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CHINA

All references to Tiananmen Square massacre closely censored for 20 years

Twenty years later, it is still impossible for the Chinese media to refer freely to the ruthless suppression of China's pro-democracy movement in June 1989. References to the demonstrations that took place throughout China for several weeks and the deaths of hundreds of students and workers at the hands of the army on 4 June 1989 are still strictly censored in the media and on the Internet. The information blackout has been enforced so effectively for 20 years that most young Chinese are completely unaware of this major event.

When Chinese Internet users search for "4 June" in the photos section of Baidu, the country's most popular search engine, they get this message: "The search does not comply with laws, regulations and policies." The same search in the video section elicits this message: "Sorry, no video corresponds to your search." If you do an ordinary Internet search for "4 June" with Baidu, you just get official Chinese statements about the "events of 4 June."

The Chinese army's brutal crackdown on the student revolt in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989 ended contemporary China's most important pro-democracy movement. A free press was one of the main demands of the protesters as well as many journalists and journalism professors. Some are still paying the price in terms of administrative punishments, constant police surveillance or forced exile.

Several journalists, including **Shi Tao**, who was sentenced to 10 years in prison for sending an email about the Tiananmen Square anniversary in 2004, are still in prison

for referring to the massacre. Free expression activist **Liu Xiaobo**, one of the leading figures of the 1989 movement, was recently re-arrested. Cyber-dissident **Huang Qi**, who has long campaigned for the June 1989 victims to be recognised, has been held without trial in Chengdu since June 2008 and is now seriously ill.

The censorship imposed after the “Beijing Spring” has never been relaxed. The Propaganda Department and the political police have established a system of extremely strict censorship. Self-censorship and the ignorance of the youngest generation of journalists do the rest. Why are so many resources spent on continuing to cover up a 20-year-old event when China has evolved in so many ways since 1989? “Because the Chinese leaders know they have blood on their hands,” says Renee Xia of Chinese Human Rights Defenders. “They fear that if the truth comes to light, the government will be under pressure to bring those responsible for this crime to justice.”

These days, the censors are concentrating their efforts on the Internet. Reporters Without Borders recently conducted tests that confirm the level of online censorship.

This is the results page, with the message “Sorry, we have found nothing relating to your request,” that appears when you search for “4 June” in Baidu’s video section:



The same video search using the Chinese version of the Google search engine, Google.cn, produced results but none of them were related to June 1989 massacre:



A photos search with Google.cn is similarly censored. But if you do a “4 June” Google photos search using the English-language version of the US company’s search engine, the first results you get are about the June 1989 events in Tiananmen Square.



On Google.com:



Chinese-speaking Internet users located outside China can find text, photos and video about the June 1989 events using the Chinese-language version of Google.com. But Internet users inside China who try to use Google.com are automatically transferred to Google.cn. Virtually no independent information about the “Beijing Spring” can be found using the Californian company Yahoo!’s search engine.

The Chinese-language versions of YouTube and Wikipedia are not censored in the same way, but the two websites are subject to frequent blocking within China that severely limits Chinese Internet user access to information on this subject.

This is the Wikipedia entry:



The Chinese and Hong Kong-based TV stations that are broadcast within China are also affected by censorship. Transmission of a 30-minute programme about the June 1989 events on Hong Kong-based *ATV* was blocked in the southeast of China, where viewers saw a tourism promotional documentary instead.

The rare appearances of the term “4 June” or references to the pro-democracy movement in the press in recent years have resulted in severe sanctions for those responsible. At least seven of the newspaper *Chengdu Wanbao*’s employees were fired in June 2007 for allowing the publication of a personal announcement that paid tribute to the courageous 4 June mothers, referring to the organisation of mothers and other relatives of Tiananmen Square victims who defend their memory.

Journalists, writers and academics still take big risk if they dare in any way to commemorate the “Beijing Spring” or question the official line that the army’s intervention on 4 June 1989 was “appropriate”.

The Chinese Human Rights Defenders network says Public Security Bureaux in various parts of the country have contacted or visited dissidents of late to threaten them with reprisals if they write articles, give interviews or try to organise demonstrations linked to the 20th anniversary of 4 June 1989. The Beijing-based dissident **Zhang Zuhua** and blogger **Zan Aizong**, for example, were warned by the police in April not to write about June 1989.

Zhang Xianling, a member of the Tiananmen Mothers group, said she was placed in police custody before a gathering in Beijing to commemorate the anniversary so that she would be unable to invite foreign news media or write articles about it.

The Chinese authorities have been monitoring the activities of foreign reporters closely for the past 20 years, especially their contacts with dissidents. **Jiang Qisheng**, a pro-democracy activist and vice-president of the Independent Chinese PEN Centre, a writers organisation, says he has been prevented several times from contacting or meeting foreign journalists who wanted to interview him about the 20th anniversary of Tiananmen. On 18 May, for example, a policeman who had him under

surveillance ordered a Beijing bar owner not to serve him when the Hong Kong journalist with him was about to interview him.

Witnesses of the June 1989 events who dare to talk to the foreign media are systematically harassed. Retired soldier Zhang Shijun is being held by the security forces in an unknown location after agreeing to be interviewed by *Associated Press* reporters and expressing his regret for taking part in the tragedy.

A TV crew from Russia's *RIA Novosti* news agency were arrested while filming an attempt to stage a demonstration on the edge of Tiananmen Square on 25 May. The police tried to erase the footage they had filmed. Several other foreign journalists have been followed by the police when they have tried to meet with June 1989 witnesses. And security has been stepped up on Tiananmen Square.

The Chinese signatories of Charter 08, which cites the June 1989 crackdown as one of the "many human rights disasters" attributable to the ruling Communist Party, are also often questioned or otherwise harassed.

On the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, Reporters Without Borders urges the Chinese authorities to:

- release the journalists, bloggers and free speech activists currently detained for participating in or referring to the 1989 pro-democracy movement
- allow the Chinese press and Internet users to report on the events of May and June 1989 and the activities of dissident groups in China and abroad
- rehabilitate all the journalists who have been transferred, dismissed or forced into retirement for supporting the 1989 student movement
- end US Internet company censorship of online references to China's pro-democracy movement
- put a stop to all harassment and use of repressive measures against journalists and intellectuals who participated in the "Beijing Spring", including house arrest, having them followed, phone taps and forced exile
- respect the regulations for foreign journalists when they cover dissident activity and events relating to June 1989.