

REMEMBERING JUNE 4TH FOR CHINA'S FUTURE

BY LIU XIAOBO

The Chinese people must fight against the officially-imposed amnesia that has almost obliterated public memory of a crime against humanity that occurred only 16 years ago.

Sixteen years is nearly enough time for a generation of people to reach adulthood. As far as the souls of those who died on June 4th are concerned, it has been a long wait for justice that may never come. From a historical perspective, however, it has been a very short time, and in the blink of an eye, those responsible seem to have been absolved of their crimes. In the eyes of most Chinese people—whether they personally experienced the events of June 4, 1989 or not—the bloodstains on Chang'an Street seem to be growing ever fainter, while June 4th and the innocent people who sacrificed their lives seem to be receding further and further into the past.

We are a cowardly and forgetful people, long accustomed to turning memorial tombs into palaces. Indeed, long before there were slave owners, we had already made bowing into an art form. Even Chinese who live in freedom, when faced with an oppressive power and the temptation to gain profit for themselves, can't resist the urge to kowtow. After all, didn't we just see—on a magnificent stage at Zhongnanhai, in a scene carefully orchestrated by a skilled director—Lian and Song¹ come from across the Straits to the mainland to kowtow to the “ruling Party”? As soon as the two men stepped onto the red carpet of the Great Hall of the People, the fear they felt inside inevitably expressed itself as lofty words of praise for the rule of the dictatorship and for the Party chief.

In fact, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—the perpetrators of mass slaughter—will never forget June 4th and the way it escalated into a major public incident. It is just that the CCP's memories of June 4th have been turned upside down by the enormity of its crime, turning a day of slaughter into a subject that is taboo in the public domain; turning the graves of the June 4th victims into ground off-limits to the public; and turning the Tiananmen Mothers, who for more than ten years have worked to seek justice and restore the truth, into targets of strict control. The authorities have washed away everything to do with the people and events of June 4th.

In 2004, after having courageously revealed official deception over SARS in 2003, Dr. Jiang Yanyong² issued an appeal for an official reassessment of June 4th. On the occasion of the 15th anniversary of June 4th, although there had already been a tremendous reaction to his letter both domestically and internationally, the official response to Jiang's request was to put him under house arrest for eight long months.

Right up until his death at the beginning of this year, Zhao Ziyang³—who earned our respect for his support of democracy and peace and his opposition to violent repression during the 1989 movement—maintained the convictions of a great statesman and always saw being a good person as his bottom line, even during his 16 years under house arrest following the events of June 4th. The fear and extraordinary weakness in the hearts of government officials was so strong that they could not let go of Zhao even in death, just as he could never let go of the memories of bloodshed on Chang'an Street 16 years ago, and of the terror enveloping Beijing under military-occupation.

Public complicity in historical amnesia

Living under the government's politics of terror, what we need is not brilliant intellect or profound theories, but only our basic common sense and the courage of our convictions. Both the righteousness of the 1989 movement and the brutality of the slaughter are like the moon shining in the sky: we only have to raise our heads to see it—we don't need to prove to ourselves that it's there or to defend its existence. The CCP was the chief culprit, and no matter how many lies or how much slander it fabricates, it can never discredit the 1989 movement; much less can it deny the criminal nature of mass slaughter. It was my strong beliefs, based precisely on the common sense mentioned above, that prevented me from ever feeling the need to defend the righteousness of the 1989 movement, even while I was crouching on the floor of my prison cell.

However, my experiences after being released from prison in October 1999 led me to acknowledge a sad fact: the combination of terror, indoctrination and distortion of history, combined with the analgesic effect of prosperity and personal profit, has effectively washed away national memory. The truth can be hidden by the power of the rod; memories can be replaced with lies; common sense can be warped by clever wordplay; and an individual's conscience can be bought with

money. It is the same way in which the CCP has all along used its monopoly of power and ideological indoctrination to transform the past 100 years of China's history into no more than a lie. The generation of people who lived through 1989 is unwilling to discuss June 4th publicly, and the vast majority of people born after 1989 don't really understand June 4th. Within a period of just 16 years, the shining righteousness of the 1989 movement has dulled. Indeed, after the death of Deng Xiaoping, the main person responsible for the mass slaughter, and after the succession to power of Jiang Zemin and Li Peng, the main beneficiaries of June 4th, the tragedy of that day seems to have been all but forgotten, and the CCP seems to have washed away its sins.

The blame for this national amnesia, whether voluntary or involuntary, must be placed with the officials and the people who personally experienced the 1989 movement. First there are the communist authorities, who after committing the crime of mass slaughter proceeded to commit the further crimes of concealing their wrongdoing and forcing the people to forget. Secondly, there are those who personally experienced the 1989 movement, especially those who were prominent figures at the time, and who have succumbed to government terror and bribery by keeping silence, or by sidestepping, distorting and even slandering the 1989 movement.

