

Memoir:

China on my mind

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China shines. It radiates possibility. If it were a fashion it would be the new black. My problem is that I remember the old darkness. At least I think I do. Memory is an unreliable companion. All I really know is that until now I have avoided revisiting that night in Beijing nearly twenty years ago. Even though I lived in the city for three years and was married to a local Chinese woman, China has been a wasteland for me. Just before I left in 1991, I wrote that the place felt like a disease crawling across my skin. That was extreme. But then so was what I saw and what I have been unable to forget. These things, which are stored in memory, roar inside us. The night when the tanks rolled over the students in Tiananmen Square I was a journalist and I thought I could contain it all in a notebook; now I am a psychoanalyst, and I no longer know what name to put to what occurred. But I need to bear witness to it, partly because it was a crime and partly because my telling of it felt like betrayal.

That night was filled with terror, but none of the Olympic tourists who negotiated the guarded underpasses that block access to Tiananmen Square would have found it. Like the blood I saw soaking into the Avenue of Eternal Peace, it has been scrubbed away. China is particularly good at erasure. It has levelled the old Beijing, and with it, physical signs of the murder that took place there. I have done the same with my past – or tried to. Journalism taught me a formula for certainty, and for a long time I confused that with truth. Now all I have are stories, some of which may be true. It is only in the telling that I will know.

I am not sure what I expected of China when I first arrived in 1988 – a mixture of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and hip socialism, I suppose. After a while I got used to the scrutiny, although it never seemed normal, and I wondered how ordinary Chinese managed the lack of privacy that came from being spied upon by their neighbours. Once past the inhuman scale of the Stalinist edifices and the giant – and then largely empty – freeways, I observed a spirit of remarkable buoyancy. With a reform process in full swing, there was a sense of expectation. A week after arriving, I found myself sitting on the cluttered floor of a tiny dormitory talking pop music with students I'd met at a gallery opening. Much drinking and hand shaking took place, making it easy to forget that Beijing had been through upbeat cycles before.

As the summer of 1988 turned into the winter of 1989, rock'n'roll jostled with Tai Chi in Beijing's Ritan Park. It was one of a number of hopeful signs that offset the useless telexes I received each day from Xinhua, China's official news agency. Every morning, the news that China wanted me to convey was piled up against my office door in a grim high-rise apartment block near Tiananmen Square. In the tradition of the nineteenth century Board of Rites, set up by the emperor to manage barbarian affairs, it served to frustrate outsiders like me, forced to live in foreign ghettos guarded by the police, surveillance cameras and informers.

Outside the compounds, the narrow laneways where life was less monitored spawned tiny bars. They had names like JJs and were places where foreigners could mingle with the new generation. It was in these poorly lit alcoves and the homes of academics that 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. Wearing bohemian black and chain-smoking, some of China's best-educated framed a petition to seek the release of the dissidents. This set the scene for a new protest, one that only needed a spark to ignite it.

That spark came in April 1989, when former party chief Hu Yaobang died, some said of a heart broken by the party. Hu had been an icon for China's youth. They saw him as sympathetic to their dreams, and when he was pushed aside, dying in disgrace, it prompted protests the like of which China and the world had never seen. As the weather warmed, students from Beijing's universities left their classes and began to march. It was a euphoric time. 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 felt like a celebration, but one of great passion and naïve intensity. Inevitably, the marches headed for Tiananmen Square, where forty years earlier Mao Zedong had proclaimed the People's Republic. In those days, you could just walk into the vast expanse of the square. It was open. People played cards and flew kites. Now it can be reached only through corridors patrolled by armed police. Like many of the cutting-edge skyscrapers that have risen around it, Tiananmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace, is no longer peaceful, or even particularly open.

