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Notes from a Non-anniversary

June 4, 2009 in Uncategorized by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

By Jeremiah Jenne

I woke up this morning and took a short walk to a big square. As expected, it was pretty calm in the kind of jittery, strained, composed way one usually associates with a dinner party where one of the hosts is having an extramarital affair with one of the guests. The square looked relatively normal but with a beefed-up security detail that included a ring of young slack-jawed crew cut types in tracksuits and matching gray badges worn on unmatching t-shirts. [Reports](#) of visitors being asked to produce passports, to weed out foreign journalists, appear to be overstated. I walked into the square from two different directions today and wasn't once asked for my passport. To read some of the other dispatches from this morning ([Reuters/AP](#)) you'd think the square was under martial law, and that's not really the case. That said, don't pull out a camera or try to film a dispatch unless you [want an umbrella stuck in your face](#). (Yes, the latest in Chinese counter-surveillance equipment can be purchased at any subway kiosk for 5 RMB, or maybe 10 if it's raining.) There are many reasons for the non-events of today's anniversary. While the square is open, the extra security is clearly ready to pounce on anybody who looks like trouble. Launching a spontaneous protest today would be like robbing a casino in Vegas; sure you might get your hands on the money but you're going to get your teeth knocked in before you set a single foot outside to spend it. Whatever you do better be worth it. And frankly, people in Beijing don't really seem to care very much, or maybe just aren't that interested in big public displays of dissent. The majority of urbanites in China's capital long ago traded away their political pottage for the right to buy knock-off handbags and a decent compact car, and they are reasonably happy with the deal they've made.

There are a few cracks in the facade. There will be a memorial service at Victoria Park in Hong Kong tonight. The new English-language edition of the *Global Times* has run [two pieces](#) this week, including a [long article](#) in today's (June 4) edition looking at the Tiananmen crackdown in historical perspective. To be sure, the piece does so from the perspective of the CCP, but that the subject is broached at all, even in a relatively new English-language paper, is still noteworthy.

For the most part, however, the chances of something major happening in Beijing today are slim.

In late May, Wang Dan, a notable figure in the 1989 movement, called on Chinese to [show their support by "wearing white,"](#) a traditional color of mourning, on June 4. This was either the smartest or the dumbest idea in the history of protesting. It's summer in Beijing. EVERYBODY wears white. A white, button down short sleeve shirt is almost a uniform among a certain class of Beijinger this time of year. I have one myself, made of such unnatural fabric that I've washed and worn it years after several overpriced dress shirts from Brooks Brothers have been reduced to "sleepwear for the Mrs." I wore it today. I'd like to say it was out of solidarity with the movement, but I probably would have worn it anyway. It's 90 degrees outside and it's the only shirt I own that wouldn't make me look like Chris Farley after a two-day bender in Mexico.

Half the town on any given day is wearing white. While Wang Dan may have been going for a 'subtle gesture of protest,' it's possible the 'wear white day' idea was a little *too* subtle. Kind of like: "If you wish to honor the memory of the Tiananmen dead, don't shave your left eyebrow completely off on Thursday morning."

Finally, there has been a lot made about the Chinese government's [knee-jerk blocking of foreign social media sites](#) like YouTube and Twitter as well as the 'temporary closure for maintenance' of their [Chinese counterparts](#). Nothing makes the CCP look more like a bunch of ninnies than when they let the Net Nanny go nuts. When [YouTube was blocked in March](#), presumably because of a video purporting to show Chinese police beating unarmed Tibetan monks, most people had never seen the offending clip. Within a day everybody (outside of China or those who had a proxy server) had

checked it out. Why? Because with not much going on in Tibet this past March, and with nobody able to go there to file anyway, it was *something to write about*. On Tuesday it was Twitter. During a week with very little substantive news to cover in connection with the anniversary, the Chinese government's ham-handed attempts to erase the memory of June 4 and stifle any attempts for dissenting groups to organize *became* the story.

Blocking Twitter, a site that almost every correspondent in town uses to some degree, fantastically inconveniences the one group desperate to write something bad about the government. Censoring sites is such an easy story – such a gift to the foreign correspondent community in Beijing – that I'm surprised it doesn't come wrapped in pretty paper with a bow and a card saying "Love, Hu!"

In the end, whatever one's views are on the demonstrations, the way they were suppressed, or the aftermath, as a historian I am always disturbed by official attempts to erase past events. As Orwell once wrote: "He who controls the past controls the future, and he who controls the present controls the past." The CCP has changed in many ways – much of it for the good – over the past twenty years. It is times like these however, when the worst of the Party's instincts for self-preservation take over, that remind us of how far there still is to go.

This piece was cross-posted at Jenne's personal blog, Jottings from the Granite Studio.

Tags: 1989, 6/4, Tiananmen