Of those people, some have become great capitalists, some have become scholarly authorities, and others have become the new favorites of the current regime. A few have become so-called elite pundits-for-hire and have issued all kinds of explanations in defense of the mass slaughter. These experts have advanced theories ranging from "conspiracy to seize power" to "radicalism," from "immaturity" to "being used," from "having no choice but to open fire" to "stability above all else," from "national conditions" to "public order," from "economy first" to "progressive reform under official control," and from "the leaders of the Communist Party are better than the leaders of the democracy movement" to "tuition costs"—all of these theories have censured the democracy movement, and many have defended the mass slaughter. They magically transformed a spontaneous mass movement opposing dictatorship and corruption and advocating freedom and democracy into a plot concocted by a handful of people. They portrayed a movement for peace and reason as a revolution of radicals; they defended the killings with excuses such as "there was no choice, we had to do it"; and they criticized demands for political reform as inappropriate for China's current conditions. They even went so far as to turn the phrase "democracy will bring disaster on the country and people" into a pop song.

The most subtle and deceptive theory is the concept, borrowed from the West, of the dichotomy between "positive liberty" and "negative liberty."⁴ Just as the French Revolution, the October Revolution in Russia and other historical events have been cited to demonstrate the disastrous effects of "positive liberty," the 1989 movement is also used as an example of how "positive liberty" failed in China. The students involved in the 1989 democracy movement have even been compared with the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution, and democracy activists and dissidents have been labeled as "careerists" or

"running dogs" of foreign imperialist powers. The end result has been the emergence of cynical philosophies such as "do nothing" and "the right to abstain from politics."

In this way, in post-June 4th China, it seems that "liberty" is no longer something for which we should actively strive, but rather something for which we should passively wait. Liberty is seen as similar to Hayek's postulation of "spontaneous order"⁵—it will come about naturally, of its own accord. But history shows that without the active struggles of generations of people, the freedom that now exists in any country would have never been more than a dream. Although in England and America the tradition of "negative liberty" has become firmly entrenched in people's hearts, there would certainly be no freedom in those countries today if not for the English Civil War or the American Revolutionary War.

The price of apathy

The tradition of "not discussing national affairs" comes from an arbitrary authority that does not allow for public debate; it deprives the people of their right to participate, and inevitably eradicates the individual's feeling of responsibility for the common good. Over time, people have lost the desire and enthusiasm to pay attention to public affairs, and have instead become consumed by the pursuit of pleasure, keeping up with fashion trends and taking care of their basic necessities. This forcible withdrawal of civil participation has inevitably turned politics, which is regarded as the greatest of all public duties, into the private business of a handful of powerful people, and public rights have also inevitably been transformed into a tool used by the elite for their own benefit. For this reason, from ancient times to the present, China has always shaped the public nature of its politics without a basis of political participation by its citizens. Rather, the political participation of our countrymen has consisted of uprisings as a last resort, of lawlessness during periods of anarchy, of mass movements organized by the authorities for their own aims, or of political apathy arising from fear.

What is significant here is the fact that nobody is shocked by the way in which the government has forced people to forget June 4th. The people's indifference to huge public crises is one of the greatest sorrows of China's political situation, and is one of the saddest of all human conditions. In fact, June 4th is hardly the only shameful historical event that Chinese people have forgotten. Our countrymen's memories of the numerous massacres throughout our history contain very little truth or specific facts. The slaughter in Sichuan by Zhang Xianzhong,⁶ the Eight Banner Army's massacre in Yangzhou,⁷ the Taiping Army's bloodbath in Nanjing, and even the more "politically correct" Nanjing massacre—Chinese have little detailed memory of these events.

Especially during the more than 50 years of CCP rule, this forced amnesia and distortion of facts has already changed China's contemporary and modern history beyond recognition. Those born in the 1950s do not know that the CCP was once the Chinese branch of the Soviet Union's Communist Party and was under their control; they know nothing of the brutal struggles that occurred in the early part of the CCP's his-

tory; they don't know how Mao Zedong had to go through the Yan'an rectification movement in order to secure his position of respect within the Party; and they are unaware of the true history of the war against Japan or China's civil war. Those born in the 1960s are unclear about the history of the movement to repress counterrevolutionaries (1950–1952), the movement against the three evils,^{viii} the movement against the five evils,⁹ the reform of industry and commerce, the anti-Rightist movement (1957), the Great Leap Forward or the people's communes. Those born in the 1970s and 1980s are unclear of the facts regarding the catastrophic Cultural Revolution, and they know very little about the 1989 democracy movement and the June 4th massacre. I believe that if the CCP remains in power long enough, those born around the turn of the millennium will have no idea what Falun Gong was.

