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Remembering Tiananmen

In 1989, Peter Ellingsen was The Age's China correspondent and an eyewitness to the deadly events in Tiananmen Square, a terrible slaughter he believes we should never forget.

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Twenty-five years ago I watched a modern army systematically murder thousands of its own citizens. It was a crime on a scale that *Underbelly* can only imagine. ''Crims'', after all, don't have access to machine guns and if they tried to drive a tank down the main street, they would be stopped. But on the night of June 3, 1989, scores of Type 59 tanks rolled through the centre of Beijing crushing residents as they went. People standing on street corners were torn apart by tracer bullets, run over or clubbed to death. It was a slow, deadly procession that began about 10pm and finished at dawn.

The bodies fell in laneways and houses, beside shops and offices, and finally, in a huge ceremonial space six times the size of the MCG. This was Tiananmen Square and it soaked up most of the blood. Standing on the apron of the square, beside the vermillion walls of the Forbidden City, and later next to the Great Hall of the People, I watched it unfold. It was life and death in three-quarter time. The military precision of troops as they encircled student protesters seemed choreographed in the humid air. I was mesmerised and bewildered: would the People's Liberation Army protect the people, or would it slaughter them in front of Western media and mortified onlookers?

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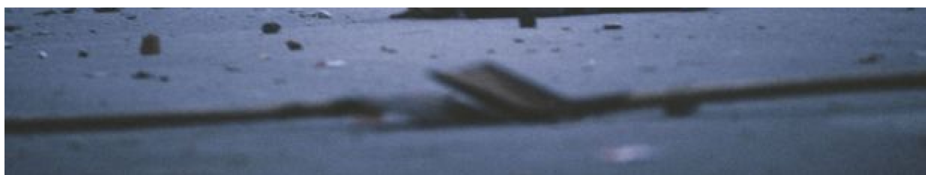

A fallen protester on June 3, 1989.

It is a long time ago, but in another way, it is ever present. Such was the scale and brutality of the crime we keep coming back to it. At least, those of us with a memory do. For most of China, the massacre never happened. The government denies it occurred, and those with knowledge of the event remain silent on threat of jail and torture. Just as there is a new golden railing keeping visitors out of the square these days, there are fine filters to prevent Chinese residents from searching June 4, 1989, online. Input ''1989'' into China's Wikipedia and you get two responses - one naming a computer virus and the other identifying it as the number between 1988 and 1990.

This is forced forgetting on a massive scale, and applies not only in China, where information is censored, but also the West, where, soon after the massacre, it was business as usual for governments and entrepreneurs. The outcome was predicted by the architect of the onslaught, China's then paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping. He told nervous comrades immediately after the event: ''The West has a short memory.''

He was only partly right. While former prime minister Gough Whitlam, dispatched to China in the wake of the massacre, failed to condemn the murders, the event has not been completely erased. It has been kept alive, publicly at least, in literature and art; locally through poems such as Fay Zwicky's *Tiananmen Square June 4, 1989*, Daryl Braithwaite's album *Rise*, and novelist Gail Jones' *Touching Tiananmen*.

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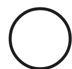
Crowds of students surge through a police cordon before pouring into Tiananmen Square during a pro-democracy demonstration on June 4, 1989. Photo: Reuters

These works create a space for acknowledging unmourned losses. They sidestep the distraction that forgets - a place where, as Nicholas Jose, Australia's cultural attache in China in 1989 observes: ''everything is believed and disbelieved with equal half-heartedness''. A quarter of a century on, I want neither to believe nor disbelieve.

I want to go on inquiring. Having realised that what is stored in memory roars inside us, it seems folly to do otherwise. In 1989 I was a journalist and thought I could hold it all in a notebook; now I am a psychoanalyst, and suspect that memory is full of holes. In order not to deceive ourselves, we must keep remembering. This is Aletheia, or

the giving up forgetting, the price the ancient Greeks paid for entering the next life.



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My remembering begins in 1988 when Beijing, in the midst of political and economic reform, seemed to halt its pointless destruction of the ancient city - the vandalism being a metaphor for the mechanisms of repression - to flirt with change. There was a sense of expectation. A week after arriving, I found myself sitting on the floor of a tiny dormitory talking politics with students. Much drinking and hand-shaking took place, making it easy to forget that China had been through upbeat cycles before.

The iconic image from the massacre. Photo: Arthur Tsang

As the summer of 1988 turned into the winter of 1989, intellectuals emboldened by the moderation of party boss Zhao Ziyang began to agitate for the release of those jailed during the last outbreak of hope - the Democracy Wall protests of 1979. This set the scene for a new protest, one that only needed a spark to ignite. It came in April when former party chief Hu Yaobang, pushed aside by party hardliners, and seen by students as sympathetic to their plight, died. This prompted protests the like of which China had never seen. Students from Beijing's universities left their classes and began to march. Each day I drove out of the city to the campuses on the fringe to look for the character posters urging change. They spoke of political reform, a dangerous idea then, as now. It was a celebration, as if someone had pulled the cork out of a bottle.

Students held cameras to their eyes as they surged forward, as if they needed proof of what they were doing; residents cheered and waved flags. Then on April 26, the party's mouthpiece, *The People's Daily*, stopped calling the marches patriotic and branded them turmoil.

The students' response was a placard, ''Pleading on behalf of the people is absolutely not turmoil''. They then began a hunger strike. A week later, the party imposed martial law and students and residents commandeered 270 buses as barricades to keep the army out.

Garbage piled up and traffic, mostly bicycles and carts, ground to a halt.