In 1989, before China became Australia's economic saviour and enough of the old city remained to imagine Beijing as sublime, I searched for the country's emerging identity, not in big buildings but on the faces of the young who had for the first time been able to read writers like Milan Kundera and Karl Popper. One girl stood out in the mass of marchers. She was a first-year history student from Beijing University. She was about eighteen, with a long plait down her back and a small, frail child's body. She shook as she walked arm in arm with her classmates singing the national anthem. They went through the campus gates into a waiting line of police. The girl had a telegram from her parents: 'Think of your family; don't march.' Her handwritten

reply was on the placard she carried: 'Mother, we are not wrong.' After pushing through the police cordon, the girl and the others made their long march into the city centre where they laid white paper flower mourning wreaths to Hu Yaobang, adorned with strips of paper bearing elegiac couplets.

At Tiananmen Square, a large oil portrait of Hu Yaobang was installed. Three days later, the history girl and three thousand classmates waited until after midnight to march again, this time squatting down in protest and shouting 'Long live freedom! Down with bureaucracy!' They carried a memorial banner, 'Soul of China'. People watched and clapped. The square filled and filled with yet more bodies. The crowd became a crush. The history girl's placard to her mother was torn. Her large framed glasses were twisted at an odd angle, giving her face a comical look. She was erect, but her feet no longer touched the ground – she was being held up by the force of the crowd. Other campuses joined in as the marches became a daily event, each time bigger than the last, until more than a million people were cascading down the wide streets, pushing past cordons of police, eight or nine deep. Some were workers in Mao suits; others were office staff in short-sleeved white shirts and dark slacks.

It felt like 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 on the footpaths cheered and waved flags of their own. Beneath the sacred monument to the heroes of the communist revolution, slogans appeared, 'Speak the truth', 'All freedom is vain without freedom of publication'. This was a reference to the party's takeover of China's most liberal newspaper, *The Shanghai World Economic Herald*. There were no direct attacks on the party at first, but the protest banners fluttered in front of China's symbols of power – the Great Hall of the People, the gates of the Forbidden City and the mausoleum of Mao.

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 for barricades to keep the army out. Garbage piled up on the streets as traffic ground to a halt and bins were emptied to bolster the barricades. Helicopters dropped party leaflets claiming that the army was being called in to protect people, not harm the demonstrators.

Ten days later, on a poorly-lit intersection twenty kilometres from the centre of the city, the history girl, still clutching her placard and now wearing a democracy slogan headband, leapt on to the running board of an army truck and urged soldiers to disobey their orders to disperse the students. 'The People's army will never harm the people,' she chanted and told the soldiers they should join the protest. That night, and for several more, convoys of more than a hundred trucks were stopped and troops were kept in their barracks by the demonstrators. Many soldiers looked even younger

than the students. Their olive uniforms hung loosely on their slim bodies 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. The students were buoyant, their faces flushed. Helicopter gun-ships with rockets protruding from their undercarriages buzzed overhead, but the students, still holding hands, felt that they were winning.

By the middle of May, with young people arriving by train from all over the country, the demonstrators massed in such numbers the party cancelled its ceremonial welcome for a visiting head of state. Instead of greeting Mikhail Gorbachev in the grandeur of the Great Hall, with its panoramic views of Tiananmen Square, party bosses assembled in the shabby surrounds of the old Beijing Airport. Shortly afterwards, a nineteen-year-old student hunger striker dressed in pyjamas told a politburo member that the party was corrupt. An old man I found skirting the square heard the exchange on his television. He had been through Japanese invasion, warlords and a revolution, and was wearing a blue Mao suit and sandals. He shook his head and quoted China's most famous twentieth century writer, Lu Xun: 'The rise and fall of the country is every person's responsibility.'

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,' they sang. Soldiers listened blank-faced and cross-legged in front of the Communist Party's headquarters. Their backs were straight as if they were meditating. The anthem fed into the Chinese cult of the hero. It gave young people who lived in squalid, overcrowded dormitories and washed in cold water a romantic sense of destiny. More than the Olympics, which showcase Western sport and are relatively new to China, the marches had a deep, cultural resonance. It meant that three hundred hunger strikers soon became three thousand, and all around them as they lay in front of the Great Hall of the People were pink pots of plastic flowers and dramatic paintings of tormented figures.

