



Living with the shame

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An officer's memories of martial law in 1989

Thirteen years ago, **LI XIAOMING** was an officer in the 116th Division of the People's Liberation Army's 39th Group Army, and was among those sent into Beijing to end the months of popular demonstrations there. He is the first soldier who participated in the suppression of the 1989 movement who has come forward to share his personal experiences, to condemn the June Fourth massacre and to express his regrets. **WANG YU** spoke to him while he was visiting New York from his current home in Australia.

Wang Yu: First of all I would like you to give a brief introduction about yourself.

Li Xiaoming: I was born on January 25th, 1964. After graduation from high school in 1983, I went to a military school called Shijiazhuang College of Armaments and Engineering. I studied there for four years, specializing in radar. After gaining my bachelor's degree, I joined the army. There were very few people who held a similar academic background to mine in the army. We were jokingly called "student officers." In 1993, I left the army and transferred to civilian work. In the same year, on May 20th, I got married. My wife was an editor at the Nationalities Publishing House. Now I am studying for my master's degree at Melbourne Royal College of Science and Engineering in Australia. My wife and son are with me there.

Wang: Would you tell us more about your position and duties in the army in 1989?

Li: At that time I was the head of the Radar Station in the anti-aircraft regiment of the 116th Division, the 39th Army. Under me were three soldiers. I was in charge of managing and maintaining the facilities as well as training operators. In case of war, our mission was to conduct reconnaissance, to locate the position of the enemy and to give orders to the anti-aircraft guns to fire at the targets. I never dreamed that we, the People's Army, would one day be in a war with our own people.

Wang: Would you please tell us what orders your division got and how you went to Beijing?

Li: Our division was stationed in Haicheng County, Liaoning Province. At 10 o'clock in the morning of May 20th, a mobilization meeting was called where the message of our superior commander was read aloud to us. The thrust of the message was that we would be sent into Shenyang to maintain law and order because university students in many big cities throughout China were on strike, demonstrating and marching in the streets. We were issued with submachine guns and the officers were given pistols. At 2 o'clock in the afternoon, we got on military vehicles and headed towards Shenyang. As we approached Shenyang, we received new orders to go to Beidaihe instead. But when we were near Shanhaiguan (the entrance to Beidaihe) we were ordered to change direction again and go to Beijing. After two days and one night of travel, we arrived at the Sanjianfang Military Airport in Tongxian, a Beijing suburb. There we were stationed and with guards posted at all the entrances. We were forbidden to go out. The only news from outside came to us from the military newspaper, Liberation Army Daily. At that time, we were told that our mission was to maintain law and order in the diplomatic quarter of Beijing. We were told not to fire our guns at anyone. Indeed it was stressed that anyone who pulled the trigger first would be held responsible in history.

Wang: So when did your troop enter Beijing? And did you receive any specific instructions before departure?

Li: We entered Beijing on June 4th as we had been ordered. In the afternoon of June 3rd, we received an order to move into Beijing. This time we were told to enforce martial law by any means, no matter what the consequences. We were ordered to reach Tiananmen Square by June 4th. The commanders did not repeat the familiar mantra, "We are the people's own army, we will never fire on the people." We all felt that it was tense and the situation was critical.

Our march was slow because people put up barriers and obstructions on the road. Then we retreated; people burst into applause. Actually we just changed direction to take another route as planned.

Our division commander, Xu Feng, with some staff officers, put on civilian clothes and went out to scout the situation. At the same time, news spread among us that some other troops had already opened fire and killed people. Our division commander might have seen and heard more, for once he got back he walked straight into the radio communication car and told us he was unable to get through or receive any orders. Our battalion commander was a rather simple-minded person. He said: "How could that be? In our battalion the signalman received a message from the military commission: 'Where are you 116th Division? Please respond!'"

At the same time, there were no more people left to block our march on the streets. Our troops could now easily move into Beijing, but we continued to go round and round outside the city. In the course of all this, bullets were distributed to us and we saw tanks moving into the city at full tilt.

Around the midnight of June 3rd, I was awakened by the sound of motor engines. I saw an armored car with someone firing toward the sky from it. This vehicle cleared the way by pushing away the buses set up as roadblocks, and rushed into the city. It would have been an ideal time for our troops to follow the vehicle into the city, but we didn't; we continued to go round and round outside the city.

