

“Thirtieth Anniversary of the Tiananmen Incident: International Academic Conference on Value Renewal and Path-Finding for China’s Pro-Democracy Movement”

Taipei, May 18-20, 2019.

June 4, 1989: A Founding Non-Event, A Breaking Point in Time and Space

(By Michel Bonnin)

My purpose today is not to present a detailed history of the Pro-Democracy Movement of the Spring of 1989 and of its violent military suppression during the night of June 3 to June 4, nor to examine the subsequent evolution of the movement in and out of China. It is rather to reflect broadly on the meaning of June 4 in the history of contemporary China, to propose my own conception, which I hope others will comment, complete and criticize. Such a topic is certainly too ambitious for my limited capabilities, but my aim is only to stimulate reflection and debate.

My main idea is that the violent military and political repression of the 1989 Chinese Pro-Democracy Movement in Beijing and in other cities is not only a tragic event which shocked the whole world, but also, looking at it in retrospect, a breaking point in the history of contemporary China. I argue that the fracture which it generated is not only affecting time, by drawing a fault line between the period of the 1980s and the following period, but is also affecting space, because the turn which China took at this time was in total contradiction with the events which started in the communist countries in eastern Europe and Russia in the same year and led to loss of power for the Communist parties of these countries. This means that the June 4 massacre cut China not only from its rather optimistic period of the 1980s (beginning in fact in 1978), but also from the rest of the (hitherto) communist world. This event, then, had at the same time dramatic historical and geopolitical effects. But the paradox is that this fundamental event has been, through the extraordinary efforts of the Chinese Communist Party, transformed into a non-event, which has been almost totally erased not only from all official record including books, textbooks and all kinds of media, but also from the collective memory of the population.

I shall now present with more details the fractures in time and space engendered by the fatal decision of using military violence against a population protesting peacefully, as

well as the subsequent transformation of this event into a non-event. Finally, I shall raise the question whether June 4 is not as tragic as a “non-event” than it was in 1989 as an “event”. Is it really possible that a new era built on such a collective amnesia, like a castle haunted by a ghost whose presence can be felt but never clearly seen, becomes a sound environment for the rejuvenation of a great nation?

1) A Breakpoint in Time

After the dark period of the Cultural Revolution and the atmosphere of “end of reign” of the Red Emperor Mao in the 1970s, the period beginning in 1978 appeared as a liberation from the Maoist dogmas, a relief from meaningless bouts of so-called “class-struggle” and as a “new enlightenment” period. Although the most optimistic hopes of a new period of “democracy and rule of law” in which socialism could respect human rights and freedom of thought were disappointed by Deng’s insistence in March 1979 on the respect of the Four Basic Principles including the dictatorship of the Party, the 1980s still were a period during which people were hopeful of a political reform and discussed passionately new ideas and new prospects for China. The 1980s were also a period of extraordinary thirst for new ideas coming from the West, including from the East-European countries, which were also experiencing a period of reform. Young people felt that they had a mission to fight the conservative forces inside the Party and eventually help the emergence of a new China opened to the outside world. For this, they not only supported the reformist forces inside the Party (mainly those around Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang), but some of them insisted on the necessity to build forces outside of the Party and put their hopes on a collaboration of intellectual and political forces “inside and outside of the system” (体制内和体制外) .

These strong aspirations of the Chinese youth were confronted to the hesitations concerning a political reform in the mind of the real Number One, Deng Xiaoping, and to what seemed to be a decision against it at the end of 1986. Then, the death of Hu Yaobang was felt as a possible end to a real reform and this triggered the students’ Democratic Movement on April 15, 1989. The boldness of this movement in its relationship with the authorities and the huge echo it stimulated in many cities and in many strata of urban society are testimony for the strength and depth of the aspirations to a political change, specifically to a new and more equal relationship between state

and society, in the entire population. This would not have been possible without the preceding decade, during which people discussed passionately about the best way to help the emergence of a new, open, China and kept a vivid memory of the cruel and hopeless realities of the Maoist period, especially that of the Cultural Revolution. This contrast had been brought to the front in the famous TV film *The River Elegy* (河殇), which proposed to create a “blue culture” in China and to put an end to the “yellow culture”, representing the traditional, feudal, China with which the closed and despotic society of the Maoist period was clearly associated.

