

"Crevice of History: A Tiananmen Reading"
Text for Sara Tung

Excerpt from "We Are All Hongkongers", forthcoming in the "Umbrella Movement Five Years On and Beyond" feature of Issue 45 of *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*

Note: Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

We Are All Hong Kongers

By Sara Tung

On 12 September 2001, the day after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, the French newspaper *Le Monde* published a front-page editorial under the headline, "Nous Sommes Tous Américains." We are all Americans.

Today we are all Hong Kongers.

I am an ABC. When the protests against extradition broke out last June, I believed that this was not my fight. I spent many months in Hong Kong in the 1980s and lived in Hong Kong in the 1990s, but I never fell in love with the city, like so many others.

Later, I realized that, like the people of Hong Kong, my family and I had also struggled against Chinese Communist repression. In fact, Hong Kong served as a refuge for my grandmother, my mother and me when each of us was forced to leave China.

In the past year, millions of people in Hong Kong, unwilling to be victims, have been united in protest, serving as "next generation" revolutionaries fighting to preserve Hong Kongers' unique identity and way of life. In doing so, they have been fighting for

all of us who have passed through or lived in this great city, or aspired to Hong Kong's values.

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1989: Tiananmen

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Four years after my run in with the Public Security Bureau, it looked as though the phenomenon of China opening and closing would repeat itself, albeit on a national scale, with Tiananmen.

In the spring of 1989, I was a first-year business student at Stanford. I was not completely done with China and decided that Hong Kong would be my next home, so I lined up a summer internship with Jardine Fleming. That April, the death of General Secretary Hu Yaobang served as a pretext for Beijing's university students to fill Tiananmen Square, thus launching their demonstrations for greater openness, reform and democracy. For six weeks, peaceful protests dazzled in their scale and breadth. Tiananmen Square was occupied not only by students and workers but also intellectuals, teachers, journalists from the *People's Daily*, even the police. The organization by the students of the square reflected the kind of government they believed China should aspire to. Train and bus conductors let students ride for free. Popsicle vendors gave away their wares. After martial law was declared, the people of Beijing flocked to the square to plead with soldiers to leave the city or at least put down their weapons.

The demonstrations were the natural culmination of a decade of opening. A big part of me wished I had not left China and could join friends in Beijing who skipped

work or classes to visit the square regularly to support the students, workers and other demonstrators.

Then in the early morning hours of June 4th, the massacre happened.

Although troops had occupied Beijing since May 20th, many of us never believed the People's Liberation Army would attack its own people. During final exam week, my mind was on the soldiers, tanks, and the dead and wounded that filled the newspapers and TV screen. In shock, I rushed to find out if everyone I knew was safe.

How was it possible that China, while opening to the world, would suddenly decide to kill its own children, who simply wanted what was best for the country?

Two weeks later, I was in Hong Kong for my internship, still numb. In the interim, friends had been evacuated from China to Hong Kong and brought their eyewitness accounts of what had happened.

When shots were fired in Tiananmen Square, Peter saved the life of an injured journalist by carrying him to a rickshaw driver, then rode thirty kilometres himself in a bicycle rickshaw, reaching the airport in time to be evacuated with other foreigners. After arriving in their Tsim Sha Tsui hotel room, his girlfriend tried to wash out his bloodstained shirt in the bathroom sink.

In the lobby of the Peninsula Hotel, Peter, still dressed in a T-shirt and shorts his girlfriend had carried in her daypack, looked around as we waited for tea and said, "Can you imagine what this place will be like when the Chinese take over? They'll be spitting on the carpets."

That summer, all of Hong Kong mourned the tragedy. One million people in black protested the massacre. My community in Hong Kong was a mix of finance types I

had met through work, old friends now living in Hong Kong, and friends from China who had been evacuated – all united in our collective grief. The sense of connection between us and with the rest of Hong Kong was palpable. I could not walk far in Central without running into someone I knew, even vaguely, without feeling as though I was meeting a comrade in the true sense of the word. Each of us would go about our daily lives, working, then socializing at drinks or dinner parties or junk trips, acting as if things were normal. It was too difficult to talk about what had happened. Instead we did our best to kill the pain.

At the same time, Hong Kong felt like the Casablanca of Asia, with people trying to figure out their futures while the larger conflict played out on the mainland. Hong Kong natives contemplated what Communist rule might be like or their chances of getting another passport, if they didn't already have one. Expats wondered how long they might stay in the British Crown Colony, with eight years left before the handover. And the most recent group of refugees to arrive – foreigners evacuated from China – wondered when it would be safe to return to the mainland, or alternatively if they should go back to their home countries or to a third country.

The giant up north was starting to leave its footprint on Hong Kong, and the clock had begun ticking.

In August, two months after Tiananmen, I befriended a journalist who had been expelled from China. When I thanked him for his contributions, Andrew said he was an observer, not a participant. In any case, to me he was a fellow traveler, someone who had gotten involved with China and had suffered for it. Andrew had also been through the

Gong An Ju. We were, therefore, “partners in crime”, and understood each other when we talked about China.

When Andrew and I met in Lan Kwai Fong, he hung his head, seemingly in pain over the crushing of the pro-democracy movement. Andrew was like a mirror for me, reflecting the feelings I could not face.

In September, three months after Tiananmen, I returned to China.

Darkness had fallen on the Motherland as the government continued its crackdown, pursuing anyone connected with pro-democracy, “counter-revolutionary” activities. Anyone suspected of being an instigator was hunted. Protest leaders who had not been killed or imprisoned went on the run. So many groups had participated in the demonstrations. A hotline was set up, and the *laobaixing* were encouraged to report on family members, co-workers, neighbors – in short, each other.

I sat up late with an old friend in Shanghai as we waited for his fiancée, a teacher, who had gone into hiding because she had been videotaped while exhorting her students to protest. When I returned to Shanghai Jiaotong University, where I had taught, I was relieved when I was told that my old students were out of the country in graduate school. Among former Chinese colleagues at IBM, everyone worried about their futures under the ongoing crackdown, families split over opposing views on the massacre, and one took his own life.

Everyone in China remained paralyzed in this climate of fear. The rest of us with ties to the country just went on with our lives, trying to forget.

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Early last year, nearly 30 years after Tiananmen, I met Andrew again at one of his speaking engagements in the San Francisco Bay Area. After he had finished his remarks on China, I approached him, and after a moment of surprise, we embraced, happy to see each other again after so many years.

Andrew and I caught up briefly. We were both writing, though Andrew was no longer writing about China.

“I hate China,” he said. “They won’t let me back in.”

The love-hate relationship had come full circle.

“Do you remember how we met?” I asked.

“Sure, I took you to a river once. We went swimming. Do you remember?”

I nodded.

“And you also took me to a beautiful beach. I had to meet you somewhere, but I was afraid I’d get lost, so you told me to go north, towards China,” I said.

Our exchange continued for a little while longer before the event ended, and we agreed to reconnect later.

In the weeks that followed, I had a strange reaction to meeting Andrew again. For a while, I kept seeing images of him doubled over, as if he were being interrogated again, and was asked the same questions over and over.

“What are you doing in China?”

“Who are you working for?”

Then, for the next few weeks, I cried every morning over all that was lost, the China that had been our home and our hopes for the country.