

A TIME FOR SELF-REFLECTION

BY REN BUMEI

The official villains of the Tiananmen tragedy are well known, Ren Bumei observes. But survivors also bear a moral responsibility to the past and to the future, which the 15th anniversary provides a crucial opportunity to address.¹

Job 13:17—The night racks my bones, and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest.

Psalm 97:10—Let those who love the Lord hate evil.

Fifteen years represents one fifth to one fourth of an average human lifetime. The June 4th tragedy took place 15 years ago, and conscience and enthusiasm are beginning to show wrinkles, but it seems I'm still ill-prepared to write a brief recollection. The tenth anniversary inspired me to express myself in the essay, "A Defense of 1989," and my feelings over those ten years were recorded in "The Diary of a Businessman in Exile."² In fact, it would be fair to say that all of my writings have been influenced by this tragedy—to a greater or lesser extent, there is nothing that does not originate from that seething spring and that blood-soaked dawn. Even so, I still don't feel comfortable using the medium of a "memoir" to rediscover the person I was 15 years ago. On the one hand, for someone who emerged from the Square on June 4, 1989, pursuing the details is too painful, and to this day I'm unable to relate those events through an objective narrative. I don't even think such recollections are an appropriate topic for me; if it is for the sake of demanding accountability, many people have already done this. On the other hand, I'm ashamed of my 15 years of survival at the expense of honor—as a "remorseful survivor" and a "guilty bystander," what right have I through my memoirs to declare myself a "child of June 4th" and align myself with the "political correctness" of the Square's tragedy?

Demands for accountability and analysis accompanied by contention have formed into the mainstream "June 4th Culture." In the space of 15 years the focus has narrowed onto the following question: Can the people assiduously recording the tragic events in the Square reflect on their own roles? The culprits responsible for China's moral tragedy and physical

tragedy of the last 15 years are of course the Beijing authorities, that question can be laid to rest. Yet there is still another side to the question—has the time come for the cynicism of theoretical liberalism and the internal dissent of exiled liberalism to accept some share of the blame? Who can escape feelings of guilt? At the tenth anniversary I attempted to promote a "call to repentance," and I wish to do the same now. That is the main reason for my writing this essay shortly before the 15th anniversary of June 4th. Now in 2004, as sorrow and criticism become increasingly ceremonial (of course I support all commemorative activities), how can we bring new respect and consolation to June 4th? The Holy Spirit's work begins by leading a person to acknowledge his guilt, and through the resulting inconsolable sorrow to become a follower and unite with Christ. Remorse is the precondition for belief. I use this essay to offer a prayer in the night for this course—and for the course I myself am following.

From the Square to my home

I will start with my personal experience.

I have kept at hand a book published in 1989 by the Beijing Publishing Company entitled, *A Record of the Quelling of the Riots and Counterrevolutionary Rebellion*. This book records the key events of those "terrifying 56 days." In references to the student rally organized by the China Zhengfa University on April 26 (during which it was decided to organize the famous April 27 protest opposing the *People's Daily* editorial), I saw a depiction of myself as one of the seven standing committee members (others included Wang Dan, Liu Gang and other students). I actually took part in the movement on April 22; at that time I participated in organizing the Autonomous Student Union at Renmin University, and served as a member of its nine-person standing committee. That period was the most exciting time of my life, and the support we raised among the people of Beijing sparked in me a love for all of humanity. Because of exhaustion, I ended up being admitted to the hospital after the hunger strike began, and upon being discharged I left the Autonomous Student Union (Renmin University sent another representative to take part in the student rally on April 26), but continued to take part in protests and in organizing broadcasts at Renmin University.

As far as I'm concerned, the most heartrending memories of 1989 include at least two encounters. One is my experience

at Tiananmen Square on June 4, and one is my experience upon returning home on June 9.

In the autumn of 2002 I accepted an invitation from a research organization in Hong Kong to speak on the New Language Movement [xinyuwen yundong]. While in Hong Kong I was able for the first time to see the film *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*.³ Friends told me, “Most people shed tears when they see this film. As a participant, you will probably do the same.” A friend took me to the cinema and then tactfully left me alone. In fact, from the moment the “Internationale” sounded the tears began to flow down my face. What moved me most was seeing myself in the scene referred to as the “Liubukou tragedy.” That scene was the most painful in my memory, a wound that has never healed and continues to bleed . . .

