



## Book Review

Philip J. Cunningham, *Tiananmen Moon: Inside the Chinese Student Uprising of 1989*, Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition, Lanham, Maryland, Toronto and Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, 487 pp + xxiv

With young people's dissatisfaction about dirty politics and bad governance, student protesters are best known for symbolic gestures. But student activism has often been a driving force for profound social and political transformation. It is evident that students in Asia have long led resistance movements that overthrew authoritarian regimes in many countries throughout this region. Elsewhere in Asia, student protests have shaken regimes until they were brutally suppressed. The massacre around Beijing's Tiananmen Square where, facing down rows of tanks and troops, students peacefully protested for democracy and against China's Communist rulers, is however one of the most striking examples of crimes against humanity. Very briefly, it is a great participatory upsurge that has marked Chinese politics. While the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was a historical tragedy, the horrific Tiananmen incident has ultimately shaped today's China. Unfortunately, despite the significance of many more students' loss of lives, such movements have received only a fraction of the notice. The timely and pertinent book titled *Tiananmen Moon: Inside the Chinese Student Uprising of 1989* by Philip Cunningham tries to redress this neglect.

Although this single-authored book was first published in 2010, the publisher has just released this new and enlarged edition on the 25th anniversary of the historic Tiananmen incident. Divided into four parts (Part I: The Moon, Part II: Waxing Moon, Part III: Waning Moon, and Part IV: No Moon), the volume attempts to tell us the chronological





events of the Tiananmen Square student protests of 1989, which eventually led to what is referred to in much of the world as the Tiananmen massacre and in Chinese as the June fourth incident, while providing the readers with a portrait of diverse reactions from various corners of the Chinese society towards this bloodiest tragedy. As the author claims, looking back at the eventful uprising at Tiananmen Square in central Beijing in 1989 makes it clear that what happened there was shaped by the fall of Mao Zedong, the rise of Deng Xiaoping and the shifting expectations born of archetypal change. According to him, the real problem for China now, as memories fade and young people grow up oblivious to an event that shaped and constrained their lives whether they know it or not, is how to remember it. It is too easily dismissed as *liu si* or 6/4, a shorthand term with controversial connotations, a tag that cannot even begin to do justice to the remarkably peaceful, transformative and uplifting weeks that preceded the June 4 violent military crackdown. As he also suggests, China wounded itself badly and dangerously by betraying the trust between the people's army and the people, which was all but serving the unspoken bond of consent between the government and the governed. Therefore, accountability and transparency, even late in the day, can serve to heal. Conclusively, the writer looks forward to the day when a million souls can gather again peacefully in Tiananmen Square to pay respects and remember the departed, while also taking time to recall, with warmth and fondness, the joyful and heartfelt contributions of the myriad unsung heroes who gathered in peace under the late spring moon of 1989, chasing the dream of a more beautiful China. Nonetheless, this book also suffers from some weaknesses, and it has a number of shortcomings.

Firstly, while the author has followed a novel writing style, the volume has neither central focus nor basic claim. Also, though the term "Student Uprising" has been used in the book's sub-title, no analytical framework or methodological approach about it has essentially been developed. Admitting that a 12-page section (before "Preface") titled "Tiananmen: Trying to remember, trying to forget" has been included, I do not agree with the second part (i.e., trying to forget). It is such a powerful event that can never be forgotten, but always be remembered.



Indeed, 25 years after Chinese tanks crushed the student-led pro-democracy demonstrations, metaphorically blood still stains the stones of Tiananmen Square and the event is acutely alive. Is it possible to forget the image of “Tank Man”, a true example of unimaginable courage, who became an iconic symbol of both the bloody events of June 4 and non-violent resistance? Seemingly, it does not go with his following statement: “Over a million of people in Beijing alone were drawn into the gyre of transformative demonstrations, whether out of principle, or merely caught up in the excitement, whether out of passing sympathy or in deep solidarity” (p. 485).

