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5-27-2009

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Cunningham, Philip J., "5/26/89: An Audience with an Audience" (2009). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 521.  
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## 5/26/89: An Audience with an Audience

May 27, 2009 in Uncategorized by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

*This piece is excerpted from the manuscript of Philip J. Cunningham's forthcoming book, Tiananmen Moon, part of an on-going China Beat feature of excerpts from Cunningham's book. Interested readers can see more at [Cunningham's website](#).*



*Philip J Cunningham with "Commander-in-chief" Chai Ling in front of the student command center*

By Philip J. Cunningham

On May 26 I got another glimpse of student command central, when Chai Ling was at the height of her power. She was holding court in the broadcast tent, the ideological hothouse of student-occupied Tiananmen Square. It wasn't easy getting in. I had to pass three rings of student security to secure an "audience."

The BBC had yet to give me any kind of ID, so I learned to talk my way into things. My only "press" pass was my wit, which worked okay because I liked to talk and could do so in Chinese. There were times when the well-known call letters BBC did not suffice to gain entry, while merely saying I was looking for a friend from Shida might do the trick. The closer I got to the student center, the higher the likelihood I'd run into someone who'd seen me before, which also helped expedite entry. I could remember most of the faces, if not names, of the hundreds I'd spoken to in the last few weeks, so overall I had a high degree of mobility on the cordoned-off, people-controlled Square.

As a provincial student leader, self-appointed or otherwise, Wang Li expected and obtained a certain amount of access to the Beijing student command center at the Broadcast Tent. What Wang Li lacked in social cachet as an unknown provincial student from Xian, I think he started to make up for by speaking on behalf of the BBC, since he was now on the payroll and knew he could impress fellow students with his important international connections. Student security guards were vigilant about keeping ordinary Chinese away from their "leaders," but by becoming a leader, or media person, many of the petty controls could be circumvented.

Wang Li put in a word for me with the provincial students, but they seemed terribly disorganized and no interviews or memorable conversations came out of that effort. After jointly touring the provincial student outpost near the museum, we cut west and headed towards the broadcast tent in the center of the Square. The amateur security got woollier and woollier as we pushed towards the center, so we temporarily split up when he got permission to enter a controlled area that I couldn't enter. Wang Li rushed ahead on his own, to see if he could find a student leader willing to talk to me. In the meantime, I decided to wing it, slowly working my way past various student gatekeepers until I ran into a familiar face from the Sports Institute.

"Hey Jin," yelled a boisterous baritone, "what are you doing here? Good to see you, come over here!" It was Crazy Zhang. When he got within arm's length he gave me a few friendly punches that actually hurt. He wasn't called crazy for no reason. The last time I saw him he was wearing a khaki green cap with a red headband around it.

"Go fight someone else!" I shoved him back.

"Better not try anything or I'll have to throw you out of here," he said with a straight face.

The smart-aleck muscle man grabbed me by the arm and led me up the north steps of the monument's marble base past a guarded security rope. He directed me to descend the steps on the east side of the monument to a roped off area from which it was possible to enter the broadcast tent. When I got inside that zone I found Wang Li standing outside the tent. He waved me over with his usual sense of urgency.

"I'll leave you here," said Zhang, this time with a gentle pat on the back instead of a threatening punch. "See you later."

Wang Li ran over excitedly, barely avoiding a collision with the solidly built Zhang.

"Jin!"

"What is it?" I asked.

"Come now!" he said excitedly, "Chai Ling, she wants to talk to you."

"Chai Ling? Where is she?"

"By the tent," he shouted. Since we were both already inside, the innermost perimeter, it was just a matter of turning the corner of the monument to reach the entrance of the broadcast tent.

There she was, the queen bee in the middle of a humming hive. She was petite and pert, wearing a loose-fitting white sports shirt with sunglasses hanging on her collar. She smiled in greeting when she saw me approach, but didn't say anything. There were people on her left and people on her right and from the looks of it, they all wanted a piece of her. There were excited discussions about some pressing matter or another, but I couldn't hear very well because a noisy diesel generator was roaring a few feet away. Just as I was about to ask her a question she was called away, disappearing for a few minutes into the shadows of the truck-sized tent.

