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Douglas Lee served as chair of the Linfield Department of History from 1988-1991. He went on to join the faculty at Pacific Lutheran University and is now semi-retired, teaching part time at University of California Berkeley and California State University at Sonoma.

Remembering Tiananmen Square

by Douglas W. Lee

In the fall of 1989, history professor Doug Lee gave a campus talk that shook me to the core. It came only a few months after Chinese soldiers had entered Tiananmen Square and massacred hundreds of teenagers and twentysomethings – students about my age – and arrested thousands more. Professor Lee had been in Tiananmen the night of the massacre, had taken pictures and talked with some of those students only hours beforehand. It made the world feel very small, made me see international events in a new light and led, in not insignificant ways, to decisions about what I would do with my life. Thirty years later, after my own stints overseas as a journalist and war correspondent, I was fortunate enough to hear Doug tell his story again – this time for Linfield Magazine and the Linfield Archives. And I was able to look through those photos again even as China grappled with a new round of pro-democracy protests, this time in Hong Kong.

The world in 2019 feels smaller than ever, and I'm thankful Doug Lee is still bearing witness and inspiring another generation of Linfield students to think globally and to engage with whatever's out there.

– Scott Bernard Nelson '94, director of communications and marketing

In 1989, I served as the enrichment lecturer for a tour group on a cruise ship from Japan to South Korea, Hong Kong and China. Our group was ashore and in Beijing just before, during and after the events of June 4, 1989 – when scores of Chinese student protesters were massacred at Tiananmen Square. There has never been a precise accounting of how many were killed, although informed estimates range from several hundred to several thousand.

This is what I saw there.

On June 3, 1989, I arrived in Beijing from Hong Kong with a half-full cruise ship of tourists. By the time we settled in our hotel and had dinner, most of our tour group decided to retire early in anticipation of the next day's visits to the Forbidden City, the Great

Wall and the Ming Tombs.

But I was excited about the well-publicized events happening in Tiananmen Square, and I felt compelled to go to the square that evening. I took a cab with three other members of our group. It was still daylight when we arrived. There were so many people there, all acting very casually and seemingly happy. People were strolling and riding bikes, often with little kids on the handlebars or on the back of the bike. I asked the cab driver to park and told him he wouldn't get the second half of his fare (plus a tip) until our return trip, because I knew trying to get a taxi later would be problematic. As we walked into the square, I was wearing a UCLA T-shirt. One of the students in the encampment yelled, "I know UCLA, I studied there!" I spoke to several

people, asking how they were doing and whether they were fearful that something might happen to them. Most were confident they would be fine.

We returned to our hotel around 10:30 p.m., and I planned to visit the square again in the days to come. Later that night, I was awakened by frantic knocking on my door. A member of our group informed me that government troops were killing people in the square.

I turned on the TV. Beijing hotels had only a few channels on their in-house TVs. On one channel, a woman taught math; on another, a woman read a play by the French playwright Moliere. Finally, I found an official Chinese government channel. Chinese writing on the bottom of the screen mentioned that an important announcement was imminent. A woman sat motionless, waiting



Douglas Lee, a Linfield history professor from 1988-91, talked with students and took photos in Tiananmen Square the night of the massacre. He recalls his bus to the train station taking a zig-zag route, often down narrow lanes where people stood with the “V” sign for victory.

to make the announcement. She never did. The screen just went blank after a few minutes. I was eventually able to find CNN news, out of the USA, which reported about the events unfolding a few miles from my hotel. It was only then that I began to understand the extent of the violence. The foreign media provided videos and still photos. I stayed up all night, horrified. Around 6 a.m., I was so moved by the unfolding events that I composed a poem about the tragedy (see page 29).

The next day, the cruise ship passengers departed for a day of local sightseeing but I stayed behind. I had an appointment to see the husband of a Linfield language instructor, who lived on the campus of People’s University, near Tiananmen Square. In a hurried phone call, though, he told me not to come; that there were tanks and soldiers raiding the campus, shooting people and arresting scores of others. What could I do? I went outside for a walk, only to discover that our hotel had been cordoned off, with no one allowed out or in. That afternoon, around 1 p.m.,

our group’s tour buses returned early from their day’s planned excursion. The American Embassy had directed American tourists to return immediately to their hotels and prepare to leave China.