The bodies of dead civilians lie among mangled bicycles near Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. Photo: AP

While helicopters dropped party leaflets claiming the army was being called in to protect, not harm demonstrators, students leapt on convoys of more than 100 trucks, persuading the young soldiers to return to their barracks. Many soldiers looked even younger than the students. Their olive uniforms hung loosely and they needed straps to hold their caps in place. They cradled AK47s and showed their teeth - in the half-light, it wasn't clear whether they were snarling or smiling. They seemed bewildered, and so did their commanders, who, on several occasions, refused to order an attack.

The marches stopped the city and its buses and taxis, but the students kept moving, often dragging their bicycles along with them under their banners. With hair long and limp in the heat, they wore tinted glasses and sang their own anthem, *Nothing to My Name*, by Cui Jian, a young Dylan imitator. ''I want to give you yearnings, and there too is my freedom, but you always laugh at me, for I have nothing to my name.'' The anthem fed into the Chinese cult of the hero. It gave the young who lived in squalid dormitories and washed in cold water a romantic sense of destiny.

THE AGE

in Beijing massacre

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How *The Age* reported the massacre.

At Beijing University, where it began, posters compared Deng Xiaoping to the hated Dowager Empress and detailed the nepotism at the top of government. With upheavals occurring in other cities, banners proclaimed ''Dare to die'' and ''We will not give in''. I heard Chai Ling, the only woman among the student leaders, tell students in Tiananmen Square that she was prepared to die.

The bubble burst around 10 pm on June 3. At the apex of the square, I heard faint rumblings and dull retorts, like a car backfiring. I ran west along the Avenue of Eternal Peace. Old men, women, students and children were shoring up barricades.

The grinding I could hear behind the flashes of tracer fire was from tanks. Even with the dim street

Reporter Peter Ellingsen in China in 1989.

lighting, I could see them, maybe 10 abreast, trailing exhaust streams. On top, soldiers in full battle gear fired into the shadows. The noise was deafening. I heard the thud of people being hit before I saw them fall. One youth was squashed into the bitumen; his organs fanned out around him. The mess of his body was dwarfed by the bulk of the tanks, each with two guns swivelling beneath a red star.

People rubbed their eyes and held cotton masks to their faces. They recoiled and then regrouped. And then, the crashing sound of an armoured personnel carrier separated from the main force. It careered over road dividers with its tractor wheels tangled in concrete and metal.

A young man lobbed a burning petrol bottle, which forced open the carrier's metal canopy. A young soldier leapt out, only to be set upon by the crowd. When a student wearing a democracy headband tried to shield the soldier he was shoved aside. Two more soldiers emerged and were beaten to death.

I turned and ran back to the top of Tiananmen Square, where troops and tanks were beginning to encircle remaining protesters. Students had been here seven weeks, and erected tents, stalls and loudspeakers. There was a young girl with a long plait waving her arms and talking loudly. I couldn't make out what she was saying, but I saw her shudder and then her limbs fly out from her body. Her classmates, their hair lifted by a light breeze, grabbed her and stumbled towards a Red Cross tent. She was laid in a line of bodies. Through it all, loudspeakers repeating the martial law declaration competed with the sobs and screams of those trapped in the square.

By 2am, hundreds were dead. The troops and tanks had massed on the northern apron of the square and prepared to roll over the tent city of 3000 unarmed student protesters and half a dozen hunger strikers. The soldiers kept firing, hitting those standing even well away from the square. I heard student leaders urging their followers to flee. Many walked out singing the national anthem; others were killed.

The students had been waiting for this: So had the foreign journalists. But while it was a grand finale bestowing a kind of grotesque recognition for the students, it was something else for us. We were not participants, but to cover the story we had all become players. At dawn, as I sat staring at the grey telex machine that would transmit my story, I wondered how I was going to write about what had happened.

The party had its story ready. It was the big lie. Within days, the television was full of manicured images that told of a riot fermented by foreign insurgents, not local dissatisfaction. It was elaborate and repetitive, and perhaps for that reason it lacked what lies are

supposed to have, the almost-ness that sharpens the outlines of truth.

I returned to Australia for a break and wandered into *The Sydney Morning Herald*. A senior journalist (he went on to his own war correspondent myth-making) stood close to me, straining to see signs of conversion, as if the events I had covered had covered me. I had no scar. There was no epiphany. I had nothing to offer him.

My account aspired to be eyewitness history but as time went on, it became clearer to me that journalism could not explain it all. Even the best words, like the best intentions, bend and break. I now know that the past does not die with a deadline. We need to go on asking questions.

In this I disagree with Robert Thomson, whom I replaced as China correspondent in 1988. Thomson - now chief executive of News Corp and probably the most powerful journalist in the world - advised against too much remembering.

''If you are haunted by history you will be history. That is one of contemporary life's certainties,'' he told students at RMIT in 2011. Unlike Thomson, I think the past can only become history by an act of recollection, not forgetting. That makes it past; otherwise, as the saying goes, what you don't remember you repeat.

I am not a China specialist or a China historian. I am only a fledgling historian of my own life. That is where my memory of the event resides. It has the opacity that marks any historical record but precisely because of that, it permits a mental re-enactment. This is the past I draw on - and which, in a sense, draws on me. When I got back to Australia, there were those who wanted a piece of the event, digested and delivered in person. It reminded me of the fairy stories we tell children. Beijing on June 3 and 4 1989, had it all - life and death, good and evil, a morality tale for our time. And, like a fairytale, we need to keep telling and rediscovering it over and over and over again.

Dr Peter Ellingsen is a Melbourne psychoanalyst. He was *The Age*'s China correspondent from 1988-1991.

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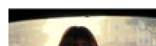
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