On the evening of June 4th, we set up camp in a rice field to rest. In the far distance, flames from a steel factory lit up the sky, red as if it was on fire. As I watched, I was thinking about the gas chambers of the Second World War. I dared not think that an army, which for years called itself the People's Own Army, had already begun killing the people. I congratulated myself on having a kind-hearted division commander who skillfully avoided following orders.

However, at 6 o'clock in the morning of June 5th, the director of operations of the 38th Group Army came to our regiment. He was standing up on a military vehicle with two soldiers manning a machine gun mounted on the front. Blazing the trail, he led us into the city as if we were being sent under escort.

Wang: While entering Beijing did you encounter any resistance and what did you see?

Li: No resistance, there were no people on the street to block our march. But we saw many burned military vehicles, civilian cars, buses and barricades. We hardly saw anyone in the streets, but heard occasional shouts from the buildings: “Fascists! Killers!” In response, some soldiers opened fire at the buildings.

When we arrived at Tiananmen Square, we were stationed in front of the Military Museum. I went out with a platoon leader of the 6th Company to look around. We saw a lot of garbage scattered around the Monument to the People’s Heroes. On the north side of the Monument, the marble steps and posts had been crushed by tanks. And the tracks of the tanks on the marble ground were clearly discernible. Amidst the garbage we found a pair of trousers and a cotton-padded jacket stained with blood. We wondered about the fate of the owners—were they dead or injured? The soldiers of our division who had been sent to clean up Tiananmen Square told us that they had also seen a lot of blood under the garbage.

Wang: You just said that your division moved into Tiananmen Square after massacre, in the morning of June 5th. On your way to Beijing, did your soldiers harm any students or residents?

Li: As I mentioned before, when we entered Beijing some of our troops fired at the buildings where people were shouting at us. When guns are fired it is inevitable that people get killed or injured. But there is no way to know how many people were injured or killed by our troops.

At about 10 o’clock in the morning of June 5th, when the 1st Company of our regiment went to reinforce the 6th Company, which was stranded at the site of Xinhua News Agency, they fired all the way in and out in order to rescue the soldiers who had been surrounded. One soldier told me he had fired a whole clip of bullets (about 20) at the people in the street. Therefore, there had to be some casualties.

On June 7th, when we left the Square returning to our station, armored vehicles mounted with machine guns marched at the head of our columns. As we passed a hotel for foreign visitors, we heard gunfire coming from it. Every one of our columns pointed their guns at the hotel and rained a hailstorm of bullets toward it. Behind the hotel was the diplomatic residential area. I had no idea about any casualties, but I learned next day that many of the diplomats had left for their own countries.

Wang: On June 3rd, when your troops were ordered to move into Beijing, did you receive any specific orders to open fire on the students and people?

Li: Personally I did not see or hear any such order. But since we were told to enforce the martial law no matter what the consequences, and judging by the fact that armed troops of all kinds were ordered to march in, it was obvious that troops were allowed to open fire in order to suppress the student movement. To open fire on the students was inevitable. Everyone in the army knew this.

After June 4th, the government gave promotions and awards to some of the soldiers and officers who had participated in the suppression. This clearly indicated not only that the government had authorized the opening of fire, but also that the leaders still thought it was proper and correct to do so. The only thing they cared about was keeping their power and control, no matter the casualties and costs.

One month later, on July 4th, the government issued a very specific order to us: in order to help the police arrest a rioter (baotu) or wanted criminal, it is permitted to fire into the air if a group of people is at a distance of 100 meters; to fire at the ground if they are at a distance of 50 meters; to fire directly at them if they are closer.

Wang: In the course of this military operation, were any soldiers or officers in your division killed or injured?

Li: Yes, I know of three. On our way from Shanhaiguan to Beijing, one soldier who was sent out to buy soda for his company commander was accidentally run over by our own military vehicle. The second, Cui Guozheng, was a cook in the 348th Regiment of the 116th Division. He may have been killed because he did not stay close enough with the other troops. The third death occurred on June 7th, during the withdrawal from Beijing. We were stationed in an elementary school of Chaoyang District. One soldier accidentally killed another while he was cleaning his gun. To cover up the accident, it was reported to the superior that he was killed by a sniper. Cui Guozheng, the cook, was named “Guardian of the Republic.” And the other two were honored as “Martyrs.”

Wang: Could you please tell us what the officers and soldiers of your division thought about all this then and how they see it now?