The petite, bronze-faced leader popped in and out of the broadcast tent a half a dozen times in as many minutes while attending to the minutiae of running the tent city of Tiananmen Square. Behind a well-secured safety rope, there was yet another group of student supplicants bearing urgent requests. There was a small patch of empty ground in front of the broadcast tent where I thought I might hold a quick interview, if one didn't mind the hundreds of onlookers just a few feet away on the other side of the rope. I could already feel the heat of open-mouthed stares building up. Who is the laowai and what is he doing on the inside?

This was the command center, where strategic decisions were made and announcements broadcast to tens of thousands on slow days like today; a week ago it had been the center of a swirling human cyclone a million strong. No wonder the student organizers are called leaders, with crowds of that size some kind of structure is necessary.

Deep in the throng of wannabes who did not have permission to enter the command center were three familiar white faces: Eric, Fred and Brian. Being good journalists, they didn't take no for an answer, they wanted in.

When the usual, "We're BBC!" didn't work its charm, they started pointing to me, as much as a ruse to slip in as a bid to get my attention. They were turned back, however, and there wasn't much I could do about it. To make matters worse, a student warden asked me to translate, leaving it to me to say, "It is not allowed to go inside the rope without special permission."

Rather than say that, I just hinted to the crew that I was working on it, and went back to the leadership tent to see if I could arrange something. I stood around, baking in the heat of the sun and soaking up unwanted glances when Chai Ling finally walked over and offered me her hand.

"Ni hao," she said, stepping forward to greet me.

"Ni hao. You're at Shida, right?"

"Yes, graduate student, educational psychology."

"Do you know the service building? You know, the Insider Guest House above the campus store. . ."

"I know that building. You speak Chinese very well."

We were interrupted by a young man who whispered to Chai Ling a flurry of messages and handed her some hand-scribbled notes on onionskin paper. The exchange went on for a few minutes, then the young man withdrew back into the tent. She turned around to resume our chat, apologizing with a weak smile. She was sunburned and looked tired, I started to have my doubts about arranging an interview.

"Maybe I can talk to you somewhere else, some other time"

"Now is fine, but I only have a few minutes."

"Is it okay for them, um, you see my BBC friends, over there, for them to come in here? We can set up the camera right here."

"You can do that," she replied. Wang Li heard the word and went to get the crew. Chai Ling got called to the side with another student matter, and I helped the crew get inside the rope.

"What's going on Phil?" Brian asked impatiently.

I explained that one of the top student leaders agreed to talk to us.

"Why don't we set it up over here?" I pointed to the "front gate" of the tent and Eric and Fred went to work. Held back by a human chain of interlocked arms, student guards and rope, the curious throng strained to get a glimpse of news in the making. It was a relief to have student security handling crowd control this time around.



*Entry to student-controlled zones was tightly guarded at times*

Allowing a foreign news crew to enter the "VIP" zone just added to the air of intrigue. In a flash, we were the center of attention. Several Europeans with cameras tried to sneak into the command center by following on the coattails of the BBC crew, but they were all stopped by truculent student guards and turned back. Some of them started to make a scene, yelling angrily in English. Just to keep up appearances and to indulge student illusions of control, journalists had in recent days gotten into the habit of flashing any old ID cards before walking into student-controlled areas loaded with cameras and recording equipment. But that gambit didn't work this time.

"Vie kant vee go in?" pleaded one of the Europeans.

"Vee also are from zee press!" his companion, added.

"Vie you let zem in?" the first man complained. "It is not fair is it?"

Unlike our tension-fraught visit to the water strikers last week, this time BBC was on the inside and our "competition" was left dangling on the other side of the ropes. Among my colleagues, who knew very well what it was like to be excluded, I could detect not an ounce of sympathy for those left on the outside.

Foreign newsmen at Tiananmen were generally supportive of the democratic tide but not one another. By now even student media handlers like Wang Li knew the value of exclusive access, and the access game worked both ways. Some journalists had been to Tiananmen everyday, and not without justification could they feel indignant at being refused access, or having to settle for reduced access. After some heated deliberation, the student guards agreed to allowed a single photographer to come in, but not the two complainers with video gear. Instead, a photographer from Vogue, French edition, was respectfully escorted in and started snapping pictures. At one point he turned to me to ask some questions about Chai Ling. He said he was working on a story titled "Role model for a Generation of Women."