It is not my purpose, here, to judge if the Beijing students were or not overly optimistic and should not have listened to more mature intellectuals who counseled more restraint and compromise in the relationship with the authorities. I know by my own experience as an ordinary participant in the May 68 Movement in Paris fifty years ago that large social movements have their own logic which is path-dependent, each action opening new possibilities but also making it impossible to go back in time. In any case, the declaration of martial law and, later, the massacre were enough to quell all the optimism accumulated in a decade.

I cannot here analyze all the effects of this event, but I would like to insist on the idea that it was one of those events, which change radically the relationship that every society entertains with Time. From a society facing the future and open to the Western world, Chinese society since the very beginning of the 1990s became a nostalgic society looking at its past and rediscovering its own specific tradition. I noticed this fundamental change while studying the memory of the *zhiqing* (the urban youth sent to the countryside during the Maoist period and mainly during the Cultural Revolution). I was surprised that those *zhiqing* who had almost all returned to cities in 1980 or before began to have a host of collective memorial activities only in 1990. And those memorial activities took pace and developed very fast, which showed that the explanation by the social and economic changes brought by Deng’s Southern Tour was not sufficient, since those changes were effective only a few years later. Moreover, the nostalgic mood was not only affecting the former *zhiqing*, but the whole urban society.

If we look closely at the period which followed the Tiananmen events, we can observe that the massacre killed not only people but also the optimism and the openness of the 1980s, especially as the authorities did all they could to reject everything new and western in the ideological realm and to encourage Chinese people to go back to their

own cultural and historical roots. This is the period when traditional practices like martial arts, *qigong* and even belief in all kinds of fantastic “special powers” (*teyi gongneng*) flourished suddenly, especially in very official institutions like the police and the army. In these circumstances, the *zhiqing* nostalgia which had always been latent became more pressing and at the same time, the authorities were more willing to let *zhiqing* organize memorial activities (and in fact they encouraged these activities as long as they could control their content). Even if the 1960s and 1970s remained a sensitive past, this sensitivity was much less dangerous than the recent past of the Spring of 1989. In a way, the tolerance shown by the authorities could be explained as the use of one memory to obfuscate another one. It could also be described as letting some steam out, in a tense situation. The first exhibition, which opened in November 1990 in the Beijing History Museum (bordering Tiananmen Square where the 1989 events had taken place), had a strong official “flavour”. The other exhibitions that followed in Hainan, Chengdu and Nanjing in 1991 and 1993 were also held under the patronage of the municipal authorities and blessed by calligraphies of the main local leaders.

The sudden emergence of unofficial historical books on the Rustication movement after 1990 is also intriguing. Before 1989, apart from some “internal” studies not available to the public, a historical account of the movement had only been published in 1987 as a small chapter in a book written by Party researchers to give an official presentation of the “ten years of the Cultural Revolution”. But, two historical books on the movement written by former *zhiqing* with no official background were published in 1992 and 1993 (one of them having been ready since the end of 1990). Others followed during the 1990s. These books of course could not have been published without official approval. Although a complete study on this topic has yet to be made, it seems then that the trauma of June 4 has brought China to a new “regime of historicity” (to use a concept cast by a French historian, François Hartog), which means a new relationship of a society to time: in this case, a tendency to reflect on the more distant past so as to forget the painful present or immediate past, in a situation when previous hopes for the future have been disappointed. The nostalgic mood of Chinese society (which was in total contrast to the idealistic and often impatient expectations concerning the future prevalent in the 1980s) appeared very soon at the beginning of the 1990s, so that a new publishing company, Huaxia publishing house (with links to the Political Department of the Army) decided in 1994 to publish a series of books dedicated to nostalgia under the

title “Collection of Nostalgia Literature”. One excerpt of the general preface to the collection and one of the post-scriptum of the fifth volume can illustrate this change in the “regime of historicity”:

