kind. Their pain is, too. The mother’s love that they stand for is bigger than all of the hurly-burly in the world that brought them together onto that sad path.

I doubt that the leaders of the Communist Party of China will ever be able to perceive that some values far outweigh their own petty grip on power. But the Tiananmen Mothers clearly see this, and so can the good people of China.

1. Fang Lizhi, Perry Link trans., *The Chinese Amnesia*, 37 The New York Review of Books (September 27, 1990).