

# China prevents people from talking about a forbidden anniversary

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A Chinese man stands alone to block a line of tanks heading east on Beijing's Cangan Boulevard in Tiananmen Square on June 5, 1989. The man, calling for an end to the violence and bloodshed against pro-democracy demonstrators, was pulled away by bystanders, and the tanks continued on their way. Photo: AP Photo/Jeff Widener

PHILADELPHIA — China's Tianamen Square changed forever during a few weeks in spring 1989. A popular leader named Hu Yaobang had just died. Yaobang was a popular leader in China because he had changed many old rules and was making the government more modern. Young people went to march on the square to show their sadness.

More and more people showed up over the coming weeks. Eventually, they numbered in the hundreds of thousands. They demanded freedom of speech and of the press, and even built a Statue of Liberty figure called the Goddess of Democracy.

It began to seem that the Chinese government would soon be toppled.

Instead, on June 4, the government ordered the military to clear the square. Army units advanced from every direction. They opened fire on protesters, bystanders and people in nearby buildings.

It has never been clear just how many people were killed. Claims range from a few hundred to a few thousand.

## **Whack-A-Mole Game**

Historian Maura Cunningham says it's dangerous for the Chinese talk online about what happened in Tianamen Square: You have to speak in code.

Don't mention "June 4th," the date in 1989 that tanks rolled against unarmed protesters in Beijing. Instead, try "May 35th" — that month's 31 days plus four in June. It's a way to escape the government's notice.

The game being played between citizen and government isn't exactly cat-and-mouse, said Cunningham.

It's more like whack-a-mole: Each time the government whacks forbidden online speech, it pops up again somewhere else.

"The Internet is a bigger and bigger part of life in China," Cunningham said. "But it's becoming more and more complicated."

Reporter Louisa Lim has also studied the treatment of Tiananmen in China. She described the government's successful effort to scrub the memory of the Tiananmen massacre from society.

"How can people have forgotten something that occurred in living memory?" she asked.

## **The "Tank Man"**

It turns out, it's not that difficult. Accounts of the mass killing don't appear in Chinese history books. Internet searches for "Tiananmen" bring up nothing but tourist information. And people, she said, are punished if they bring up the protests.

Lim showed the famous photo of the "Tank Man" — the lone figure who stood up and stopped an advancing line of tanks after the killings. Then she described an experiment: She showed the photo to 100 Chinese students at four top universities. Only 15 recognized the picture, and several were nervous about admitting it.

"It looks like Tiananmen," one told her. "But it can't be."

Today, the huge square is heavily monitored. Its open plain is crossed each day by thousands of tourists — and by plainclothes and uniformed police.

We must "keep the memory and lessons of those weeks alive," China expert James Carter said. "The people who died," he said, must not be "erased from history."

## **WeChat Network**

In today's China, it is too dangerous to protest on the streets. Protest has moved online — but there too it is getting harder and harder.

Cunningham has seen the change first-hand.

Back in the mid-2000s, she noticed that a few U.S. and British websites were difficult to find. Today, more and more are blocked. Facebook is, and so are Twitter, YouTube and The New York Times.

In the last year things have been getting worse. More sites are being blocked and those who complain about the government are being punished. The uncertainty over who else may be reading has pushed many people onto networks like WeChat. On such services, users talk only with people they know.

"It limits the spread of the idea, but people feel safer," Cunningham said.

What makes things harder is uncertainty about what opinions are permitted. What's acceptable today might be forbidden tomorrow.

"The line is constantly shifting," Cunningham said. "It's really hard to know what will get you in trouble."