- *The sad present has not been able to give us new ideas or new forms which we can acclaim and recall with dignity. So we have no other choice but to look behind us and return to the past.*
- *One of my friends said to me: “Tomorrow is born of yesterday, not of today. I can only concoct my dreams of the future from the traces of the past.” These words are an accurate reflection of the mentality of certain urban intellectuals today. Unable to imagine what tomorrow will hold, they try to avoid falling in a state of open anxiety by intoxicating themselves with heady draughts from the past.*

So, we can see that the shock of the military repression of the democratic movement, followed by a period of terror (hunt for its real or supposed “leaders” and pressures on persons and organizations to show their rejection of the movement and obedience to the Party) led to a sudden change in the social mood. An other aspect of this change is a general spreading of cynicism inside society, linked to the loss of moral legitimacy of the regime and to the new “social contract” which the leadership soon proposed (or rather imposed) to the population.(I shall go back to this point later).

The breakpoint effect of these events was indeed not limited to the population but also very obvious in the official political sphere. The most obvious effect was the total marginalization and even political destruction of the more open and reformist wing of the Party once represented by Hu Yaobang, and then by Zhao Ziyang. With the house arrest of Zhao, the arrest of his right-hand man, Bao Tong, and the sidelining of other leaders like Hu Qili, the Party was purged from all the forces favoring a political evolution of the country and of the Party. This was an important action blocking a future evolution of China.

But this was not the only political effect of June 4. The problem was that this unprecedented event of the People’s Liberation Army openly using bullets and tanks to kill unarmed Chinese civilians on a large scale meant a sudden loss of legitimacy for the Party in large chunks of the population. Many people who had kept a rather good image of the Party (or had regained it after the Cultural Revolution) suddenly saw the brutality

of the regime and opened their eyes to its absence of popular legitimacy. This was a widespread phenomenon. Suddenly, they saw that the king was naked, to refer to the famous Andersen story. And people knew that internationally the Chinese regime was strongly criticized and was the target of political and economic sanctions. This brought a very clever and informed journalist like Liu Binyan to predict that the regime would not last more than two more years. This was of course a wrong prediction made by someone who still thought that a communist regime needed a moral legitimacy. The following months and years showed that this was not the case. As long as the regime was able to purge dissenting leaders and to stick to power in a united fashion, nobody could throw it down. This is a specificity of totalitarian or neo-totalitarian regimes: in a paper I wrote at the time, I noticed that the Chinese Communist Party still kept a kind of “Ground Zero legitimacy”, which could also be called a “Dasein legitimacy” (to refer to the German philosopher Heidegger), which means the legitimacy of a power which simply is “there”, occupying the political sphere with the capacity of preventing anyone to topple it out of its throne.

But of course, this legitimacy needs to be reinforced by something more positive. And very soon, the regime resorted to the magic wand of all political regimes in a difficult situation: nationalism. Nationalism married together love of the fatherland (patriotism), insistence on the heroic role of the Party against aggression and humiliation from foreign enemies, pride about the rich and ancient Chinese civilization, and above all the idea that Chinese people are radically different from the rest of humanity, are a special breed which cannot follow the Western ways. All this can be considered as the main pillar on which the Party tried and in a large measure succeeded to find a new legitimacy. But these efforts would certainly not have been as successful, if they had not been sustained by an important wave of prolonged economic growth, which brought satisfaction and pride to a large part of the population.

This economic transformation would not have been possible without the determination of the leader who must bear ultimate responsibility for the fatal June 4 decision, Deng Xiaoping, to reject all ideological restraints on the use of the capitalist market system. By opening the gates during his famous Southern Tour at the beginning of 1992, he proposed a new “social contract” to the Chinese people: continued political obedience against a wealth of personal opportunities to become “rich” or at least richer than before.

We cannot know, of course, if this new radical turn of the economic reform would have been launched (and launched in such a vigorous manner) without the events of June 4. But, in any case, it is clear that the policies concerning the new ideological basis and the new socio-economic orientation of the regime have been deeply modified after June 4. It is then possible to say that this date constitutes a breakpoint in the contemporary history of China.

