

1-1995

From Kent State to Tiananmen Square: Some Personal Reflections

Ken Hammond

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hammond, Ken (1995) "From Kent State to Tiananmen Square: Some Personal Reflections," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 23.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol2/iss2/23>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vietnam Generation by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.

From Kent State to Tiananmen: Some Personal Reflections

Ken Hammond

For me there has always been a connection between Kent and China. When I entered Kent State as a freshman in the fall of 1967 I was already interested in Chinese history and politics. My older brother had just returned from serving in Vietnam. The Cultural Revolution was unfolding in China. And I was becoming more and more involved in the antiwar movement.

In studying China's modern history, I learned about the May 4, 1919 demonstrations in Beijing, which gave rise to what became known as the May 4th Movement. On that date thousands of students from Beijing's universities assembled at the Gate of Heavenly Peace, in Chinese called Tiananmen, to protest against the betrayal of China by the Western democratic governments, led by the United States, at the Versailles Peace Conference. The victorious Allies, having won the war to "make the world safe for democracy," and having raised the standard of self-determination for all peoples, had just agreed to give the former German territorial concessions in China to Japan rather than return them to Chinese control. The warlord government based in Beijing had acquiesced in this, and triggered the student demonstrations.

These protests turned into riots with the homes of leading politicians being attacked and burned, and with large scale street fighting in Beijing. In the following months and years the movement grew and broadened, to become a call for modernization, social justice, and an end to imperialist manipulation of China. One current within this movement developed into the Communist Revolution which eventually won control of the country in 1949.

In the late 1960s, as students in America were confronted with the war in Vietnam as a current living example of imperialism in action and sought to find ways to combat it, the Chinese revolution was taken up by many as a source of ideas and experience to learn from. Both the tradition of May 4, 1919 and the activism of young Red Guards in the contemporary Cultural Revolution were seen as examples to be emulated. In the Cultural Revolution we saw, or seemed to see, a truly revolutionary, anti-authoritarian mass movement, in which ordinary people, students and workers, were participating in politics in their own name, and fighting against the bureaucratic, elitist Communist Party, which had set itself up as a new ruling class.

Unknown to us at the time, the participatory democratic potential of the Cultural Revolution had already been aborted by the time most of us were taking up the study of Chairman Mao's thought. In February of 1967 mass organizations of workers in Shanghai, China's largest and most industrialized city, had overthrown the leadership of the Municipal Communist Party and had established the Shanghai Commune, loosely modelled on the Paris Commune of 1871, and attempting to create forms of mass direct democracy. Within three weeks this Commune was disbanded at the direction of Mao Zedong, who at this crucial juncture could not bring himself to give up the monopoly of power held by the Communist Party.

The Cultural Revolution from this point on degenerated into a struggle among factions within the Party for control, with the participation of "the masses" only a crudely manipulated sideshow. In light of the recent developments in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland, one wonders what might have been possible if this Chinese forerunner of Solidarity had been allowed to develop.

Meanwhile, students in the United States, influenced in part by the propaganda of mass mobilization in the Cultural Revolution, were building their own mass movement for peace in Vietnam and social justice in America.

At Kent State the movement grew greatly from 1967 to 1969. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) became a significant presence on campus in the 1968-69 school year. Political education was carried on at rallies, marches, and in "dorm raps," focusing on the involvement of the university in both the war and in other social injustices, such as racism. SDS self-destructed, both at Kent and nationally, in the summer of 1969, but the political consciousness which had begun to develop among large numbers of students continued to ferment. In the wake of the arrest and expulsion of numbers of SDS leaders and activists, the movement seemed to subside in the fall of 1969. But in fact it was only dormant.

It seemed that winter that people desperately wanted to believe that Richard Nixon actually was telling the truth when he claimed to have a secret plan for peace in Vietnam, and that he only needed to be given a chance to make it work. When, in April 1970, he unveiled the invasion of Cambodia, the sense of having been lied to, and been made fools of, released feelings of rage and frustration among students at Kent and universities across the country. The rebellion of May 1-4, culminating in the murders and woundings of May 4, was the result. The historical irony of May 4, 1919, and May 4, 1970, was bitter indeed.

In the immediate aftermath of the shootings at Kent, twenty-five people—students, faculty, and youth from the community—were indicted by a special state grand jury, which also issued a report blaming the trouble at Kent on pernicious cultural influences like rock'n roll, and the contamination of foreign ideas. No legal action was ever taken against the soldiers

who shot down unarmed students who were nonviolently protesting for peace. When the families of killed and wounded students sought justice from the soldiers and officials responsible, the state, at public expense, resisted for seven years, then settled out of court without allowing a judgement of guilt to be rendered.

The killings at Kent State, though they unleashed a great wave of protests in the month immediately following, with hundreds of schools closed across the country and hundreds of thousands of students taking part in protests, resulted in the collapse of the radical mass movement among young people in America. Once the first wave of outrage passed, and over the summer of 1970 students had a chance to reflect on what had happened, a terrible realization came over the movement. The lesson of Kent State was that white, middle-class students, if they pushed their protests too far, would be brutally murdered, just as blacks, latinos, and peoples of the Third World routinely were. This led to a grim calculus of risk. Sadly, for the great majority of young people, the conditions of their own oppression were not harshly felt, and the oppression of others, while worth the risk of arrest or even getting one's head cracked, was not worth having one's head blown off.