Secondly, the author said: “Today’s China, basking in a post-Olympic glow and newfound national strength, is still profoundly haunted by the seminal events of 1989, though the topic is strictly taboo in the media and still feared by influential people in the leadership” (p. xix). It is obvious that the Chinese government has condemned the protests to this day as a counter-revolutionary riot. In other words, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) hard-liners tried to erase the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen massacre from history and endeavoured briefly to convince the skeptical public that violence against unarmed protesters had been necessary to prevent a national disaster. Also, the government has never released a death toll for the crackdown. Actually, students took to the streets to voice their criticism of the high level of corruption in politics and demanded political change in favour of a more liberal system. Thus, it would have been rational if the author had intellectually answered the following two most inescapable questions: (1) Have the Tiananmen Square protests ended in bloodshed a long-lasting impact, and led to some democratic progress with clean government in China? (2) Has any control of public opinion through media control prohibiting all forms of discussion or remembrance of the event since 1989 helped maintain social harmony and political stability in the country?

Thirdly, in this study, the author has asked: (1) How should the hundreds of individuals who died that night, soldiers included, be remembered? (2) How should the extraordinary exertions of students, townpeople and party members who struggled to redefine China under such punishing conditions be commemorated? But he has not responded



more satisfactorily to these important questions. The book should have revealed that social media have replaced the hand-lettered placards at Tiananmen, and images of the massacre have been circulated via the *WWW* (world wide web) by thousands while many online Internet users attempt to evade the censorship efforts to commemorate the event. I do not think that the democracy-loving ordinary Chinese people are living with “amnesia”, i.e., people cannot remember things for long periods of time. Moreover, it should have been emphasized that a quarter century after Tiananmen, China can no longer confine information on its attacks on human rights to within its national borders. In fact, there are increasing international responses towards the Tiananmen massacre and the episode left a bitter legacy the world still remembers even though people in the country are forced to forget about the brutal incident. In this connection, it may be mentioned that Hong Kong and Macau are the only places on Chinese soil where the 1989 crushing of China’s pro-democracy movement can be commemorated.

Fourthly, it is true that this comprehensive volume covers a series of domestic events on the subject in each of its four parts, but it does not offer some insightful thoughts on Beijing’s foreign policy-making process during the period, granted that China’s international relations with the great powers of the world have been deeply affected by the Tiananmen incident. More specifically, it lacks any inside story of China-United States (US) relations after Tiananmen, while the US together with its allies quickly imposed a series of diplomatic and economic sanctions against China. Besides, the author has overlooked the response of Japan to the political situation in China following June 4, 1989 when Tokyo was criticized for pursuing an ambivalent foreign policy with a globally isolated China at that time predominantly motivated by Japan’s economic interests. In the case of the European Union (EU), it is empowering the military rise of China by approving multi-million dollar deals for the transfer of weapons despite an arms embargo stemming from the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. Moreover, India is very much concerned about Tiananmen, and the event introduced a considerable level of uncertainty into the business and investment climate between China and the Association of Southeast



Asian Nations (ASEAN). In short, the book does not see the Tiananmen incident as a subject of much debate, despite the fact that China, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), has maintained to the outside world that June 4 is “much ado about nothing” and a “strictly internal affair”.

Fifthly, while the author says “The challenges remains how to teach a chapter of the past that current power holders continue to deny, how to appreciate the good and bad of it, and, if possible, to draw appropriate lessons” (p. 484), the book has not persuasively presented some valuable lessons that can be learned from Tiananmen, about which Beijing continues to find itself in a sticky situation. It might have been helpful for the better learned readers if the author had proposed that:

(1) A genuinely confident leadership in Beijing would account for those killed, detained or missing in connection with the events surrounding June 4, 1989 in view of the fact that the attitude of China’s leadership 25 years later has remained unchanged;