By the time BBC had set up camera, Chai Ling was back. The generation/gender role model and I did a short pre-interview chat while the French photographer did his thing. She and I talked about the relative merits of Shida and Beida. She liked both campuses, but she had joined Beida's hunger strike committee because she had more friends there.

Eric gave the signal that the Beeb was ready to roll. I had suggested to Chai Ling that we do an informal interview, hoping we could get a few candid comments on tape without a formal set up, but Brian had different ideas.

"Move out of the way, Phil!" he said, nudging me to the side to take a stand between the two of us.

"What do you mean?" I said, trying to regain my footing. "I'm talking to her."

"I do the talking, Phil!" he said, "Okay Eric, start rolling."

I stepped back dejected but not defeated. I watched Brian talk, then gesticulate, then resort to primitive pantomime, as Chai Ling was not able or willing to converse in English. Seemingly oblivious to the language gap, he went on doing this for a few minutes, getting lots of puzzled looks but no words in response. Chai Ling looked at me, then at him and back at me again.

Brian threw up his hands in frustration and walked away. "Turn off the camera!" he instructed Eric, then turned to me. "Listen, will you? We need someone who speaks English."

While the BBC reporter paced about impatiently, apparently looking for another interview, Chai Ling resumed talking to me with rapid-fire delivery, telling me things I hadn't even asked about. She started to give a very emotional account of her involvement in the movement. I don't think she knew much about video recording and perhaps she did not care, because the camera was not rolling. It wasn't even mounted on the tripod anymore. I detected pain in her expression and listened intently, trying not to be distracted by the mumbling and grumbling behind me to the right. She kept on talking and I kept on listening.

Out of the corner of my eye I could sense the crew was busy, probably packing up, but I did not break eye contact because I wanted to hear what this intense young woman had to say. There was something dark and troubling in her countenance.

She continued to pour her heart out. After a few minutes I realized that the film crew had definitely not just stepped back to change tapes or put in a new battery. Going, going, gone. They wrapped in a huff and disappeared without saying a word.

Chai Ling and I shared the mutual embarrassment of having an interview fall apart even as we spoke, leading us both to shrug our shoulders and laugh. She continued talking politics, in a low voice but with great energy and emotion, telling me the student movement had come to a crucial turning point, the future was full of uncertainty. There were serious conflicts between rival student groups. The Beijing students were tired but tempered from weeks of demos and the hunger strike. It was the provincial students, relatively late arrivals, who were pushing for action. Chai Ling said there was a plot to destroy the movement and she didn't know who to trust anymore. She spoke of betrayal, of fear, and of her sense of responsibility as a leader. We were interrupted again, this time by a student messenger. Upon the receipt of some urgent communique, she turned to me and said she had to go, asking how to get in touch.

"Bei-jing Fan-dian, 1-4-1-3," I said, giving her my room number at the hotel.

"I want to talk more," she said with a soft-spoken intensity. "Can I trust you?"

I waited for her to say more, trying to understand.

"I want to run away. . ." she said.

"What?"

"It is getting very dangerous!"

"Yes, you should be more careful," I said. "But what did you say, run away?"

"A Chinese person told me that the British Embassy is offering political asylum to student activists.

What do you think about that?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's possible, but not likely. Who told you that?"

"I think it may be a trap."

"I just don't know."

"Can you ask about that for me?"

I told her I didn't know anyone at the British Embassy but I said that maybe one of my "good friends" at the BBC did. Then I added my own advice. "Be careful about dealing with foreign embassies. If you go to a big embassy, it could be used against you politically. Maybe the embassy of a small, neutral country is better." If she went to the US Embassy I was afraid she would become a political pawn in US-China relations. I didn't think that the British Embassy would be any better. Worse yet, what if it was a trap? What if the asylum offer had been made by an undercover agent, a trap set by Chinese police to discredit the nationalism of the students?

"Jin, I must go now," she said. "See you again!"

**Tags:** 1989, 6/4, Philip J Cunningham, Tiananmen, Tiananmen Moon