The following morning, our tour group left the hotel at 7 a.m. for the Beijing Railroad Station bound for the seaport (Qinhuangdao), where our cruise ship was docked. The bus to the train station took a zig-zag route, often down narrow lanes, where people stood on corners with the “V” sign for victory. We were detained at one major intersection, where tanks were parked on an overpass. When we finally got to the train station, it was, as it had been when we arrived the day before, deserted and locked up. We were the only people allowed into the station. We sat on the train for an hour. We saw another train arrive and yelled across the tracks to ask if people knew what had happened. They either said “no” or ignored us. In a few hours, we were rumbling through the countryside on a sunny morning, as if nothing had happened. The events of June 4-5, 1989, in Beijing seemed like

a dream, rather a nightmare, that was rapidly vanishing.

I recall two observations I made at the time, which bear repeating today. First, that Deng Xiaoping and his regime need not have taken such dire measures. Second, it is my hope that there will be a Chinese leader who will have the courage to “re-write history and acknowledge the tragedy.” This would go a long way to healing Chinese society and righting a terrible wrong.

This horrific violent event occurred at a pivotal time in which China underwent radical reform and modernization, to reverse the excesses of the Maoist Age (1949-1976). Similar to the French Revolution two centuries earlier, China in 1989 seemed the most unlikely place for such an event. For the Chinese Communist party, the event, however distasteful and regrettable, came and went. The party’s agenda moved forward, resulting in remarkably successful reform and modernization over the last 30 years. Still the memory of Tiananmen persists. Like a dark shadow, it remains an unspoken, yet enduring legacy of what



happened and what could have been.

Tiananmen represented one part of a long history of protest in China and was tied directly to an earlier protest movement well known in the country. On May 4, 1919, a group of university students, labor leaders and newspaper editors gathered in Tiananmen to protest the Versailles Peace Conference's awarding of China's Shandong Peninsula to the Japanese, who had taken it from Imperial Germany during WWI. When students representing several universities occupied Tiananmen Square in May-June 1989, they did so in part to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the 1919 protest. They saw themselves as part of a long and noble tradition. They protested what they perceived as unfairness and injustice, where Communist party leaders selfishly enriched and empowered themselves, while promoting ostensibly progressive reforms and modernization.

China's Tiananmen experience in 1989 is also part of the larger contemporary global experience of the early 21st century, which included a proliferation of protest movements either advocating new democratic leadership and policies or seeking to recover lost democratic institutions and practices. We see this today in scores of places, such as Myanmar, Turkey, The Philippines, Venezuela, Syria, Hungary, Russia and, yes, in China. (Some would say even in the United States.) The proposition is fundamental and enduring – people in every society want the right to speak freely, to choose their political leaders and to protest governmental decisions and policies. In this regard Tiananmen is as relevant and timely today as it was in 1989.

 linfield.edu/fall-2019-videos

Forbidden Dreams Amid the Forbidden City

Spring has arrived, here too Gorbachev and Democracy's dream,
In May, Russians, Beijing students, hopes do entertain,
So too within the Great within, Deng, Li, and Zhao hold court,
Forbidden Dreams amid the Forbidden City.

Tiananmen Square, in all its martial glory, stirs men's hearts and minds!
Let A Hundred flowers bloom, Let a hundred schools contend,
The Great Within, in its shadows bears secrecy, abusive power, and
divided authority.

In the square sprouts dreams of democracy, hope, and joy,
Forbidden Dreams amid the Forbidden City.

One day, one week, two weeks, a cry goes out without an echo, already
the seeds of conflict drop, as budding blossoms do bloom,
Powers that be are divided, purge and pathos do their work,
Among the students, workers, and people, excitement and hope,
Forbidden Dreams amid the Forbidden City.

June 4th, Bloody Sunday arrives, at the stroke of midnight,
Before the hour, light, loudspeakers, and laughter,
After the hour, chaos and carnage unfold, as machine guns and tanks erupt,
Like the fully opened flower, hope and joy drop, and are trampled afoot,
Forbidden Dreams amid the Forbidden City.

Lady Liberty is gone, broken and ground into the pavement,
Gone now the laughter and stench of students encamped,
Over now the stand-off between hardliners and reformers,
between state and student,
Crushed dreams, like crushed bones, soaked in martyrs' precious blood,
Forbidden Dreams amid the Forbidden City.

Forbidden Dreams at Tiananmen, Amid the Forbidden City, live on yet,
Dreams that tanks cannot crush, machine guns cannot dispel,
What has sprouted so colorfully amid the students at Tiananmen,
those forbidden dreams amid the Forbidden City,
they now sprout everywhere in the land.

Someday, Forbidden Dreams, like the Forbidden City, will be forbidden no more,
Democracy a palace for the people, for the people will it so!

– Douglas W. Lee, Ph.D.

6 a.m. June 5, 1989, Kunlun Hotel, Beijing, China