At around 8 o’clock on the evening of June 3, I rode my bicycle from Renmin University to Tiananmen Square. The mood there was extremely tense, but the students gathered beneath the Monument of the People’s Heroes were still in high spirits. When gunshots were heard from Chang’an Avenue, a female Renmin University student from Hainan led us to begin singing. We sang “Blood Soaked Banner,” “Farewell, Mother” and especially the “Internationale.” Around 3 or 4 o’clock the next morning, the martial law troops surrounded the square and began firing scattered shots at the memorial. At that time I was sitting at the base of the memorial, and chips of stone broken off by the bullets struck me in the face. What is strange is that I felt no fear, only grief, indignation and shame. After a consultation between representatives of the students and the commanders of the martial law troops, the students began to disperse from the square’s southeast corner. Many students hugged each other and wept openly. After leaving the Square, the students came into conflict with uniformed and heavily armed soldiers. The two sides began throwing stones at each other, and some people began to curse the soldiers as “fascists.” The students were still leaving the Square, and passed by the west side of the Great Hall of the People toward Chang’an Avenue. That was Liubukou, the location of the Zhongnanhai government offices.

I was 21 years old at that time, and it was the first time that I had faced death in such a way.

As I neared Liubukou I suddenly sensed that the group of students in front of me was dissolving in chaos and beginning to retreat. Advancing a few steps, I saw a group of people lying in pools of blood in Chang’an Avenue. I don’t remember how many people there were, perhaps around 18. A student said that when the tanks saw the group of students approaching, they advanced on them and some students were crushed. I and some other students immediately began administering first aid, and some people brought hand-drawn carts onto which we loaded some of the injured and shouted for them to be taken to the hospital. I assisted seven or eight wounded. In fact, some of the people were already dead at the scene, their intestines and brains spilling out. I was 21 years old at that time,

and it was the first time that I had faced death in such a way. The scene recorded in *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* shows me after I had moved some injured and was pushing some students away in hopes of preventing a clash with the soldiers in Chang’an Avenue. I was wearing a white shirt, and it was stained with blood. I saved that shirt for many years, but unfortunately I have since misplaced it.

After there was nothing left on the street but traces of blood, I will never forget how I stood on Chang’an Avenue and raised my fist toward the distant Tiananmen Square. I vowed that from that moment forward I would ensure that the rest of my life was worthy of that event. As I watched the sun rise I was surprised to see that it was green, the same color as the uniforms of the soldiers below it. From Chang’an Avenue to the university, people lined the streets tearfully embracing us, and we ourselves wept all the way. The whole world seemed to be wrapped in frosted glass, weeping for China . . . Upon returning to the dormitory I was unable to sleep for several days, and passed the time in a haze between sleeping and waking . . .

A well-meaning person advised me to leave the city and return home, but I felt it was better to remain at the university. Memorial activities were taking place in spite of the red terror. Unfortunately, I encountered death once again on June 6. On that morning I rode my bicycle with the intention of seeing how the situation was off campus. When I reached Muxidi, I saw martial law troops on parade with tanks leading the foot soldiers. Along the side of the street some people were still protesting. At that time it seems someone in the crowd began shouting slogans, and a volley of gunfire followed. People scurried madly for shelter, but suddenly there were cries that someone had been hit. I and others rushed over and found a boy of 8 or 9 struck in the abdomen. Some people quickly carried the boy to Fuxingmen Hospital. At that time I didn’t know if the boy survived, but subsequently, upon reading Ding Zilin’s report,⁴ I found out that he died at the hospital.

After that experience I fled Beijing like a wounded sparrow. I rushed to my home village—my parents had already sent many telegrams inquiring after my safety, and I needed to hurry back to them. On June 9 I arrived at the home of relatives in Heilongjiang, only to learn that my mother was near death. The reason was that a younger student had spread a rumor around our county seat that I had been killed at the Square. Unwilling to remain a moment longer with my relatives, I set off for my parents’ home 300 kilometers away. By the time I arrived my mother was barely hanging on. She embraced me, unable to utter a word, only weeping silently. Nearly everyone in the village came to surround our house, and I saw countless women’s tears and men’s cigarette butts . . . I myself was speechless, and mutely lowered myself to the brick bed, my eyes glazed—the experience of the last five or six days seemed to have obliterated my intelligence . . . I realized that I had not yet seen my father, and I was told that he had set off for Beijing to retrieve my corpse . . .