2) A Breakpoint in Space: a Sad Geopolitical Contrast

Einstein taught us that time and space are not separated in the physical world. I would argue that the time fracture of June 4 had also an important spatial aspect. Only five months after the distant events of Tiananmen shocked the Western world in a tragic way, the same world witnessed with excitement and delight another historical event happening right at its door: the Fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, which was followed by other uprisings in the then communist regimes of Eastern Europe. Before the end of the year, mainly by peaceful means, communism had disappeared from that region and two years later the USSR itself, the formidable stronghold of “Real Socialism”, began to crumble after 70 years of uninterrupted iron fisted rule and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union eventually lost power. This was of course a turning point in world history, and most importantly the end of the Cold War that had structured the whole world since the end of WWII. But, as a result of the exhilarating effect of the fall of the Berlin Wall, many people in the West, including intellectuals, had the wrong impression that Marxist-Leninist regimes were finished and that Western liberal democracies had won the war. The memory of Tiananmen was eclipsed or at least not considered as meaningful.

The most obvious proof of the total obfuscation of the historical meaning of the Tiananmen massacre was the publication of Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History*. The success of this book and of many other books and articles acknowledging the end of the communist ideology and of the communist system which had evolved from Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin until 1989 meant a total disregard for the fate of the Chinese people. The violent reassertion of the totalitarian model of government was not considered as significant and was deleted from universal (or global) political science.

For the Chinese intellectuals and ordinary people who had been participants or sympathizers of the Pro-Democracy Movement, the East European events were at the

same time a source of joy and of disarray. The contrast between the victory of democratic ideals in the West and their bloody crushing in their own country was heartbreaking, even though it could be a source of hope for the future. To make sense of that cruel contrast, they often expressed the idea that the Tiananmen massacre had so disgusted and shocked Europeans, including Gorbachev, that he had decided not to use the Soviet Army to crush the East European revolts, contrary to what had been usual practice before that in many East European countries. Then, in a way, the tragic failure of the Chinese democratic movement took the heroic dimension of a sacrifice which permitted (or facilitated) the end of communist dictatorship in the West. Maybe this idea is still in the minds of some former participants of the movement. Unfortunately, this idea is not conform to the historical fact that quite a few years before 1989, Gorbachev had already notified the East European leaders that they had to solve their problems by themselves and that the Soviet Army would not come to their rescue in case of a rebellion in their country.

Then, the sad reality is that history had taken a completely different direction in China and in the West (or to be more precise, in “the East of the West”). The June 4 violence had not only cut the Chinese people from their optimistic period of the 1980s, but also from the rest of the world. And although there was great sympathy in the West for the Chinese democrats who had been massacred under the eyes of the world, the meaning of that massacre was largely eclipsed by the events in Europe and in Russia. It had become an event which people remembered or had heard about, but deprived of signification because its meaning could not be integrated into the new worldview of Western intellectuals and ordinary people. In China itself, its fate was about to become even more tragic, because of the CCP’s efforts to transform it into a non-event.

3) From Tragic Event to Tragic Non-Event

In the few months following the massacre, the authorities tried to minimize it and to justify it in putting the blame on the students who were supposedly duped by some “black hands” supported by hostile foreign forces. They published not only newspaper articles but also books giving the official version. In September, they even held an exhibition in the Military Museum presenting “proofs” of the counter-revolutionary rebellion and the admirable actions of the soldiers. Even a film showing the famous

scene of the “tankman” was shown in the exhibition as proof of the restraint shown by the soldiers. Texts written by astrophysicist Fang Lizhi, one of the so-called “black hands”, were also displayed to show how he had poisoned the minds of young people. But of course, these actions, like the use of “Reverse teaching materials” (反面教材) during the Cultural Revolution, could have the opposite effect of the intended one, by diffusing ideas which were not necessarily understood with the correct ideology by the public. Using Marxist or Hegelian dialectics, they could be tempted to use the “negation of the negation” and get a positive image of erroneous ideas. This is why Deng Xiaoping was very soon convinced that silence and amnesia were a better way of dealing with the events on the long run.

