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## Tiananmen Moon: Preface

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April 15, 2009 in Uncategorized by [The China Beat](#) | [2 comments](#)

*Philip J. Cunningham was a participant and observer of the events in Beijing in 1989.*

*Now Cunningham has a forthcoming book, [Tiananmen Moon: Inside the Chinese Student Uprising of 1989](#) (Rowman & Littlefield, May 2009) that details his story of the events. In honor of the 20th anniversary, Cunningham will be sharing selections from his book at China Beat over the coming months. You can read more at the [Tiananmen Moon website](#).*



By Philip J. Cunningham

If getting caught up in a popular uprising in China has taught me anything, it is that the past, present and future flow together as one with ferocious intensity. Looking back now at the eventful uprising at Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989 makes it all the more clear that what happened there was shaped by things that came before; and today's China, basking in a post-Olympic glow and new-found national strength, is still profoundly haunted by the seminal events of 1989, though the topic is strictly taboo in the media and still feared by influential people in the leadership.

I initially got involved in the demonstrations because of my interest in Chinese history, the abstract study of which I had pursued at college and in graduate school. Then I moved to China. Trying to be a little more Chinese and a little less foreign, I immersed myself in Beijing campus life and cultural activities, mostly with Chinese friends. In the time it takes for a new moon to grow full and then wane back into blackness again, I was pulled so deeply into the vortex of living, breathing history-in-the-making that my life would never be the same.

More than any history book I ever read, or any period film I ever worked on, being on the streets of Beijing as history was being made was the most profoundly moving and eye-opening experience of all.

The Tiananmen demonstrations were crushed, cruelly, breaking the implicit pact that the People's Liberation Army would never turn its guns on the people and burying student activism for many years to come, but not before inspiring millions in China and around the world to push for reform and change, heralding the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The uprising at Tiananmen, though highly controversial in China to this day, would shape many of the choices of the Chinese leadership and has been an unacknowledged inspiration for much of the change that has swept China ever since.

While residing on a Beijing campus in the late 1980's I found myself up against the rigid social rules, regulations and racial exclusions that dampened the joy of living in an otherwise cordial and engaging environment. In times of stress, I found cycling to Beijing's most central location a great way to get away from it all. Especially memorable was a bitterly cold winter night in early 1987 when I discovered the beauty of Tiananmen in the moonlight.

The evening started at a local dance hall. I had bicycled there in the company of someone I was fond of but didn't get to see often. She and I happily danced the night away, sipping nothing more potent than orange soda pop, every fast dance followed by a slow one, as mandated by the cultural commissars of the time, until eleven PM, when we raced back to campus to beat curfew. We got through the side gate of the Shida campus without trouble but by the time we reached our respective dorms they were closed for the night, padlocked shut.

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Afraid that waking up the guards would bring unwanted attention to our late night tryst, we got back on our bikes and plunged back into the inky blackness of Beijing. We cycled up and down empty windswept streets, breathing steamy breaths, working up a sweat despite the winter chill. Hotels, which had convoluted rules about who qualified to register for a room were not a serious option. The cold night air, cold as it was, was far more welcoming.

Gliding down quiet boulevards in the quiet of the night proved unexpectedly invigorating. Having nowhere to go gave us a vicarious sensation of freedom, the feeling that by keeping on the move, we could avoid the inevitable walls and guarded gateways. When the cold got unbearable, we huddled at a makeshift noodle stand that was throwing up clouds of steam into the frigid night sky. We did our best to be unobtrusive, quietly slurping on noodles on a bench in the company of burly, chain-smoking truck drivers whose view of an exotic inter-racial coupling was probably not too different from that of a hotel clerk, except they seemed to be cheering us on. There was no heat in the noodle shack to speak of, other than vats of boiling liquid, but the hot air and general merriment of the earthy drivers helped warm things up a bit.

From there we ventured back out into the cold to cycle up and down Beijing's main east-west thoroughfare of Chang'an Boulevard under a brilliant full moon. It was so cold and clear and bright that the moonlight could be mistaken for a thin coat of snow on the pavement.

Beijing was a city of few lights, so the great glowing lamp in the frozen sky was our only guide. We followed the moon the length of Chang'an Boulevard or perhaps I should say it followed us. When we got to Tiananmen Square there was not a person in sight, just a sea of flagstones reflecting an ethereal glow. The monumental buildings that surround the Square were monochrome monoliths, squat tombstones boxing in the luminous diamond-studded sky.