The struggle of a nation to retain its memories and resist amnesia depends first and foremost on the struggle of the conscience of the intellectual elite against those in power. Otherwise, we will have no way to make the truth about the June 4th massacre and the evils of the dictatorial system a matter of general historical knowledge among our people, nor will we have any way to prevent those kinds of tragedies from occurring again. Hasn't the vicious cycle of autocratic rule in China's history gone on for long enough?

Voices of conscience

As the great liberal philosopher John Acton¹⁰ said, "Freedom rules over our conscience in order to give it the conditions to grow. Freedom is what allows our conscience to guide our actions; freedom is the master of our conscience."

Under official restrictions that prevent people from remembering or from holding memorial ceremonies, at a time when freedom still hasn't arrived, and especially while the struggle for freedom has been temporarily suppressed, to actively fight for freedom is to awaken our conscience. Although the people have no way to prevent the government from suppressing, concealing or distorting memories of June 4th, as long as they do not yield to government coercion, they can at least hold onto their own memories for their long-suffering country, and preserve a foundation of human dignity for the free China yet to come. To defend the righteousness of the 1989 movement is to defend human rights and conscience everywhere; to testify to the truth of June 4th is to pray for and watch over the innocent souls of those killed; to use individual memories to resist the government's forced amnesia is to join the Chinese people's struggle for freedom, and preserve our memories and conscience for the sake of this nation, which has suffered so much hardship.

Against this backdrop of placing all our hopes on the testimony of our people, the tenacious existence and expansion of the Tiananmen Mothers is a tangible expression of the highest and noblest human spirit in China today. The testimony of the Tiananmen Mothers serves as a rallying cry and inspiration to the Chinese people to maintain the strength of their convictions, and at the same time as a warning to the ruling dictatorship that in today's world the use of violence to extinguish the

human spirit cannot be tolerated. Although the dictators possess a huge state apparatus, key social resources and systematized methods of violence, the Tiananmen mothers, a group with no power and no influence, still gain strength from the dying words of their children, from the blood shed by their loved ones, and from their innate motherly love, conscience and courage to preserve the hope of progress toward freedom, democracy and respect for life for our long-suffering nation.

If we decide that the 1989 movement and the June 4th massacre require a memorial, and the souls of the innocent dead require a monument—neither of which is allowed under the current situation—the testimony and searching of the Tiananmen Mothers can serve as the foundation stone for such a monument.

Translated by Roberta Raine

The original Chinese version of this article can be accessed on the Web site of New Century Net:

NOTES

1. KMT (Kuomintang) candidate Lien Chan and PFP (People First Party) chairman James Soong of Taiwan both made highly publicized visits to the mainland in mid-2005.
2. A surgeon at the People's Liberation Army Number 301 Hospital, Jiang oversaw the treatment of people injured and killed during the crackdown that began on the evening of June 3, 1989. Also in his professional capacity, he revealed in 2003 that the SARS crisis was much more severe than Chinese authorities had acknowledged.
3. Zhao Ziyang, who was General Secretary of the Communist Party during the democracy movement in early 1989, was placed under house arrest after advocating a lenient official approach to the protesters. He died while still under house arrest in January 2005.
4. The concept of positive and negative liberty was first put forth by Isaiah Berlin in 1959. Positive liberty refers to the ability to act to fulfill one's own potential, as opposed to negative liberty, which refers to the absence of obstacles that might prevent one from achieving one's aims.
5. Spontaneous order is a term that describes the spontaneous emergence of order out of a seemingly chaotic context. Many advocates of laissez-faire economics, such as Friedrich von Hayek, have argued that markets function through spontaneous order.
6. Zhang Xianzhong was a farmer who led a peasant uprising in the 1600s and waged war in Sichuan Province.
7. During the Qing Dynasty when the Manchu were in power, they created eight different "banner armies" to suppress and control the populace. They were stationed in major cities such as Beijing and Yangzhou.
8. The "three evils" were corruption, waste and bureaucracy within the Party and government; this campaign was held in 1951–52.
9. The "five evils" were bribery, tax evasion, theft of state property, cheating on government contracts and stealing economic information, as practiced by owners of private enterprises; this movement began in 1952.
10. Lord John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton (1834–1902) was an English historian who made the famous pronouncement: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Lord Acton made the history of liberty his life's work and delivered two famous essays entitled "The History of Freedom in Antiquity" and "The History of Freedom in Christianity."