In my speech at a similar conference we had in Hong Kong ten years ago for the twentieth anniversary of the Tiananmen events, I already said, concerning the “treatment” of the events by the regime: “The main method employed is quite simply total concealment (...) Ideally, these events would be made to disappear from social memory altogether, and be transformed into non-events for all the generations who did not actually witness them directly”. This method has been pursued very thoroughly since then and even the huge development of social media, which could have helped maintain memory, has been countered by a very strict and quick censorship, with all kinds of terms related to 6.4 being prohibited and blocked. Even “May 35” became taboo and the candle emoticon disappears each year from the social media a few days before and after June 4. Of course, this erasing of social memory is facilitated by the fact that those who have not witnessed this period have become more numerous ten years later and will become more and more numerous with time passing.

There are many proofs of the success of the policy of amnesia, among the younger generations at least. Rowena He and Louisa Lim have written books and articles dealing with this question, and my own experience of teaching in Hong Kong with a large majority of students coming from the Mainland confirms this. But, amnesia cannot be absolute, of course. Some parents have told their children about what happened, students who have gone to universities abroad have also generally heard about June 4. But, they might be convinced by the official justification reserved to those who have heard about it: it was necessary to quell this rebellion to save China from a foreign plot, to protect stability and, thanks to that stability, China has been able to obtain a great success in its economic development. On the contrary, with the disappearance of the

USSR, the Russian people have not been able to make real progress and have lost part of their territory. Then, for the good of the country, it was necessary to sacrifice some people. This idea is not limited to June 4. Many unjust actions or policies of the regime are justified by the superior interest of the country. I have met this conception also concerning the educated youth sent to the countryside. But, my experience is that this justification is only efficient when people have a limited and abstract knowledge of historical realities. When they are confronted to the concrete details of the event or policy through words or images, they get a better understanding of the whole situation and feel a natural empathy with the victims. This is why it is so important for the regime that the people remain ignorant or only get an abstract and caricatured knowledge of history. Young people who suddenly learn about this dark page of recent history that had been totally concealed to them will often feel shocked and even insulted, because it is not normal that they should be ignorant of such a public and important event of the recent past of their country. Indeed, this rather successful fabrication of nationwide amnesia has a tragic aspect. It has long-term effects, which cast a shadow over the future of China.

4) The long-term effects of the fabrication of amnesia

1984 as a response to 1989

The CCP regime, as other communist regimes, has always dedicated a lot of energy to control all information circulating in the country. But, to make an event like the 1989 pro-democracy movement and its tragic conclusion disappear totally from collective memory, the effort had to be especially strong and systematic, and with the rapid development of Internet and of the new communication technologies, it had to be based on the most advanced technology. This is why the answer to the specter of 1989 had to be “1984”. The overarching surveillance system installed by Big Brother in George Orwell’s novel seems less and less dystopian and more and more realistic in today’s China. And even if this tendency has clearly been strengthened since Xi Jinping’s accession to top power, it was already very clear in the 1990s and the 2000s. One of Deng’s main mottos, “Stability prevails on everything” (稳定压倒一切) implies such a system. But even if this system is sufficient to guarantee stability for some time, it is not enough to fully control the minds of the people. This is why the other great dystopian

opus of the 20th century, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, has also been put to contribution. It is not enough to prevent people from knowing the truth about history and to fill their brains with slogans, it is also necessary to "amuse" and distract them, to give them opportunities for pleasure and satisfaction and to fill their spare time with "harmless" activities. The extraordinary development of consumerism in China, which began after Deng's Southern Tour in 1992 and was prolonged until now has been very effective in this respect.

The mix of the two methods of control of the population (the negative and the positive, or let's say the "stick and the carrot") has been hitherto successful. But it is dependent upon a continued economic growth. The protection of stability (维稳), including the political police, the army of censors in all kinds of media as well as the numerous surveillance devices and the people who collect and study their data, all this is costly. It seems that it is now more costly for the government than the army, in spite of the constant growth of the Defense budget. As for the satisfactions brought by consumerism, they are also clearly dependent on a growing economy. And, if the exhilarating effect of economic growth and consumerism is no longer there, it is not certain that the authorities will be able to put a slight dose of ecstasy in the drinking water tanks as imagined by Chan Koonchung, the writer of a recent utopian/dystopian novel, *The Fat Years*, dealing at the same time with the feelings of satisfaction in the Chinese population and its capacity for amnesia (he imagines that a whole month has been lost in China, that there is no trace of it in records as in the people's memory).