We parked our bikes and lay down in the middle of the Square, staring at the moon straight above. It was so quiet and isolated we could have been in the middle of the Gobi Desert. Huddling close for warmth, we whispered, joked and told stories. It was the most intimate moment we had ever had. Inspired by the impossibility of our togetherness, I made up a song, which goes like this:

*Midnight moon of Tiannamen,  
When will I see you again?  
Looking for you everywhere,  
Going in circles around the Square...  
Riding with you down Chang'an Jie,  
Memories I'd like to share...  
Shadows dancing in the dark,  
Lovers talking in the park...  
Follow you here,  
Follow you there,  
Bathing in your  
Sweet moonlight everywhere...*

*Midnight moon of Tiananmen,  
When will I see you again?*

Our midnight reverie ended abruptly when a team of policemen patrolling on bicycle spotted two unauthorized bodies napping on the ground near the central monument and ordered us to leave. We did so reluctantly, going in a big sweeping circle around the Square to demonstrate our attachment to the location. The memory lingers, the two of us huddled together on a bitterly cold night, under a towering sky so vast that it brought to mind a boundless universe.

A few months after our midnight ride, I was a guest on "English on Sunday" a national radio program produced at the massive Soviet style headquarters of China Central Broadcasting. The bilingual host of the program, Shen Baoqing graciously asked me if she could use the lyrics of my song in one of her English publications. We got in a discussion about Tiananmen and we went over the words I had written in English and Chinese. She invited her boss, the branch secretary of the Communist Party, to discuss it with us.

"Well, it's very nice," he said, pausing to grimace. "But, tell me, why do you use such dark images, the moon, night?" he asked. "We Chinese associate Tiananmen with brightness, with the sun!"

"My gracious, he couldn't very well use the sun," Shen Baoqing offered helpfully. "The sun over Tiananmen might be mistaken for Mao."

Not surprisingly, the branch secretary got the last word. "The song should be more positive," he said. "For example, why not change it to 'Under the blue skies of Tiananmen'? It's a much better line."

Not long after that, I rode my bike back to Beijing Normal University under an intensely gray, overcast sky, which I took note of because it accorded so well with my cloudy mood on that particular day. When I watched the evening news that night on CCTV, I heard the announcer repeat a familiar line: "And today there was glorious celebration in the Great Hall of the People," the voice intoned earnestly, "under the blue skies of Tiananmen."

The Chinese belief in the incantatory power of words is such that saying something often enough is almost enough to make it seem almost true.

This has to be one of the motivations for all the lies that have been told about Tiananmen since 1989. Much of what the Beijing authorities have repeatedly said about the "counter-revolutionary riots at Tiananmen" is not true, and they do not believe it, even though they must pretend to. Perhaps worse yet, worse than the devious sloganeering that became so counterproductive it was quietly abandoned, was the subsequent silence, a soul-chilling silence that only gets louder with each passing year.

I have written this book to challenge that silence. It is a personal account, at once subjective and idiosyncratic, partial and incomplete, but it aspires to elucidate what modest truth might reside in subjectivity. It is the story of a serendipitous traveler finding himself on the inside of a major uprising, marching shoulder to shoulder with young Beijing rebels and sleeping on Tiananmen Square under the open sky. It is the story of the friendship between a foreign student and his local friends at a time of great upheaval. There are shocking discoveries and humorous asides, journalistic scoops and partisan advocacy, resulting in police troubles and political intrigue. It is also a love story, the chronicle of an affection that speaks to the love of a people, and also a tragedy, for that love ends in heartbreak, when the people's dream is destroyed.

Looking back on the one month period covered by this memoir, it is striking how often the mood on the ground corresponded to the movements of the moon in the sky, though few of us were fully conscious of it at the time.

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The full moon over Tiananmen marked the lyrical and literal apogee of the peaceful protests in May 1989 when the citizens of Beijing flocked to Tiananmen Square a million strong to celebrate what was hoped would be a brilliant new chapter of Chinese history.

The demonstrations faltered and stalled out as the moon began to withdraw its protective nighttime illumination, while the army delayed its crackdown till the darkest night of the month, the night of no moon.

*Tiananmen Moon* is divided into four sections reflecting the ebb and flow of the lunar illumination that fateful month.

The narrative that follows is a testament to the beauty and wonder of a popular uprising that went better than anyone had a right to expect before tragically going awry. It is a commemoration to all who ever marched in peaceful protest or engaged in civil disobedience or waved the banner of rebellion and sang songs evoking the eternal hope of building a better tomorrow.

The story starts out at Tiananmen under skies that were truly blue, skies that eventually cloud up and turn to gray. More startling, though, is the transformation of Tiananmen, which in the course of a few weeks goes from being the grandiose place that deserved nothing less than an arching blue sky, to a synonym for cruelty, from a talismanic word to a search engine taboo, from a monument dedicated to remembering past glory to a memory-draining black hole in the heart of Beijing.

This book is dedicated to the wonderful things that once were, and to all the residents of Beijing who took part in the protests of 1989, most especially to those martyred souls who didn't live to see the fruits of their great sacrifice.

**Tags:** [6/4](#), [Philip J Cunningham](#), [Tiananmen](#), [Tiananmen Moon](#)