“Ren Bumei came back alive!” The news brought my mother back from the brink of death, and then led the village police to set up sentry posts at the front and back of the village in preparation for corrective measures according to my activi-

ties. But fortunately nothing like that happened. After my father was chased down and brought back to the village he began to organize a party to celebrate my “resurrection.” The village’s tragic mood quickly transformed into celebration. I continued to stay near my mother like a dumb beast who only wished to curl up with his suffering . . . I held out no hope of finding a place to lick my wounds, because my whole body seemed covered with wounds . . .

I plan to write elsewhere about my experiences over the past 15 years, the persecution I experienced in China because of June 4th, perhaps as the subject of a speech. After I was investigated in 1990 I was expelled from the university. The university authorities gave the following reasons: 1) failure to turn in assignments (that is the subject of another story); 2) committed serious political errors during the riots; 3) protested the investigation and refused to admit error. According to regulations, I had to sign this decision. I wrote three “personal opinions” on the document: 1) I did not fail to turn in my assignments; 2) I did not commit any serious political errors or any other errors during the riots; 3) I strongly protest this decision, which does not conform to socialism or to law. I remember at the time the department head became very angry. He clamped his lips together for a moment, then pronounced the retaliation for my impudence: Not only would I be expelled from school, I would also be sent home, and my household registration [*hukou*] would revert to my home village. In fact, this additional punishment worked to my advantage: under escort I enjoyed my first experience in “first class,” assigned to the soft bed section of the train. While my escorts kept sleepless watch over me, I was lulled asleep to the tune of “My Old Home” all the way to my native village.

A tragic lack of progress

Obviously my situation was not the most tragic: I was not a corpse in the street, nor was I imprisoned in some dank jail cell. My sorrow could not come close to the heart wrenching pain of the families of the dead. But I believe that June 4th served as a turning point in the lives of many people during that time, and I was no exception. How did people accomplish this turnaround in their lives? Building on the personal experiences related above, I would like to further discuss my spiritual journey and what June 4th meant to me as a person and to China, and also explore the importance of including self-examination in a reappraisal of June 4th.

In fact, when we consider the subject of how June 4th changed our lives, we usually refer to our total despair at the CCP’s totalitarian suppression and our conversion to the principles of freedom and democracy. I think this change in thinking is broadly representative. From the point of view of the authorities, June 4th forced China into a “post-political” or “post-ideological” era in which a horror of politics came to dominate China’s political stage. For ordinary citizens, political phobia had a similar result; apart from members of the Tiananmen Mothers and the Democracy Party Movement, who continued to adhere to their principles or were ruthlessly purged, cynicism led the intellectual liberal elite to become initially unremorseful survivors (when facing the tragedies of

the Cultural Revolution or June 4th), and eventually guiltless bystanders (when facing the Tiananmen Mothers, the Democracy Party and the Falungong spiritual movement). In addition, the rules of the market gradually swallowed up the sporadic political protests of grassroots liberals. As for the overseas democracy activists, in the 15 years since June 4th they have almost completely exhausted their financial and moral resources. For that reason, there has been generally nothing good or new to report regarding Chinese politics since the 1990s, and the collective silence in the face of the major political persecutions referred to above leaves no basis for optimism over China’s political development. This is a further indication that China urgently needs to enter an era of political self-reflection.

Most regrettable is that even before feelings of shame could be articulated, a mood of self-satisfaction had already taken over the fortresses of Chinese liberalism. One epochal development since June 4th has been the rise of the Internet, and this should have allowed new opportunities for recording the events of June 4th. But due to the maturing⁵ of China and Beijing, this never happened. In the “Internet Empowerment Wave” of 2003, especially in its fervently discussed culmination, commentators seemed to have forgotten the crimes of June 4th and the shame of subsequent human rights abuses. Before 2003 began, a string of self-congratulatory pieces began appearing, and by the beginning of 2004, self-congratulatory scholarly treatises and optimistic projections regarding the Hu-Wen government had blended to produce a heady symphonic paean to mutual well-being. In the midst of this seductive pantomime of democratic progress, the Chinese government arrested several Internet essayists, murdered Sun Zhigang⁶ and incarcerated Sun Dawu.⁷ No rational person will believe that I oppose supporting them, but it is ironic that the self-congratulators, while suggesting that Du Daobin⁸ has been liberated as the result of some great Internet movement, seem to have forgotten that he is still in custody.

