

Louisa Lim



THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF AMNESIA
TIANANMEN REVISITED

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To those who dare speak out

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

To write about present-day China requires an almost impossible calculation, weighing the risks and consequences of every sentence. It is like juggling in the dark, given the void of information into which these words fall. The very need for these acts of reckoning is also the reason why this book is necessary. As the boundaries of what is considered politically acceptable in China narrow, the subtle algebra of self-censorship has steadily diminished free expression both within China's borders and beyond. This process has quickened in recent years, as the Chinese government has expelled some foreign journalists and denied visas to others. Because my family has made China its home for the past decade, I could not help but contemplate these issues as I decided whether to write this book. But one question kept nagging: if I—with all the freedoms available to me—chose not to write about June 4th, then would anyone else document these stories for the historical record? Historical fact should not be held hostage, and the line between compliance and collusion is vanishingly thin.

I owe an enormous debt to those who have shared their stories with me, especially as most do not have the option of being able to publish their own accounts or to leave China. All were aware that they were taking a risk in talking about the sensitive topic of June 4th to a Western journalist. As I wrote these chapters, I wrestled with the question of whether to strip out their details to try to protect them, and for a very small number of my interviewees, I did indeed take that step. But most of those who spoke to me are so well known,

and their experiences so unique, that their identities cannot be disguised. These people gave me permission to use their real names, and I know these decisions were not taken lightly. I hope that this book will honor the trust they have placed in me to tell their stories.

None of the people with whom I spoke inside China knew that I would write about the brutal crackdown in the city of Chengdu in June 1989. I only began to discover what had happened there during a chance meeting with Tang Deying, whose teenage son was beaten to death in police custody in June 1989. I did not begin further research on Chengdu until after I had left China. In writing this book, I hope to begin a conversation about the “other Tiananmens” that took place beyond the capital, to remember the victims of the crackdown, and to break the code of silence in China that surrounds discussion of 1989.

January 2014

TIMELINE

APRIL – JUNE 1989

- 
- April 15** Death of deposed CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang.
 - April 16** Students mobilize on some Beijing campuses.
 - April 17** First student march to Tiananmen.
 - April 18–19** Student sit-in at Xinhua ends in scuffles with police.
 - April 21** 100,000 students gather on Tiananmen Square.
 - April 22** Hu Yaobang's memorial service is held inside Great Hall of the People; three students kneel on steps outside.
 - April 24** Beijing Autonomous Federation of Students formed. Class boycott begins.
 - April 26** *People's Daily* editorial labels the student movement "turmoil."
 - April 27** Massive demonstrations against April 26th editorial.
 - May 4** CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang pledges no "major" turmoil during a speech to the Asian Development Bank.
 - May 13** Student hunger strike begins in Beijing.

- 
- May 14** Elected student representatives meet officials, but talks break down.
- May 15** USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev begins state visit to Beijing.
- May 17** More than a million people march in Beijing.
- May 18** Premier Li Peng meets student leaders at the Great Hall of the People.
- May 19** Zhao Ziyang visits students on the square during his last public appearance. Students end their hunger strike. Troops attempt to enter Beijing ahead of martial law, but citizens block their advance.
- May 20** Martial law is officially declared at 10 A.M.
- May 23** Troops pull back to the outskirts of Beijing.
- May 27** Students vote unanimously to retreat at the end of May, but decision is immediately overturned.
- May 28** Zhao Ziyang's secretary Bao Tong is arrested.
- May 29** Thirty-foot-high Goddess of Democracy statue unveiled.
- June 3** Four intellectuals begin hunger strike.
- June 3-4** Thousands of troops deployed into central Beijing. Troops open fire on civilians; tanks roll into Tiananmen Square. Preliminary Chinese reports say 241 people died; eyewitnesses believe the figure is higher.
- June 4** Protests against the violent suppression break out in dozens of cities across China, including Chengdu.
- June 5** Foreign media film a young Chinese man standing in the path of a column of tanks; he becomes known as Tank Man.
- June 9** Central Military Commission Chairman Deng Xiaoping makes his first appearance since the crackdown, saying the government has suppressed a counterrevolutionary rebellion.





A victim of police brutality clutches his injured head as he waits to receive medical treatment in Chengdu on June 4, 1989. According to official statistics, 8 people were killed and 1,800 injured in Chengdu in clashes with police. This little-known episode has not been written about before now, and these pictures taken by Kim Nygaard have never before been published.



Angry protesters face off against riot police in Chengdu's Tianfu square on June 4, 1989. The pictures Kim Nygaard took (on right) at a Chengdu clinic show the prevalence of head wounds in a vivid illustration of the police strategy of using their batons to target protesters' heads.





The protest movement spread far beyond Beijing, but that has been largely forgotten. These photos from mid-May show citizens thronging the streets of Chengdu bearing banners with slogans including "Power Belongs to the People." Students later occupied Chengdu's Tianfu Square, staging a hunger strike at the foot of the Chairman Mao statue.







Thousands took to the streets of Chengdu on June 4, 1989 in a brave protest against the killings in Beijing. The authorities used tear gas and stun grenades to try to disperse the marchers, but fighting broke out. Police were massively outnumbered and were forced to withdraw to government buildings, which were attacked by crowds, as in the middle left picture. Overnight, the city was plunged into chaos, with angry citizens setting fire to government property.

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