At Beijing University, where it began, posters compared Deng Xiaoping, the party's de facto leader, to the hated Dowager Empress and detailed the nepotism at the top of the government. With upheavals occurring in other cities, banners proclaimed 'Dare to die' and 'We will not give in'.

At the end of May, a ten metre-tall replica of the Statue of Liberty appeared in Tiananmen Square. Made of white plaster and holding a freedom torch aloft, the 'Goddess of Democracy' faced the portrait of Mao that stares out into the square. The Statue of Liberty clone was spotless, while the portrait was defaced. Someone had thrown paint over it. The party atmosphere was changing into something harder.

Some of 'The Flying Tigers', a band of motorcyclists that kept students informed about troop movements, were arrested. They had put troop numbers around the city at more than 150,000. I heard Chai Ling, the only woman among the student leaders, tell the fewer than five thousand students still left in the square that she was prepared to die. She was dressed in shorts and sneakers. Like many students in those first sticky days of summer, she was feeling the heat, and the call of China's ancient cult of the hero.

The night of June 3 was almost as hot as the day. At 10pm, I was sweating and threading my way through the tents, banners, food containers and people to the vermilion walls of the Forbidden City. 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. At the next corner, old men, women, students and children were shoring up a barricade of buses and rubbish bins – a futile attempt to keep the soldiers out of the city. But it wasn't just troops in trucks that were coming. The heavy grinding I could hear behind the flashes of tracer fire in the west of the city was from tanks. Even with the dim street lighting, I could see their unmistakable outline. They were maybe ten abreast as they churned along trailing exhaust streams of smoke and dust. On top of the tanks, soldiers in full battle gear fired into the shadows. The noise was deafening. I heard the flat thud of people being hit before I saw them fall. The tanks rolled over bodies in their way. One young man was squashed into the bitumen; his organs fanned out around his corpse. The mess of his body was dwarfed by the bulk of the tanks. Each tank had two huge guns that swivelled beneath a red star. Each tank had armed troops that marched beside it. I saw a boy of about eighteen fall to the ground with a hole in his forehead. In the darkness, no one could tell where the firing was coming from or where it was going.

People rubbed their eyes and held cotton masks to their faces. They recoiled and then regrouped. There was talk of killings further to the west, where the action began. Rumours that had been circulating about the use of rubber bullets were discarded. And then came the crashing sound of an armoured personnel carrier separated from the main force. It careered over road dividers with its tractor wheels tangled in webs of concrete and metal. There were shrieks and shouts. A young man lobbed a burning petrol bottle on top of the carrier. Its metal canopy lid opened and a young soldier leapt out, only to be set upon by the crowd. They were wielding tree branches, steel rods and bare fists. A student wearing a democracy headband tried to shield the terrified soldier, but he was shoved aside as the crowd strained to land blows, kicking and smashing until the soldier lay prone in a pool of blood. Two more soldiers emerged and were beaten, their bodies left like bundles in the gutter.

The tanks were bearing down on the crowd now, and the weapons' fire was coming in volleys rather than random shots. I turned and ran back past the party's headquarters where a few days ago soldiers sat as if in contemplation. At the top of the square, I could see troops and armoured vehicles beginning to encircle the

remaining protestors. The students had been in occupation for nearly seven weeks, and had erected tents, stalls and loudspeakers. There was a young girl with a long plait down her back – perhaps the history girl. She was waving her arms, talking loudly. I couldn't make out what she was saying, but I could see her shudder and then her body was torn and separated into parts. Her classmates, their hair lifted by a light breeze, grabbed her limbs and stumbled towards a Red Cross tent. She was laid on the concrete in a line of bodies. People in white coats were ferrying the dead. Through it all, the loudspeakers blared out the party's martial law declaration. The sound 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 three thousand unarmed student protestors 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.