Strangest of all is that some people continue to proclaim over the Internet that the dawn of the “Empowerment Era” is at hand. In fact, the blatant examples of the BMW case,⁹ the Zheng Enchong case¹⁰ and perverse politics make a joke of such optimistic projections and “strategic optimism.” While the victims remain in darkness, their supporters should show some prudence in their self-congratulation, which could be described as both inhumane and insincere. Of equal importance is that this kind of conclusion disregards the shameful enormities of 15 years ago, the shocking moral corruption of which would be considered a matter of national disgrace in any civilized country. Here, in the midst of the bombast and reckoning of advantages, it’s as if June 4th never occurred, and as if repeated country-wide instances of religious persecution had never occurred. This chorus seems to exclude no one from praise (a Web site such as *Minzhu yu Renquan* [Democracy and Human Rights] can be ignored because praising its adherence to basic principles would demonstrate a lack of survival skills or inability to “play the game.”)—but one thing that has been overlooked is that such an advanced race, a race possessing so many great intellectual elites, can still, in this modern age, so

thoroughly tolerate the official version of such a huge tragedy as June 4th for 15 years, and even more surprisingly can tolerate their own complete indifference to the blatant lies.

As the 15th anniversary of June 4 approaches, people have been discussing the possibility of establishing some kind of memorial, and have begun delicately dodging the hypersensitivity of the authorities by strategically seeking the “least common denominator.” In countless commemorative essays over the past 15 years, people seem to have forgotten that the “highest” grade of political consensus here fails to meet the world’s most basic standards of politics and justice. The question is, why do Chinese so easily descend into self-satisfaction and settle for second best with no feelings of shame? In this sense, June 4th has not really lead Chinese to a spiritual awakening. China’s atavistic predestination is to experience suffering without self-reflection. If self-reflection does occur, the blame always lands squarely on the authorities and others, while one relegates oneself first to the role of strategic critic, and only then usurps the role of the righteously indignant.

For this reason I worry that the aftermath of the June 4th tragedy is an even greater tragedy: the bloodbath has not actually imparted to the Chinese spirit any sense of guilt or humility or personal growth, resulting in only more needless sacrifice of life. This easy retreat, this ready indulgence in mutual flattery over a little “progress,” can only make one sigh in the depths of despair. It is because of this lack of feeling of guilt and humility that virtually all of China’s elites have allowed themselves to descend into “rational cowardice” (within China) or “rational mutual disagreement” (within China and overseas). The problem is in the fact that cowardice is not rational, but rather undermines any attempts to stand up for humane principles. And what is the point of mutual disagreement? This “I’m okay, you’re okay” mentality has to stop!

I can be considered a genuine “son of June 4th,” but what have I contributed to June 4th? It’s true, the inadequacies I criticize in others are mine as well. But please forgive me, I have no intention of keeping my mouth shut because of that. The way I look at it, since there are so many things we cannot do, is it possible for us to at least admit what we cannot do and not expend all our “talent” on self-intoxication with what we have done? In an era in which about 90 percent of things cannot be done, can we acknowledge our own guilt rather than our 10 percent of achievement? In the midst of the guilt the Beijing authorities have imposed on us, is it not possible that some of the shame arises from ourselves? Under these conditions of taking the easy way out, mutual attack and unsustainable morality, is it possible to feel only self-satisfaction or blame or criticism and not a morsel of self-reflection? Even more important is that recognizing what one cannot do and internalizing the shame is the basic precondition for fighting for what one actually can do. But barrack-room boasting (strong personalities are so deeply entrenched!) and mutual recrimination can only lead us to distance ourselves even further from absolute imperatives and from the warning that June 4th gave China. And in fact that’s exactly what we have: 15 years without self-reflection, 15 years of callous indifference, 15 years of speechless rage or rageless speech—all of this shows that June

4th was not really a turning point for Chinese. What became a turning point was hatred and terror, and in fact there were not even any real refugees, just some people who turned flight into a means of making a living. In a human tragedy of such massive scale, China did not produce a single book, film, mass commemorative movement or humanist champion worthy of the event. What it has continued to produce to an appropriate scale is self-protection, political oppression, internal squabbles, scandals and seekers of fame and wealth. This is our status quo: such a country, such a people, such a police force, such an intellectual elite—such an individual, myself.

What I relate here is my personal spiritual journey. June 4th has given me a double dose of shame and reproach. It leads me to regularly confess that I am a sinful person. But in fact not everyone is as cynical as I am; others have approached their own cross through the exultation or consolation of their ideologies. I, who have survived at the expense of honor, what right have I to applaud my ability to stay afloat, when those who genuinely adhere to their principles sink through their lack of “survival skills” or ability to “play the game”?

