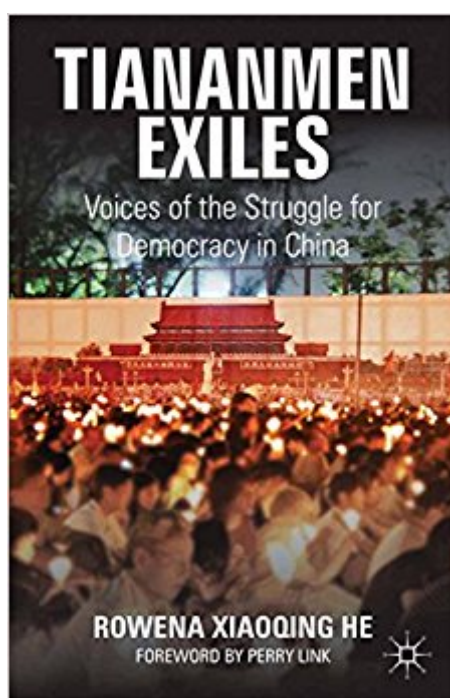


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Tiananmen Exiles: Voices Of The Struggle For Democracy In China (Palgrave Studies In Oral History)



Synopsis

In the spring of 1989, millions of citizens across China took to the streets in a nationwide uprising against government corruption and authoritarian rule. What began with widespread hope for political reform ended with the People's Liberation Army firing on unarmed citizens in the capital city of Beijing, and those leaders who survived the crackdown became wanted criminals overnight. Among the witnesses to this unprecedented popular movement was Rowena Xiaoqing He, who would later join former student leaders and other exiles in North America, where she has worked tirelessly for over a decade to keep the memory of the Tiananmen Movement alive. This moving oral history interweaves He's own experiences with the accounts of three student leaders exiled from China. Here, in their own words, they describe their childhoods during Mao's Cultural Revolution, their political activism, the bitter disappointments of 1989, and the profound contradictions and challenges they face as exiles. Variouslly labeled as heroes, victims, and traitors in the years after Tiananmen, these individuals tell difficult stories of thwarted ideals and disconnection, but that nonetheless embody the hope for a freer China and a more just world.

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Customer Reviews

There are still things, in this fast-forwarding world, worth our slowing down, even stopping, to view, review, think and ponder. This book makes me do all that. Via personal interview recordings and seemingly plain but heart touching narratives, the author presents the sustained struggles of three Tiananmen exiles, all college kids 25 years ago, compounded with the author's own account. If you ask me why I (you'd better too) care. I care because the struggles of the Chinese exiles, as vividly revealed in the book, may inevitably become the struggles of the civilized world in dealing with a rising regime that is sucking us, thanks to the "globalization", into an uncivilized black hole. An excellent book!

Rowena He has written a compelling book aimed at recovering memory and fighting against the official amnesia desperately promoted by China's authoritarian regime. The detailed life stories of those who fought for justice 25 years ago stand as a testament to the power of the human spirit and the universal hope for freedom.

You will find that the writing of this book is rigorous -- there is no bragging or fiction, all from experiences of the author. It is a good reading for people who want to learn more about the impact of Tiananmen Massacre toward Chinese people.

Dr. He's book is amazing. The stories she tells and the people we meet in "Tianamen Exiles" bring together heart, soul and mind. All three are necessary if we are ever to fully know the truth about Tiananmen.

Summary of My View I found this book both profoundly moving and enlightening. I am glad the author had the courage to write it. It will do much good. It will keep the truth alive, along with the hope for justice for the Chinese people. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." I do not know if he is right. It is up to us, the living, to make him right. This book will help us to do this. Background Like many in the West, I paid careful attention to the 1989 reform movement in China, and the struggle of students and workers to reform and improve their society. I was horrified when tanks crushed their hopes, dreams, and lives, both in Tiananmen Square, and elsewhere in Beijing, on June 4th/89. Years passed. I did not forget