Li: At that time, many soldiers and officers were very sympathetic to the students. They did not agree with the government policy of firing at the people and using force to suppress the student movement. The commander of the 6th Company in our division, like me, was a graduate of military school, and was nicknamed “Dr. Cui.” He openly criticized the government, and then deserted the army in mid-June. He was dismissed and sent home. Our division commander, Xu Feng, who tactfully avoided taking action to enforce martial law, was later discharged involuntarily to a civilian job. Our army commander, Fu Binyao, was transferred to the Xinjiang Military District because he did not execute the martial law orders forcefully enough. This was actually a demotion. There was a rumor that the commander of the 38th Army was convicted in a military court because he had refused to enforce martial law. I was also very angry with the government because it resorted to such bloody and brutal measures to maintain itself in power. Though I didn’t shoot one bullet, when I saw the bloodstains in Tiananmen Square, I always thought about those brave students and innocent people who sacrificed their lives for democracy and freedom of our country. It made me feel ashamed and guilty.

I remember on June 8th, I and another soldier went to the post office by bus in order to send home telegrams. On the bus, all the passengers looked at us with cold and hate-filled eyes. In the post office, the people working there looked at us as if they despised us. They told us the machine was out of order and refused to send telegrams for us. I felt remorseful and ashamed. At that moment I realized that in the eyes of the people we were murderers and butchers. I felt ashamed to be associated with the army. It has been 12 years since the event; I still cannot heal the wounds in my heart. I constantly feel the pain.

Wang: It is now 2002, 13 years after June Fourth, what prompted you to speak now? Why the long delay?

Li: The slogan of the Movement was “against corruption and degeneration.” At that time I did not realize its importance. During the ensuing years, in the name of economic reform, taking bribes and bending the law became commonplace in our whole society. It was obvious that political corruption was leading our country towards destruction. Therefore I became aware of the significance of the 1989 Movement. This realization made me think that I should speak out about my personal experiences as a soldier who took part in the suppression of the Movement.

I didn’t speak out sooner, because I dared not, and I have my family to take into consideration. Now I am living in Australia, a democratic country, and my wife and son have arrived and we have lived there since 2001.

Wang: How does your wife feel about your coming forward to talk about the event?

Li: Even though she is in Australia now, she is still afraid about what I am doing. She is also afraid that I may cause trouble to other people who are in China by doing so. Her worries are not groundless.

Wang: Why did you leave China? How is your life in Australia?

Li: I left China because I saw no hope in my surroundings: dictatorship, political corruption, economic chaos and many unlawful activities in the bureaucracy. This entire situation has destroyed the quality of human life there. Living in that environment makes you feel hopeless and powerless. There was nothing I could do to make a change. The worst was that I saw no future for my son. So I decided to leave for a foreign country.

As soon as China began opening up to the outside world, all the high-ranking officials sent their children to live abroad, especially to Western countries. They are against democracy in China, but they want their children to enjoy democracy in the rich foreign countries. Why don’t they send their children to North Korea? What hypocrites they are! They want neither democracy nor human rights for China, because they believe that they can only maintain their profits through dictatorship.

We live a happy and peaceful life in Australia. I work hard and study hard as well.

Wang: How do you feel about China now?

Li: I think the situation is very bad. Many workers are out of work; in the remote countryside there are people starving; many sick people get no medical treatment; many children don't have a proper education. Where does the money go? It goes into the hands of corrupt officials!

Wang: Do you think there is a way to change the situation in China?

Li: Yes, establishing a democratic system will change the situation. I have often thought that we should move Mao out of his Mausoleum and change it into a Museum of Historical Misery, featuring the Campaign Against the Three Antis, the Campaign Against the Five Antis [in the 1950s], the Cultural Revolution and the June Fourth Massacre. All these were disastrous for China. If we can learn lessons from the past, we will be able to avoid making the same mistakes, and then we can build a good future.

Wang: What have been your impressions in New York?

Li: I feel very moved to meet so many people whose courage I have admired. Some of them are students who were active in the 1989 Movement. Some of them are democracy movement activists. When I attended the 13th anniversary of the 1989 Movement in Boston with Wang Dan and the others, I felt an upsurge of emotion, shame mixed with happiness.

I very much admire the people of Hong Kong. They were very involved in the 1989 Movement and gave a lot of support at the time. Since 1989, every year thousands of them come out to commemorate this event.

For those great mothers like Ding Zilin words fail me. Nothing can make up for their loss, but grief has not defeated them. Instead they come out bravely to prevent the same tragedy happening to others in the future.

WANG YU *is a poet and a member of Human Rights in China's board of directors.*



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