But what truth did I have to tell? Was the truth simply what I had seen and heard? I thought so. But no matter how close I stood to falling bodies, I could not know how it felt to be hit by a bullet, crushed by a tank or torn apart by human hands. In striving to be truthful, I had no option other than relying on my imagination. Journalism is reluctant to admit the role of the imagination. Its power rests in claiming objectivity and 'Being There'. With world-altering events, it goes even further, styling itself as eyewitness history. But the eyewitness is a notoriously unreliable source. We see what we want to see; memory and repertoire cloud perception and, even with the clearest eye, we glimpse only a version of what occurs.

Squeezing the big event into journalese seemed a betrayal. My nouns and verbs didn't have the ballast to carry the weight of what I saw. What was needed was to put aside journalism's inverted pyramid of hierarchical information and root around in ambiguity. This does not come naturally. To dislodge the journalistic mask requires some uncomfortable moments; an admission of subjectivity for one thing. Big events can momentarily do this. They can help you arrive at a kind of truth by pushing past platitudes, such as the sweeping generalisations journalists are so fond of. But when

you have spent most of your life embracing a formula like a life raft, how do you retrace your steps, get back to a place where you can be surprised – to, as Carolyn Steedman says, ‘the shocked astonishment of one who has never read what she knows has been written down before’.

I did not know that when the overwhelming unfolds you can only pretend to know what you are doing. In fact, I did not understand the massacre in the way I perhaps appeared to, nor did I possess the insight some attributed to me. This was not because I was just a journalist who could chat in Mandarin without being fluent, or that I was not a Sinologist. It was the experts, after all, who had gone along with the biggest lie of all: the Cultural Revolution. My problem was that I was yet to discover the benefits of chaos, and the way that words crack and break, allowing you to move from literalness to metaphor. It is metaphor that fills in the gaps, that conveys what happens when the unthinkable is unleashed, when the centre cannot hold. It is precisely because words won’t stay in place, won’t stay still in the way that the journalistic formula demands, that meaning is possible.

Journalism – increasingly conflated with something called communications – does not appear comfortable with this idea, which is a shame. By pretending to be objective, as opposed to subjectively fair, journalism runs the risk of aping marketing and politics where words are bred to be empty and hollowness arrives in the guise of impartiality. It now seems to me that it is only in doubt that I can aspire to be a storyteller – that is, someone who has something to say but will say it differently each time.

I returned to Australia for a break at the end of 1989. I was the Australian Journalist of the Year. A year later, I won the Walkley Award for the best feature article. It too was on China. I was the China guy. Universities and think tanks invited me to comment. I attended public meetings and was accorded a temporary sort of reverence by some colleagues. One day I called into the old Broadway office of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. A senior journalist (he went on to his own war correspondent myth-making) stood close to me, searching my face. He was 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.

By 1991, my time in China was coming to an end. The West, which with one hand imposed sanctions against the regime for the massacre, had with the other sent its old men – Gough Whitlam, Willy Brandt, Richard Nixon and Ted Heath – to patch things up with the Communist Party. I was told to move on; the story was different now. But I could not forget. Nor could I feel vindicated. My overriding sense as I boarded the plane in Beijing for the last time wasn’t that I had nailed it, but rather that I had got away with it.

In fact, I was not as certain as some of the sentences I wrote. I am not talking about facts in the sense of what can be known. The death toll, for instance, is a number. No one could be sure about it, but only because the army refused to reveal how many bodies it scooped up with the blood it scrubbed from the Square. I put the figure at three thousand – the estimate of the Red Cross – rather than the three hundred claimed by the government. What troubled me was what can't be known but can be explored. Because journalists can tend to see themselves as in the know, rather than just plain curious, this can be hard to find. I think it is because journalism encourages accounts that simulate reality rather than interrogate it. This disguises the disjointed nature of what we witness. The rough seams are smoothed out.

I didn't know it then, but it is the confusing moments that actually reveal the most. If I was doing it again, I would try to stay with the loose ends, the details that did not make sense. To some extent, this is a literary device. What I most remember from a book I loved as a teenager, *Catcher in the Rye*, is not the plot or the resolution, but the enigmatic question Salinger poses throughout the novel, 'Where do the ducks go in winter?' Where did the young man in the white shirt who stopped a column of tanks on June 5, 1989 go? A British tabloid named him as Wang Weilin, and said he was nineteen, but this is not verified. Almost nobody knows his name. Nobody knows what happened to him. And yet his bailing up of seventeen tanks while carrying what looked to be his shopping was history.