Tiananmen Square and the dream of Chinese students for a better world, but the event slumbered deeper and deeper in my memory. Most of the stories I read in the newspapers referred to China's economic might, which indeed is real. Now and then in the media, I heard the point of view, often by Chinese people educated in China after 1989, that the absence of free speech, a free internet, and democracy, is nothing more than a nuisance. One is, after all, free to buy a fancy car or handbag; indeed, with all the new wealth, one even more free to buy goods than those in the West. While I did not accept this thinking, my memory of Tiananmen sank deeper, almost out of sight, as a stone might when sinking through murky water. As June 4th approached this year - 25 years later - the press began to cover the issue. Tiananmen began to rise in my mind. Then I read an article in the newspaper about Tiananmen, history, and memory, titled "A War of Memory Against Forgetting" by Harvard instructor Rowena Xiaoqing He. She astonished me by recounting the fact that the Chinese authorities remain so afraid of Tiananmen that people are routinely jailed in China because they have the audacity to meet and remember Tiananmen Square. Intellectuals were imprisoned just last month. She notes in her article that "Despite repeated repression, the past quarter-century has witnessed a war of memory against forgetting, a struggle between the powerful and the powerless." Reading this I thought - however wealthy the society is, when people cannot speak and remember, eventually, the power structure will collapse through its own corruption, or, be brought down by the people.

The Book - "Tiananmen Exiles" Based on the above article I bought Ms. He's book. She weaves together the stories of her own life, both in China, and in exile, and the lives of leading activists. This book is intelligent, passionate, and taught me a great deal. I learned about the costs of the fight against injustice and the continuing challenges of exile. In Athens, in ancient times, the worst penalty short of death was ostracism. Many today don't value culture and home to this depth, but Ms. He and the others in this book love China, yet are unable to live there. Some of them love China so much, they have tried to turn themselves in, but were refused, and kicked out of the country! Ms. He's book resurrected the event of Tiananmen for me, and reminded me why it matters. Her book is not another general overview of the event. For basic facts regarding Tiananmen, one should look elsewhere. Her book probes into the central issues raised by the event, by looking at the lives of a few key people. Ms. He brings out the deepest part of the story, at least to my mind, - which is the battle over memory and history itself. Very much like Big Brother in Orwell's 1984, the Chinese government has brainwashed generations of young people to know nothing about Tiananmen, nothing about other protests in the past. Everything that is called history must serve the Party. Thus, not only are innovative ideas for the society forestalled, but the human spirit itself is frozen inside each person. Of course, politicians in democratic societies also try to control the past,

but it is much harder to do so in an open society with free speech. Conclusion Without a knowledge of history we do not know who we are, where we have been, and where we should go. We are lost, in danger of a living a superficial life. We face this danger as well in the Western world. We must continually struggle to keep our democracies vital. Ms. He's book shows us the strange situation where a people do not know their own history. Each generation is therefore compelled to start over, rather than develop the ideas of their past. And yet, they cannot start over, because no one can speak freely. Each is free to spend money. But in their search for deeper meaning, each is locked alone in their own mind, like in a prison cell. Some realize this; some do not. For now, the economy is good. But that will not last. And then memory, and the higher hopes for a better, fairer, more open and just society, where lies are not necessary, will revive. This is not a dream, or idealism, but simply long-range realism. Democracy and human freedom contain too much power, destiny, and truth to be defeated perpetually by dictators. This review is by: Robert Girvan, Toronto, Canada

I find this book to be a real-life collective Bildungsroman, a story of China's Tiananmen generation told through the dialogues among four of its members, including three former student leaders and the author herself. The life journey of each individual from childhood to mature age, as captured in these dialogues, is both psychologically revealing and socially, culturally, and historically meaningful. From the deeply touching account of their upbringing, their youthful idealistic aspirations and sacrifices, their frustrations and disillusionments, and their eventual coming of age in a distant land, the reader comes to know intimately how they have become what they are today. The book also contains one of the most succinct and the most moving narratives of the Tiananmen Movement itself, along with insightful observations of the relevance of that historical event to China today. This is also a brave work of memory against officially enforced amnesia with its timely release on the eve of the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Movement that began in April and tragically ended on the early morning of June 4, which was 25 years ago today.

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