

As Mark Twain may or may not have said, "History never repeats itself, but it often rhymes." In the last several days and weeks, history has been busily composing a number of frightening refrains. Tonight, on the eve of the 31st anniversary of the massacre of peaceful pro-democracy demonstrators in Tiananmen Square, people in Hong Kong are looking back over a year of resistance to violent state power, and in the country where I live, armored military vehicles have rolled down the wide avenues of the national capital, where federal police have tear gassed and terrorized peaceful demonstrators. All so that a would-be dictator could have a photo opportunity in front of a church that he didn't even bother setting foot in.

The resonances are almost overwhelming.

It seems we all have a great deal in common right now. This is a dangerous time, and while I can't be here in person, I wanted to share these words. I recently read a short post by the Hong Kong writer Hon Lai Chu. Those of you who read Chinese might have seen it on her Facebook page. I've translated it into English. Here's what she wrote:

Several weeks ago I gave an interview, and the first question the reporter asked me was this: "If there ever came a day when you could no longer write, what would you do?"

This was far from the first time I had encountered that question. Ten years ago, a reporter from the Mainland asked me the exact same question.

I think the question that both of them had really wanted to ask was, "If you were to lose the thing that's the most important to you, what would you do?"

I've forgotten how I answered the question ten years ago, but my answer several weeks ago was that I would do something else. If I were unable to publish or post, then I would write for myself. If the act of writing became subject to surveillance and prohibited, then I would continue to weave words in my mind. In fact, none of this is of the utmost importance, because impermanence is the only constant in the universe, and in the end everyone will die. There are some predicaments that seem extremely realistic, and yet they are illusions, which will soon be transformed. There is nothing more real than breathing in and out. When, in the midst of all of this upheaval around the National Security legislation, I find myself feeling afraid, I try my best to remember this point.

— Hon Lai Chu

When I read this, I was reminded of an anecdote in an essay by a Mainland critic about poetry after June 4. The essayist, addressing the difficulty of writing under political repression, relates an anecdote about Anna Akhmatova.

In the darkest years of Stalin's repression, Akhmatova was unable to write any of her poetry on paper, lest the secret police confiscate her work and arrest her. Instead, she composed poems in her head and committed them to memory. When she had a new poem, a friend would come over and they would sit at her table and light a candle. Akhmatova would proceed to write the poem on a piece of paper. The friend would read it silently and memorize it. Once the friend had memorized the poem, they would use the candle flame to light the paper on fire and burn it until there was nothing left but ash. The essayist wrote that in China in the 1990s and 2000s, poets were in an even more difficult position, because not only did they not have paper and pencil, they had neither matches nor candles.

When I think about all of us in our different time zones, it gives new meaning to the word "vigil". I picture all of us on June 4 lighting candles in different time zones, so that while some are sleeping others are awake, and vice versa. This way, someone will always be keeping watch, and keeping the flames of democracy and freedom of expression burning.

[Read the following essay if and only if you want to share this and there's extra time, but there's no need.]

On the same page that she posted her thoughts on the interview question, Hon Lai Chu also posted the following short essay.

Watching the Clouds, by Hon Lai Chu

Outside my window is a vast expanse of sky and cloud. This is a luxury. Some of the dwellings in this densely packed city do not even have windows, and great many of the windows that there are look out on dark and depressing views. I think that if one can manage to be allotted a tranquil and bright window, it's not a matter of chance or a mere stroke of good luck; rather, the message can be read in the clouds.

Just as when I worked at the newspaper, before turning on my computer I would spend 20 minutes browsing that day's editions of all the major papers; or, every day before I sat down to write, I would spend a half-hour writing in my secret diary, every morning, I sit by the window and watch the clouds, completely immersed. In modern city life, free time is such a luxury that one can feel a bit guilty; and yet, at the same time, these interludes are extremely important. If reading newspapers before getting down to editorial work is a way of nourishing one's sense of touch, and the diary entries before writing are a way of soothing and anxious mind, then watching the clouds is a way of finding clarity in the laws of nature, and appreciating that reality is a realistic illusion.

Cloud formations, ranging from a disorderly profusion of cotton puffs spread across an azure sky on one day, to the plump clouds of another day, hanging in the air around the peaks with their full bellies; and then the next day, the clouds might fill the entire sky, extending in every direction until the day becomes a cloudy day, or turning to fog that meanders between the mountains. At these times, dragonflies fly low, and flying ants hover over the water in the moments before the storm breaks. Then the rain stops, and it's another clear day, and we resume the cycle of alternating clear and rainy days. The affairs of the world and of the ten thousand living things, from tumult to tranquility, from loss to wholeness, from flourishing to decline, this is an ever-changing cycle. Because human beings are already too distant from nature, clinging to happiness, fearing destruction, they are easily taken by surprise, and may even fall into despair.

First an epidemic, and then totalitarian violence has crept into many sectors of life. Everywhere there are new forms of resistance or repression, and yet, after suffering from insomnia for the past few months, I need only look to the shapes of the clouds in order to

apprehend the fact that I am in nature, that I am merely a drop of water, a flying ant, a doomed beam of light. In the end, everything will pass.

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