In case of an economic slump, the regime would have to find new methods to guarantee its "stability". It is hard to predict the future, but in difficult internal situations, an efficient "distractive method" for governments can be the heightening of tensions with foreign "enemies", especially when the main ideological pillar of the regime is nationalism.

Confronted to the successful refusal of the regime to acknowledge what happened in the Spring of 1989, as well as to its more and more ambiguous attitude towards hitherto acknowledged historical black spots like the Cultural Revolution, we are led to raise a fundamental question:

Can the regime refuse indefinitely to face its own history and prevent its people from knowing it?

There is in China a long tradition of insisting on the necessity to draw lessons from history. Wang Fuzhi, for example, said in the 17th century in his “Reading of the *Zizhi Tongjian*”: “What is precious in history is that by exposing the past, it is a master of the future”. Even the CCP, when it is in its interest, will remind the Japanese government that “a nation which does not dare to look at its past has no future”. And still, its capacity to deny history and to make events “evaporate” has rarely been matched in world history.

Before Mao took power in China, he had already learned a lot from Stalin in the art of rewriting history for his personal political interest (see my brief presentation of the 1945 “Resolution concerning several historical questions” in *China Perspectives*, 2007-4, p. 52-53). When Deng Xiaoping took the helm at the end of 1978, his objective was to unite the Party and launch it on the road of the Four Modernizations. For this, he needed to solve a huge pile of unjust decisions which had affected people during the Cultural Revolution and other movements of the Maoist period, but since inside the Party and inside the population, former victims and former perpetrators were mixed, he promulgated, during the preparation of the “Resolution on several questions concerning the history of our Party since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China”, a purely utilitarian attitude towards history: “Better remain in the generalities and not enter into the details” (宜粗不宜细), so as to obtain a situation in which “all people are united to face the future” (团结一致向前看). He insisted that this was valid not only for one event, but for history in general. And indeed, although the 1981 Resolution admitted that Mao had made an “error” in launching the Cultural Revolution (reserving the “crimes” to the Gang of Four), it has been very difficult afterwards to do detailed research on “sensitive” topics like the Anti-Rightist Movement, the Great Famine or the Cultural Revolution. It was clearly “inconvenient” (不宜) to risk damaging the Party’s legitimacy through that of Mao. But, clearly the 1989 Pro-Democracy Movement and its repression have posed an even greater problem to the authorities and the only “convenient” treatment was evaporation through amnesia.

It is certainly not sound for a people to be deeply ignorant of its own past and it is certainly a receipt for the repetition of previous errors. Even in open societies with a large degree of freedom of expression, a special effort must be done by the State, by teachers, intellectuals and all people concerned to make sure that the young generations understand the facts of the past and the causes of many historical dramas, so that they

are not tempted by dangerous ideologies and ready to act irresponsibly. But, having said that, we have also to acknowledge the fact that some leaders might not be against the repetition of former errors, if they are a necessity for the preservation of their own power and if those who must pay for the damage are the people and not themselves.

To get back to the question of what could be done to get out of the vicious circle of a constant need for repression because of the desire to conceal the memory of a prior repression, I would like to evoke a debate which I presented in my intervention ten years ago: the debate about the question of the possible reconciliation between the Party and the Chinese people concerning the June 4 massacre. In 2007, a Chinese reconciliation think-tank had been created on the model of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Famous dissidents like Liu Xiaobo, Chen Ziming and Zhou Duo were part of the project. Dai Qing had published on this topic an article in the magazine *Yazhou Zhoukan* which caused some sensation in March 2009. But even then, Wang Dan had observed that the Party showed no sign of intending to go into that direction.

Ten years later, such a reconciliation project seems indeed unthinkable. With the evolution of the Party during those last years, with the death in detention of Liu Xiaobo, with the ever stricter official control on history, the gap between power and society is so large that it seems impossible to imagine any kind of reconciliation. Reconciliation needs discussion and you cannot discuss with Big Brother. You can only obey or resist. Resistance, of course, is extremely difficult. But one must believe in history. It has already shown that Fukuyama was wrong when he wrote that 1989 was the end of it... The struggle goes on.