

After Tiananmen and Prison, a Comfortable but Uneasy Life in the New China

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BEIJING — When Liu Suli was released from a Beijing prison in 1991, having served 20 months for his role in the pro-democracy [Tiananmen Square](#) protests of 1989, he pledged to abide by what he called “the three noes.” He would grant no interviews about the protests. He would write no articles. He would accept no donations from sympathizers.

On that warm June 4 morning, Mr. Liu carried off the corpses of protesters, their blood spattering his shoes. Their sacrifice was too painful to face, much less reconcile.

But this week, as the 20th anniversary of the democracy movement’s violent end drew near, Mr. Liu relented. Seated in his Beijing bookstore, interrupted only by countless drags on unfiltered cigarettes and sips of chilled tea, he tried to reconcile Tiananmen then, and China now. He spoke for three hours.

“If I don’t talk about it any more, I might forget,” he said. “I might not know how to say it.”

Thursday marks 20 years since hundreds of students, [workers and average citizens died in an army assault](#) on the Tiananmen Square democracy movement in the center of Beijing. Inside China, the day is a nonevent; even oblique references to June 4 are taboo.

For the outside world, Chinese officials this year offer a tenable excuse: the protests, they say, threatened China’s stability. With stability restored, China produced an economic miracle that has lifted scores of millions from destitution.

For veterans of the June 4 movement, however, reconciliation is seldom so tidy or superficial.

Some, Mr. Liu says with evident disgust, have put the past aside and embraced the China where Adam Smith, not Marx, is chief ideologist. Others have become permanent dissidents.

And some dwell in an uneasy middle world, part of both Tiananmen and the new China but not wholly in either. They are prosperous lawyers who defend dissidents knowing that it could cost them their jobs, and comfortable academics whose names on a human-rights petition could doom them to demotion or exile.

And they are intellectuals like Liu Suli, who weathered the Tiananmen assault and prison to take a place he never sought in China’s new middle class. Over the 18 years since his release, he has built a popular bookstore and cafe near Beijing’s top academic institution, Peking University, that has become a haven for intellectuals and expatriates. Now 49, he does not seem a man who has suffered these 20 years of stability.

He suffers nonetheless. He is appalled by the notion that China’s success was erected on the bodies of Tiananmen demonstrators. He struggles with the inability of Tiananmen’s ideals to gain more than a toehold in his homeland. And he despairs at the oft-expressed thought that his fellow Chinese have made a devil’s bargain, trading the freedom that he and his fellow protesters sought for a chance at a car and a bigger apartment.

“You can raise pigs to be very strong and very fat,” he said. “But a pig is still a pig. And a pig has no rights.”

Mr. Liu was 29, with a wife, a 2-year-old son and a lecturer’s job at the Chinese University for Political Science and Law when Hu Yaobang, the Communist leader who was pushed from power for advocating liberal reforms, died in April 1989. Within a week, 100,000 demonstrators filled Tiananmen Square for his funeral. One of Mr. Liu’s students, Zhou Yongjun, became the new

democracy movement's first leader.

Mr. Liu was there too, but as an observer. Camera in hand, he shot dozens of rolls of film documenting the events, and he began to see a timeline of sorts leading to Tiananmen, from protests in 1986 and 1979.

“The political demands the students were making were actually an accumulation of 40 years of Communist rule in China,” he said. “The naïveté and idealism of the students wasn't just the students; it was the naïveté and idealism of the people.”

By the time the students began a hunger strike on May 13, the government had already ruled their protests illegal. China's rulers, Mr. Liu said, had left themselves no option but violence should the students refuse to back down.

Eventually, he shed his outsider's position and joined the demonstrators, quickly rising to become the operations director and press spokesman for the Capital Alliance to Protect Law and Patriotism, an ad hoc group that coordinated the protests. He escorted Communist Party officials into the crowd to talk to demonstrators, briefed Western journalists and escorted student leaders to meetings with Chinese Army officers.

On June 4 soldiers approached the square's monument, where Mr. Liu was stationed. One put a gun to his head. An officer approached from behind, warning him in a low voice to flee.

They retreated through a chaotic field of overturned buses and burning military vehicles, returning to a university campus where the bodies of seven protesters had been laid on the lawn. He helped move them out of the sun to slow the decomposition process. Mr. Liu and two fellow protesters, wanted men, fled Beijing at the urging of protest leaders.

But Mr. Liu soon returned. “If everybody in the movement escaped,” he said, “there would be nobody left to continue the movement.” He spent a year and eight months in a Beijing prison with 13 other men, so crowded that not all could lie down at night to sleep. His wife, from whom he has been since divorced, left with his son for the United States.

Mr. Liu's release in February 1991, even before his case reached trial, was a welcome shock. He was fired from his university position and expelled from the Communist Party, but that suited him. “I told them that anything that has to do with the party has nothing to do with me,” he joked.

He says he is still watched constantly by security agents. “The government really hates us,” he said. “It pains them that we are here. We do a lot of things they don't like. But the price of destroying us is something they can't afford.”

He says he is now devoting his energies to deeper discussions on how China can rejoin the modern democratic world. For someone who saw his hopes crushed at Tiananmen, it is a tall order, and he knows it.

“An idealist in China is a word that stinks up the streets,” Mr. Liu said. “‘Idealist’ equals an insane person, or a stupid person, or an idiot. It's best that you don't talk about idealists in China.”

So is he an idealist?

“Of course I am,” Mr. Liu said.