(2) Time has come for the Chinese authorities to stop the suppression of remembrance, information blockade, media censorship, prohibition of public discussion and harassment of artists, scholars, lawyers, bloggers and relatives of victims as well as to put an end to their impunity over the 1989 atrocities;

(3) The independent Chinese pressure groups could engage directly with the involved United Nations organizations, particularly the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), even though these sorts of actions often provoke extraordinary wrath of the government;

(4) The Tiananmen movement of 1989 was the most serious challenge to the legitimacy of the Chinese government over the years, and the tensions that surfaced during that movement although muted, remain a hurdle to the future of the nation;

(5) In the last three decades with planned reform and opening up, enormous socioeconomic achievements of the world’s second largest economy have received global attention. Nevertheless, these do not excuse China of its continued human rights violations. Rather, they do explain how the country’s Communist rulers can remain popular despite repression, corruption and other problems. Hence, the building of



democracy and rule of law must continue to be perfected, when the voices to topple the Chinese Communist Party have become louder than ever. Apart from this, in order to maintain the country's growth miracle, China's leaders should no longer separate political change from economic reform.

Notwithstanding my abovementioned critical viewpoints, this book possesses several plus points. More categorically, although there are many volumes on the issue available in the world of scholarly publishing, this piece is based on personal narratives and observations of Philip Cunningham. In fact, this American-born China expert skilled in the Chinese Language, who as a foreign student was living on campus at Beijing Normal University during the week-long popular uprising, actively took part in the demonstrations. At the same time, he covered the events as a freelance journalist for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Furthermore, he in person conducted interviews and made interactions with the protesters. Thus, this book represents a different kind of coverage that richly complements the existing literature on the 1989 Beijing Spring. While its major purpose has successfully been attained, this work which is grounded in practicalities has uniquely been organized as well.

Lastly, as a book dedicated to those wonderful martyred souls who will never know the fruits of their great sacrifice, the memoir by Philip Cunningham has been told in an outspoken manner and conversational tone. From his study, we have understood about how two and a half decades later the Tiananmen massacre has become more relevant than ever before while the Chinese Communist rulers are trying to make this influential incident irrelevant. Despite its descriptive nature, this highly-informative and easy-to-read volume will be of interest to those who want to know the thrilling stories of the Tiananmen Square upheaval and the June 4, 1989 government military crackdown from a real person who directly experienced this archival event in the modern People's Republic of China.





*Dr Monir Hossain **Moni**  
BSS (Honors) (Dhaka), MSS (Dhaka), MA (Hitotsubashi), PhD (Waseda)  
Research Associate Professor and Head  
Division of Asian & International Affairs  
Asia Pacific Institute for Global Studies (APIGS)*

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Dr Monir Hossain Moni is currently a Research Associate Professor and Head at the Division of Asian & International Affairs of the Asia Pacific Institute for Global Studies (APIGS) located in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. Prior to this, he has worked for Department of Political Science at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Dhaka for over more than a decade and a half. Under the Japanese Government MEXT scholarship programme, he obtained his second M.A. in Asia Pacific International Relations from the Graduate School of International Public Policy (GSIPP) of Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo, Japan, and earned Ph.D. in Asia Pacific International Studies from the Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies (GSAPS) of Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan. A recipient of the Nakasone Yasuhiro Award, Dr Moni is constantly striving to combine his intellect with action in a meaningful, proactive and timely fashion to help build a “better world” (i.e., poverty-free, peaceful and prosperous humanity) in the 21st century. He specializes in Asia Pacific global studies, encompassing international relations, global political economy, multinational business and sustainable world development. In line with his research interests, he has contributed numerous worthwhile articles to globally reputed journals including *Asia-Pacific Review*, *Asian Profile*, *Asia Europe Journal*, *International Studies*, *World Affairs*, *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, *Journal of International Development Studies*, etc. <Email: [moni@apiqs-edu.net](mailto:moni@apiqs-edu.net)>

