Surviving 1989

In the spring of 1989, millions of people filled the streets all over China demanding political reforms. The nationwide movement, highlighted by the university students’ hunger strike in Tiananmen Square in the center of Beijing, ended with the People’s Liberation Army opening fire on its own people before the gaze of the entire world. On the night of June 3, amid the approaching gunshots, the unarmed students in Tiananmen Square gathered near the Monument to the People’s Heroes and took their oath hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder:

For the sake of advancing the democratization of our motherland, for the true prosperity of our nation, for our great motherland I pledge to use my own youthful life to protect Tiananmen and to defend the Republic…. Heads may be cut off and blood may flow, but the people’s Square cannot be lost. We are willing to use our youthful lives to fight down to the last person.

Even today the number of deaths and injuries on that fateful night remains unknown. More than 200,000 soldiers participated in the lethal action. Historian Timothy Brook argues that the military crackdown is a “massacre,” noting that “using combat weapons against unarmed citizens was a moral failure.” Intellectuals and student leaders were subsequently purged, imprisoned, or exiled. Scores of workers and other citizens simply disappeared. Many others have been struggling with an open wound ever since.

June 4: The Wound of History

Liane

Child, we need you to return to Hong Kong safely. We need you to leave alive to tell the world what our government did to us tonight.
“The boy’s body was all mixed up with blood and flesh. He wasn’t moving.” When Liane described to me the scene of the Tiananmen military crackdown, she had to struggle to steady her emotions:

A younger boy was shouting hysterically, “I will avenge my brother! I will avenge my brother!” I tried with all my strength to hold him back when he dashed toward the soldiers. He started to cry on my shoulder. He was just a kid, but he cried like an old man in despair. Shortly afterward, he tore himself loose from my arms and ran after an ambulance shouting “Brother! Brother!” Half an hour later, his body was carried right in front of me, covered in blood. I fainted.

When the 1989 Tiananmen Movement erupted, Liane was an undergraduate journalism student in Hong Kong. She and other members of the Hong Kong Federation of Students went to Beijing to support their fellow students’ struggles for a better China. She was outside the Museum of the Chinese Revolution in Beijing on the night of June 3, 1989:

When I regained consciousness, people tried to put me into an ambulance. I told them that I did not need an ambulance. The wounded needed the ambulance more than I did. A second ambulance came, and again I struggled not to get in. A middle-aged female doctor held my hands and spoke to me in English: Child, we need you to return to Hong Kong. We need you to leave alive to tell the world what our government did to us tonight.

The fear that all the blood would be shed in vain was expressed again and again. One Chinese man asked a Canadian reporter on the street: “Does the world know what happened here?”

In 2008, Liane and I both attended a candlelight vigil held at the University of Toronto to commemorate the nineteenth anniversary of the Tiananmen Massacre. “Mommy, where are the brothers and sisters?” Liane’s little daughter asked, jumping up and down energetically. “Where are the brothers and sisters?” Liane must have told her child that they had come for the sake of some “brothers and sisters.”

When Liane went over to lay a candle and a flower in front of the memorial plaque, her little girl turned to me and asked: “Where are the brothers and sisters? Mummy didn’t tell me. Do you know?” I knelt next to her, put aside the white chrysanthemum, and held her little hands, unable to say a single word. I wish I could have been as eloquent as the female doctor who held her mother’s hands in 1989. But nineteen years later, we had no knowledge about what happened to those two boys—we didn’t even know who they were, or if they had survived.

There is a magazine photograph, published in 1997, of Liane standing in front of a large group of Chinese students welcoming President Jiang Zemin to