My account of the massacre aspired to be eyewitness history without understanding enough about the subject who does the witnessing. I did not rely exclusively on journalism's formula – who, why, what, when and how – but I leant heavily upon it and that let it down. A better starting point would have been to question the authority of the observer; this would have avoided the terrifying sense I had later that journalism had explained it all. It would have opened up gaps that may have allowed the often haphazard horror to be rethought, and ultimately more equivocal and interesting questions to emerge. Admitting that being there does not equate with being across it was beyond me at the time, and perhaps it is still beyond journalism. I now think the best we can hope for is a story that doesn't hide its subjectivity or assume certainty. Journalism could do it, but it would mean exchanging power for doubt, swapping echo chamber assertions for good writing.

Janet Malcolm says a journalist is someone who'll betray you without remorse. In part, this is a reference to the journalistic 'I', which Malcolm says parades as 'the dispassionate observer' without revealing that he or she is not in fact the writer, but an invention. Better in my view to declare where you stand – which is, inevitably, on shifting ground. Some of the difficulty with this is structural – a shortage of time and resources means foreign correspondents often rewrite other reports – and some of it is psychological. What was romantically called 'sniffing the East wind' boiled down to Western journalists summarising the Hong Kong newspapers. And there is a sense of expectation that goes with the role. We need to believe that someone understands what is happening. Journalists appear to fill the gap. It is hard for a journalist to say

they do not know the reason why something happened. They always have something to say. It was a role I eagerly embraced, as it seemed to diminish my own uncertainty. Maybe this is because, at the time, the act of writing plugged gaps – rather than, as I now think is the case, discovering them.

Last year, Robert Thomson, whom I replaced as China correspondent for *The Age*, *The Financial Times* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, was back in Melbourne. He addressed journalism students at his old university, RMIT. Thomson is now the publisher of *The Wall Street Journal* and one of most powerful journalists in the world. He had a message: 'If you are haunted by history you will be history. That is one of contemporary life's certainties.' The line has a ring to it. But is it the ring of truth or the sound of something hollow?

I have come to think that being haunted by history is unavoidable. I am haunted by what happened in China. This was not the case for Thomson's boss, Rupert Murdoch. He was so eager to forget the massacre that he agreed to remove the only outlet on his Star satellite over China that would have mentioned it, the BBC. This is a symbolic act for a newsman like Murdoch, and suggests power is his first priority. And then there is our own history. We see with eyes informed by what has gone before. To deny this is self-delusion, and results in precisely what Thomson warns against: you become history – that is, you repeat the past because you ignore it. The past needs to become history, but this only happens with an act of recollection, not forgetting. The past can't be forgotten; we are a kind of palimpsest – forever re-remembering and rewriting our memories.

This is perhaps a flaw in journalism that now seems intent not so much on erasing history as on failing to construct it. In place of Hugh Cudlip's definition of journalism as that which comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable, lifestyle-leaning media outlets now seem intent on eliding the distinction. Before I left *The Age* three years ago, an editor told me I had to find a new way of writing about poverty. The old way – where the role of the journalist was to question those in power – was suddenly *passé*. What was it Dr Johnson said? 'A newspaper writer is a man without virtue, who lies, at home for his profit.'

I am not a China specialist or a China historian. I admit only to being a fledgling historian of my own life. That is where my memory of the event resides; not in any particular social or cultural context, but simply within me. It has the opacity that marks any historical record but precisely because of that, it permits a mental re-enactment of the past. Whether I like it or not, this is the past that I draw on – and which, in a sense, draws upon me. When I got back to Australia, there were people who wanted a piece of the big event, digested and preferably delivered in person. I gave them that. It reminded me of the fairy stories we are told as children. China had it all – life and death, good and evil, a morality tale for our times. And, like a fairytale, we need to keep telling it and rediscovering it over and over and over again. ■