

Book Review

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Bullets and Opium: Real-Life Stories of China After The Tiananmen Square Massacre, edited by Liao Yiwu, ed. New York, Atria/One Signal Publishers, May 2019, Pp. 320, paperback edition.

"The China that we see today was born on the eve of the Tiananmen Square massacre on June 3rd & 4th". The marching of armed soldiers, the endless cavalcade of tanks, the clearing of the main square by the armed forces, and the eventual series of brutal killings of young Chinese students & ordinary citizens; finally, the ultimate suppression of revolutionary fervour & political dissent in China is among the few of the most gruesome moments that the author recalls from the year 1989. 30 years after the incident in 2019, *Bullets & Opium* by Liao Yiwu attempts to recapitulate the wrongdoings and the aftermath of the massacre. Yiwu, now living in exile in Berlin, Germany- after escaping the Chinese authorities in 2011, provides the readers with an account of the *"June Fourth Thugs"* i.e. *the ordinary citizens rendered helpless by the Chinese State*, with his collection of interviews & anecdotes. Contrary to popular opinion, the book places emphasis, not on the Chinese students but on the ordinary citizens, who were the main victims of the attack, and were subsequently tortured, imprisoned, maimed, and even executed as *"terrorists"* & *"thugs"*.

Liao Yiwu, himself a writer & a musician, hails from the southwestern Chinese province of Sichuan and holds immense love for poetry. He describes how his quest to unearth the realities of June 4th leads him to question & interview several survivors, including the families of murdered & imprisoned protestors, contemporary political rivals such as from the China Democracy Party, practitioners of Falun Gong religion (which was envied by the Chinese Communist Party), as well as local political activists. Yiwu unwillingly also shares the persistent threat to his life (seemingly from the Chinese authorities) from daily police harassment, secret

state surveillance, as well as more hardcore measures such as imprisonment and even house arrest. This piece of investigative journalism interviewed the “*Tiananmen thugs*” over 4 years in jail and involved more than 15 years of travel to remote corners of China, although at a steep personal loss for Yiwu- leading to the dissolution of his two marriages as well as isolation from his first child. The book is an extensive account of how his method of “*gumshoe private eye*” journalism which includes walking, listening and observing- led to possibly the most credible revelations of the post-Tiananmen era for the world outside China.

A central point in the trajectory of the book is in 1990 when the recital of his own poem named “*Massacre*”, which was dedicated to the victims, lands Yiwu in jail. Over the next four years, he is isolated from his family and forced to spend time with his fellow inmates- both ordinary criminals and thugs. A major theme of the book is associated with the recollection of how political tyranny and injustice cause social, emotional and physical damage to the prisoners- mostly young men in their early & late 20s. Yiwu describes in detail the loss of careers & marriages these men faced, and how no human contact (especially with women) led them to develop sexual issues such as erectile dysfunction and sexual trauma. The endless torture and the evil propaganda of the then-Chinese State, including the horrific police violence- have led to the concepts of human & political rights becoming more & more dispensable in China, Yiwu shows.

The book now & then provides references to how China’s rapid economic development originating in the 1960s has sidelined all other aspects of society such as cultural transformation, political inclusiveness, individual liberty, etc which have been crushed by the overarching presence of the State (read as the CCP). A particular instance of this is provided in the case of Hu Yaobang, who was the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party till June 1989. Yaobang, an advocate for political inclusiveness, liberty and modern democracy was forced to resign from his post by the more-hardline communists of the CCP. His sudden death just days before June 3rd is often described by many, including Yiwu, to be the ultimate catalyst that led to nationwide protests in different cities in China. In the post-Tiananmen era, the Chinese State has been particularly characterised as one that is hostile to its political & social opponents such as smaller political parties, local activists, religions such as Tibetan Buddhism, minorities in Xinjiang, etc. The welcoming of Western multinational corporations lured by cheap labour,

economic profits and government incentives by the Chinese State, which itself is looking to replace the Western power structures with its economic power- has only led to a worsening state of affairs for the ordinary Chinese. Now the locals, as Yiwu describes, are worried about declining healthcare, an ageing population, depleting natural resources, increased pollution, etc on top of the strong political surveillance of the country under the CCP.

Interestingly, Yiwu has added his signature *poetic* touch to the accounts of the survivors, by coining terms like *bullets* and *opium* as metaphors for CCP's weapons against political dissent in China and for the unprecedented yet unchallenged economic development in China, respectively. A curious reader will here be able to gauge the subtle reference to the "opium wars" fought between China and the Western powers in the 1840s & 50s. Further, his humorous and self-deprecating honesty about his failures & drawbacks in his life makes him call himself a "*rebel poet*", who is caught in a living hell of a failed marriage, emotional instability, sexual dysfunction and of course, the constant threat to life when he is released from prison. As a result, he is best described as a *man on a mission* to interview his fellow *thugs*, or as he casually calls them the *89ers*.

Among others, the brutality of the Chinese prison systems and the state-sponsored "*education through labour*" for uneducated workers stand out as the most prominent examples of human rights violations in China in 1989, that continue today on an equal, if not lesser scale. His interviews & experiences with some of the *89ers* such as the "arsonists" who apparently set army vehicles on fire and the "idealists" who intended to adopt a Western-influenced form of governance in China, provide readers with an accurate account of how Tiananmen was not only a pivoting point in the history of China and the world but also a crucial moment in the significant process of decline of human rights in modern China. It is worth knowing that such revelations have only been made possible by the courage of the interviewees (victims) as well as the persistence of Yiwu himself.

While there are countless instances & stories of grief among the interviewees, the readers should keep in mind Yiwu's desolation over his child which he regrets to this day. Readers may continue to appreciate his courage & modesty, yet the grief of losing his daughter and the failure in two of his marriages also surface repeatedly in different parts of the book. Detailed descriptions of how

he evaded the police multiple times, how he got arrested in 1990 as well as his experience of escaping Sichuan after climbing out his kitchen window to begin interviewing Wu Wenjian (one of his first interviewees) try to bring to light the malicious nature of the police & other institutions under the CCP.

Another essential facet of *Bullets & Opium* is the description of Yiwu's efforts in 2017 to help Liu Xiaobo, a Nobel Peace Prize winner from China, and his wife Liu Xia to escape from China to Germany for the treatment of his malignant liver cancer. Yiwu is said to have exchanged a series of letters with German singer Wolf Biermann, who tried to facilitate Liu Xiaobo's escape by lobbying with the then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Although he died in July 2017 in China, his participation in the June 1989 protests and his major contribution to Charter 8 (for the democratic reforms movement in China) ensured that international support was rallied & his wife was able to reach Berlin safely. Interestingly, Yiwu and Liu Xia, both activists, are still concerned about the rights of the Chinese people and continue to raise their voices against CCP-led China.

For first-time readers, *Bullets & Opium* is a fair & trustworthy account of the plight of the June 1989 victims, who continue to bear the brunt of the wrongdoings of the Chinese State. For those who are regular readers & thinkers on Chinese issues, this book spills the beans on how the official Chinese estimates of deaths are grossly underreported and how hardcore communists were the main perpetrators of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Regardless, Yiwu's writings of his experiences of 30+ years, the domestic political discourse in China, and the destitution of the *thugs* make this a fascinating read. While some of the details are indeed horrifying (especially the police brutality and the sexual trauma of the prisoners), they provide perhaps one of the most realistic accounts of modern China's domestic realities to date, which correlates with what Yiwu notes- "*the regime that committed the massacre is still in power*".