

## **Talk for 3 June. Tiananmen in Hong Kong and the Importance of Art as Record.**

This is three quick observations. Two poems, one satirical ish piece of prose. This first poem concerns me mulling over my right to speak on what's happening in HK at the moment, partly because as I can leave far easier than others I accept that I am not as omphalically connected to the situation as those who cannot. My RISK is not as great and the self-accusation is that there is a degree of personal grandstanding should I pretend that this is not the case. Plus White Saviour Syndrome is simple not my style, and I don't think people need it or want it.

That said: I have lived in Hong Kong for over twenty years and am invested emotionally, financially and by blood in the current situation. I do have Skin in the Game.

That's the though process being worked through in this one.

### **Sonnet 356. Skin in the Game.**

Our Right to comment on the world's events  
Is based on weight of thought? Ability?  
Upheld by facts we've sought? From here we get  
The confidence to raze uncertainties?  
Our Right to castigate, to criticize

Is built through time spent in community?  
Or how our comfort can be compromised  
By claims to voice the crowd with clarity?  
But Right's the wrong word here! For who need ask  
Permission to articulate their theme?  
And who could give it? Whose test must be passed  
To prove a speaker's suitability?

Our own at least! And I stand unashamed  
Of bruises on skin I've in the game.

**Andrew Barker**

In Gore Vidal's book *Empire* he has, I think it's, McKinley say "What America needs now is a great poem." He means that we only remember Troy because of the Iliad, and the Imperial expansion of America into the Philippines he wants glorified would be better established through art.

As Christopher Hitchens usefully put it. "To not be absolute is not to be obsolete," meaning that just

because something is not completely true doesn't mean that its not true often enough to be useful. This is a part of Louise Ho's *Remembering 4th June, 1989*, which while it may not be great is certainly quite good and relates very well to something going on today.

### **Remembering 4th June, 1989**

Yes, I remember Marvell, Dryden,  
Yeats, men who had taken up the pen  
While others the sword  
That would have vanished  
Were it not for the words  
That shaped them and kept them.

The shadows of June the fourth  
Are the shadows of a gesture,  
They say, but how shall you and I  
Name them, one by one?  
There were so many,  
Crushed, shot, taken, all overwhelmed,  
Cut down without a finished thought or cry.

Presumably, that night, or was it dawn,  
The moon shone pure,  
As on the ground below  
Flowed the blood of men, women and children.  
The stunned world responded, and  
Pointing an accusing finger, felt cheated.

But think, my friend, think: China never  
Promised a tea party, or cakes  
For the masses. It is we,  
Who, riding on the crest of a long hope,  
Became euphoric, and forgot  
The rock bottom of a totalitarian state.

**Then, this compact commercial enclave,  
First time ever, rose up as one.  
Before we went our separate ways again,  
We thought as one,  
We spoke as one,  
We too have changed, if 'not utterly'  
And something beautiful was born.**

**As we near the end of an era  
We have at last  
Become ourselves.  
The catalyst  
Was our neighbour's blood.**

**Whoever would not  
For a carefree moment  
Rejoice at a return  
To the Motherland?  
But, rather pick ears of corn  
In a foreign field  
Than plough the home ground  
Under an oppressive yoke.**

**Ours is a unique genius,  
Learning how to side-step all odds  
Or to survive them.  
We have lived  
By understanding**

**Each in his own way  
The tautness of the rope  
Underfoot.**

**Louise Ho**

What's often misunderstood about this poem is that it is not about what happened in Tiananmen. It is about the reaction of the Hong Kong people to what happened in Tiananmen. And this is a reaction she sees as the seminal creation of a Hong Kong identity.

One again "To not be absolute is not to be obsolete." She may not be 100% right, but few would say that she is not onto something. Part of the reason today is so important to the people of and in Hong Kong, I believe is that today has as much to do with the formation of that HK identity, as it has to do with the students in Tiananmen.

**The catalyst**

## **Was our neighbour's blood.**

I have a belief as to why the type of writing Ho does here is important. We all know, or should know, Stendhal's, "Politics in a literary work, is like a gun shot in the middle of a concert, something vulgar, and however, something which is impossible to ignore."

Which is true except when it's not. But what's important about this noticeable gunshot if you don't do it somebody else will.

So I want to leave you with something I wrote as a satire in 1997 when the way to refer to what happened in Tiananmen was altered in the style book at the *South China Morning Post*.

-A style book change at the newspaper! What happened in *Tiananmen Square* on June fourth, 1989 is

no longer to be referred to as the “*Tiananmen Square massacre*”. It is now the “*Tiananmen Square incident*”. “Massacre” is considered too inflammatory to Beijing. Thus the process begins. Thus we rewrite the past. The repression of the revolters against oppression is now an “incident,” a word so non-specific one wonders what will be made of the massacre fifty years from now. Actually, I don’t wonder. I know.

The “*Tiananmen Square Celebration*” was when many people amassed to tell the Government how much it was loved, and were treated to a spontaneous display of military memorabilia. One over-enthusiastic young man even going so far as to walk out in front of one of the tanks to offer the soldiers some food.

That’s how the “incident” will be viewed in the

future.-

Which brings us back to McKinley. As horrible as this sounds, times seem to be remembered as much for the art that celebrates or condemns what happened, as for the thing that actually happened.

Hence arts' importance. Disruptive gunshot or not.

Andrew Barker