

# Remembering Tiananmen

In China, June 4th is a sensitive date. As the anniversary approaches, an old ritual unfolds: censors spring into action, social media posts disappear and searches for ‘Tiananmen’, ‘June Fourth’, ‘1989’ are scrubbed from the internet. Activists are placed under surveillance, while foreign journalists mark an event that officially never happened. For the writer and former factory worker Lijia Zhang, the date holds special significance.

5-minute read



Lijia Zhang in her early years in Nanjing. As a young factory worker, she would later become involved in the 1989 pro-democracy movement.

**F**or more than three decades, the Chinese Communist Party has tried to erase the memory of Tiananmen. The effort suggests how deeply the Party remains haunted by it. I know because I was there. Not in Tiananmen Square itself, but in Nanjing, where I was a 25-year-old factory worker. Like millions of Chinese, I watched events unfold with excitement and hope. The student demonstrations quickly became a broader movement, drawing support from all walks of life. I organised a protest by workers from my missile factory in support of the students.

Poverty had forced me out of school at sixteen and into a factory that produced intercontinental missiles capable of reaching North America. The factory was, in many ways, a miniature communist state. We lived in identical apartment blocks, attended endless political meetings and were forbidden from wearing lipstick or flared trousers.



Nanjing in the 1980s, a period of economic transition when everyday life remained tightly structured by state institutions and work units.

I spent a decade there but never received a promotion, even after earning a degree in mechanical engineering. My bosses suspected I had a perm, a sign of bourgeois tendencies, though I was simply one of the few Chinese people blessed with naturally curly hair. Every month, women were required to show menstrual blood to the 'period police' to prove they were not pregnant.



**A Buddha statue produced by the missile factory where Lijia Zhang worked. In 1988, employees were invited to pose for photographs beside it.**

Desperate for an escape route, I taught myself English. Looking back, learning English changed my life. What I acquired was not merely a new language, but an entirely different way of seeing the world. As my English improved, I began listening to the BBC, whose broadcasts sounded radically different from the propaganda I heard every day. Gradually, I became more politically aware.

When the student-led pro-democracy movement began in April 1989, my ears were glued to the radio. As it gathered momentum across the country, I felt compelled to do something. For the first time in my life, I felt history opening before me. My fellow protesters and I believed that ordinary people could help shape our country's future.

Then, before dawn on June 4, came the sound of gunfire. The movement was crushed. The hopes of a generation were shattered. Like many others, I learned a painful lesson about the limits of political change in China.



**Workers from a missile factory in Nanjing join a demonstration in support of China's 1989 pro-democracy movement. The bespectacled woman on the far left is the author, Lijia Zhang.**

What has fascinated me ever since is not only the crackdown itself but the Party's determination to erase it from public memory. The campaign has been disturbingly successful. Many young Chinese know little or nothing about Tiananmen. Some have never heard of it; others know only fragments.

In 2013, when the political atmosphere was still more relaxed than it is today, I gave a book talk attended by university students. Afterwards, an earnest-looking young man approached me. 'Did the government really open fire on the students on June 4, 1989?' he asked. 'That was just Western propaganda, wasn't it?' I have often been struck by the gap between my memories and their knowledge.

Personally, I have never regretted what I did in 1989. I was repeatedly interrogated by the police and suspended from work, yet it remains the most meaningful thing I have ever done. It shaped my understanding of China and gave me a lifelong fascination with politics and power.



**Lijia with her mother and her daughters in front of the city wall in Nanjing**

Looking back, I do not see June 4 simply as a tragedy. I see it as a watershed. The movement arose not only from a desire for democracy and human rights but also from widespread frustration with everyday life. Corruption was rampant, inflation was rising, and personal freedom was limited.

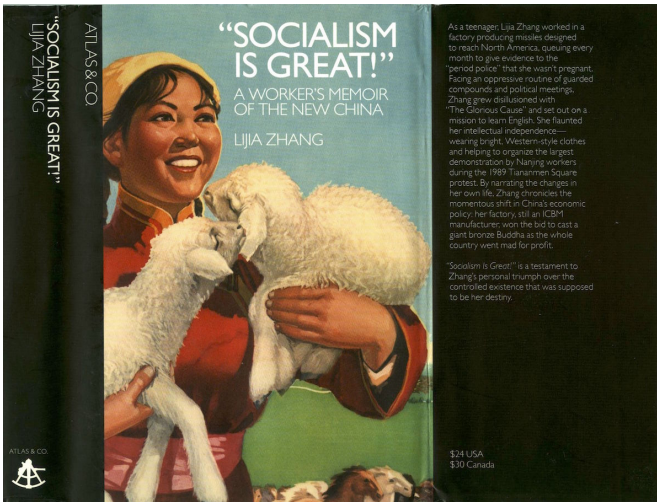
The Party's response was twofold. Politically, it tightened control. Economically, however, it accelerated reform and allowed people greater personal freedom. Chinese citizens today can choose where to live, what careers to pursue and, to a much greater extent than before, how to live. I have mentioned that I failed to win promotion partly because of my curly hair. Today, you can wear whatever hairstyle you like, dye it pink or shave it off entirely.

The cage remains, but it has grown so large that many no longer notice its bars.

In that sense, the protests of 1989 were not an absolute failure. Some of the grievances that fuelled them were addressed. Without that shock, China's rulers might never have felt compelled to expand the cage. The Party defeated the movement, but it has never fully escaped its legacy. It fears Tiananmen less as an immediate threat than as a memory it cannot control.

What Tiananmen represents, however, is a challenge to the Party's preferred narrative. The official story of modern China is one of stability, prosperity and national rejuvenation under Communist Party rule. Tiananmen reminds people that there was another possible path, and another vision of China's future.

When I was young, the Chinese government encouraged us to remember past humiliations and injustices. It understood that memory shapes identity. The same principle applies to Tiananmen. An event of such magnitude cannot be permanently erased. It survives in family stories, private conversations, overseas communities, memoirs and fragments of testimony.



Lijia Zhang later recounted her experiences as a factory worker in her memoir *Socialism Is Great!*, which explores life inside a Chinese missile factory during the reform era.

Thirty-seven years later, the Party may have largely succeeded in making Tiananmen invisible. It has not succeeded in making it irrelevant. The desire for dignity, fairness and a voice in public life still persists beneath the surface. When repression becomes too heavy-handed, people can still push back, as they did during the White Paper protests of late 2022.

For me, the events of 1989 remain a reminder of a moment when millions of Chinese briefly imagined a different future. The tanks crushed that dream, but they did not entirely extinguish the questions that inspired it.

That is why, every year, the censors return to work. Not because Tiananmen is remembered too much, but because it is remembered at all.

Lijia Zhang is the author of the memoir *Socialism is Great!* based on the decade she spent working in a missile factory. Her novel *Lotus* explores the life of a Chinese sex worker.