From Liubukou to cyberspace, over the past 15 years Ren Bumei has remained an indebted sinner. In a certain sense we don’t even have the right to commemorate June 4th. The moral humiliation of the past 15 years is still attributed to the savagery of the authorities, but is this entirely accurate? In the face of June 4th all of us are guilty. A race that embraces the corpse of June 4th does not deserve to blow its own trumpet. For that reason, the topic “June 4th changed my life” should not only acknowledge the legal culpability of the authorities, but should also acknowledge that in the political sense, not one of us is without culpability.

For that reason, I say here: please include self-reflection and repentance among the key components of the 15-year commemoration.

For that reason, I say here: let us hope that self-reflection will inspire a deeper accounting that transcends what the written word can express.

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Translated by Stacy Mosher

1. This article was originally posted on the Web site of *Minzhu Zhongguo*, http://www.chinamz.org/127_issue/127gbztl.html.
2. This article can be accessed online at: <http://www.cclw.net/famous/srlwrj/>.
3. *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, produced and directed by Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon, 1995.
4. Ding Zilin, a university professor whose son was killed in the June 4 crackdown, heads the Tiananmen Mothers, a group of relatives of the dead and injured demanding accountability for June 4th.
5. Ren Bumei typically uses the term “mature” (*chengshu*) to refer to an overly practical or cynical attitude of the intellectual elite toward matters of principle.
6. Sun Zhigang, a 27-year-old garment designer from Wuhan, died in custody after being detained in Guangzhou on March 17, 2003 for allegedly lacking the appropriate identification. Public uproar over the case led offi-

- cials to pledge reform of the Custody & Repatriation system. In June 2003 the Guangzhou Intermediate People's Court sentenced four officials and eight detainees to death or imprisonment for their roles in Sun's death.
7. Sun Dawu, an outspoken peasant entrepreneur in Hebei Province, was arrested on May 29, 2003 on charges of "illegally taking deposits from the public" after banks refused to loan him money to develop his company. Sun went to trial on October 30, 2003, and was sentenced to three years in prison, suspended for four years. Since his release Sun has maintained a low profile.
 8. Du Daobin was detained in Yingcheng, Hubei Province on October 23, 2008, after posting a large number of articles critical of the Chinese government on the Internet. In spite of wide scale petitioning on

his behalf, in February 2004 the authorities announced that Du had been formally arrested on charges of subversion.

9. On October 16, 2003, a BMW jeep driven by Su Xiuwen was involved in a traffic accident in Harbin that killed one person and injured 12. The relative of a senior Heilongjiang official, and the wife of a wealthy businessman, Su was sentenced to two years in prison, suspended for three years.
10. Zheng Enchong, a Shanghai lawyer who assisted hundreds of families displaced in urban redevelopment schemes, was sentenced on October 28, 2003 to three years in prison on charges of "revealing state secrets" on the basis of his communications with HRIC regarding human rights infringements.

Seventy Years Already

Loudspeakers belch languid waves
to drench students hellbent on marching
for "Science" and "Democracy"—as if
Western pop music could make them forget
Western political hopes, as if today
was not their day in history. But these
youths know, they greet the Party's dance tunes
with softly hummed verses
of the "Internationale." Over and over again:

Qilai, qilai jihan, jiaopode nuli
Arise you hungry, shackled slaves...
Arise for the last fight before
a bright tomorrow
While one tall youth

in well cut jeans, bullhorn
in hand, pleads with passersby:
"We're tired, so tired!
For seventy years already students
have marched for freedom—too long
in coming!"

I am inside the chain of human
hands, inside the march, circled
by young writers who have not
lost faith in song, the Internationale
their bond of hope across an angry,
sullen world. For once I worry less
if this event is mine, or theirs,
what counts is to take back one
day of history from those who would
cut out its tongue, its heart.

In front of me, a boy bedecked
in a paperbag cape decorated
with bold calligraphy: "Mother, don't
think me bad because I heard
my nation cry and did not
plug my ears."

Dreams Follow No Party Line

Rushing, as if to a tryst, I ride
a Flying Phoenix bike to the students
at Democracy Wall. Amidst the clutter
of red ink news about local elections, dead
heroes, living monsters—a modest
message penciled in blue:
"Dreams follow no party line!"

In the heat of politics, debates,
firm resolutions for what is
to be done, someone posted a plea
to let minds wander, to warn
against quick balms for China's
ancient ills. I, too, came hungry

for clear answers, only
to be reminded: dreaming
well done is always
pointless.

BY VERA SCHWARCZ

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