Nonetheless, the movement had taken its toll on the war. The Nixon government was also facing its own grim calculations, and recognized that the war could not be won. The U.S. withdrew from Vietnam, and by 1975 the war was truly over. During these same years, Nixon also launched his opening to China. The Chinese, having backed away from direct democracy in 1967, and with the Party reconsolidating its rule, were beginning to move away from their support for revolution in the Third World. Deng Xiaoping, bureaucrat *par excellence*, was reemerging into political prominence, and needed only to await the death of Mao to launch his own program.

Mao died in 1976 and within two years Deng was firmly in the driver's seat. His "pragmatic" policies of economic reform, part of which was the opening of China to outside investment, were welcomed by the Western powers. But from the outset Deng's policies were clearly most beneficial to the Party bureaucrats and flunkies who dominated all aspects of the economy. As central planning was relaxed, it was these very Party hacks (and their children) who were best positioned to profit from the new climate of "free enterprise."

In the course of the 1980s, the reforms did give rise to some new economic forces, especially in the countryside, where income rose dramatically, and some peasants independent of the Party were able to launch ventures of their own. But while the slogan of "getting rich is glorious" was seen in the West as a banner for China's conversion to capitalism, the Party bureaucracy was in fact reaping most of the profits.

At the same time certain groups within society were being dramatically left behind. Most importantly, students and educators, tied to institutions which had no way of generating income to use as bonuses or subsidies and

thus help keep up with inflation, saw their real purchasing power shrink while factory workers, taxi drivers, and even peasants had great rises in prosperity. At the same time, the efforts to make industry and agriculture more "productive" led to layoffs and the dislocation of superfluous labor from the factories and countryside. Many of these people wound up on the streets of major cities, where they had no legal status, no social services, and little prospect of improving their lot.

The demonstrations which broke out in Beijing in April 1989 were a direct result of the policies of Deng Xiaoping. The students who launched these protests, in attacking the corruption of the Party leaders, and in their calls for "freedom and democracy," were looking for a way to break the monopoly of the Party on economic, entrepreneurial opportunity. They were joined in the course of the movement by two other major groups; professionals from government ministries such as telecommunications or the New China News Agency, and large numbers of unemployed people, largely displaced rural workers.

In the weeks from mid-April to the beginning of June, the Western media, particularly the American television news organizations, made Beijing the focus of their operations in a completely unprecedented way. The role of the TV cameras and reporters, as well as the American government radio station Voice of America, in the development of the demonstrations cannot be underestimated. The students made their banners in English so the American audience could read them. And the reporters breathlessly repeated rumors invented by student leaders and fed to the newsmen as part of movement strategy. American anchormen gleefully reported that the Chinese government was no longer in control, and that its end was only a matter of time.

In the end, the government, which had been virtually paralyzed due to deep disagreements as to how to respond to the students' demands, resolved once again, as it had in 1967, to preserve at all costs the monopoly of power of the Communist Party. The result was the military assault of June 4, in which perhaps 700 people were killed and thousands wounded. Economic reform, and indeed the nation's economic health, was greatly set back. But the Party, despite its loss of prestige and credibility, remains in control.

What I find interesting in all of this is the way in which the media, and the great majority of politicians, have responded to the killings in Beijing. Of course, I can only consider this in light of the response of the same media and politicians to the killings at Kent State. As a student at Kent, I was directly involved in the events of May 4, 1970. And having lived in Beijing for two years in the mid-1980s, I had friends involved in the events of April-June 1989. In both instances unarmed young people demonstrating for what they believed in were shot and killed by government soldiers. But in the aftermath of Kent State, where the students who were shot were, after all, American kids, the state sought to put the survivors in jail, and the media

endorsed the murders as, at worst, a tragic mistake, but one which the unruly students brought upon themselves.

By contrast, the media and the mass of politicians cannot seem to say or do enough to express their righteous indignation about the killings in Beijing. The ten years of praise for Deng Xiaoping's supposedly pro-capitalist reforms evaporated overnight. Indeed, there seems to be almost a guilty sense of "we won't get fooled again" on the part of reporters and anchormen who once gushed about the triumph of discos and democracy. And the politicians in Congress are delighted to have an issue on which they can assume the moral high ground, without having to worry particularly about the practical results of their posturing.

Obviously, this is not to say in any way that the condemnation of Deng Xiaoping and his cronies is undeserved. Rather, it should be noted that the killings in Beijing were part and parcel of the policies Deng has pursued, not merely since 1978, but from the 1950s on. So long as the Communist Party is a self-serving, ruling elite, alienated from the people it claims to serve, it will seek, by any means necessary, to preserve its power. We learned at Kent State that the same is true for those who hold power in the United States.

It has been twenty years since I saw friends and fellow students murdered by soldiers for protesting against the policies of their government. On the nineteenth anniversary of the killings at Kent State, May 4, 1989, I found myself at a rally at Harvard called to support the student demonstrations taking place in Beijing. Some friends and I were passing out a leaflet, urging that in our support for the Chinese students, we should also remember that democracy is something which must be lived every day, and that the problems of social and economic injustice in our own country should not be forgotten or set aside. As the Communist ruling classes of Eastern Europe are being turned out of power and a new era in the worldwide struggle for real democracy seems to be beginning, my hope is that as Americans we will not be seduced by a smug myth of the triumph of capitalism, but will redouble our efforts to keep alive the truth about power and oppression which is the lesson of both Tiananmen and Kent State: that only when governments serve the public interests of ordinary people, and not the private interests of the wealthy and privileged, will it be possible for society to be truly free.

