

# REFLECTIONS ON SEVENTEEN YEARS OF EXILE

BY CHEN KUIDE

For some, refusing the compromises of China's academic world has resulted in the loss of a homeland.

June 5, 1989, Shanghai; a cloudy, gray morning. The car taking me to the airport skirted one obstacle after another through the chaotic city. Whenever traffic stopped, I watched people carrying bicycles past roadblocks on their way to the airport. My car weaved right and left until we finally arrived at the Shanghai Hongqiao Airport. There I boarded a flight to the United States, where I was to be a visiting scholar.

As the plane departed I looked down once more at my homeland. My ears were still ringing with the protesters' exuberant shouts over the past 50 days, as well as with the sounds of gunfire in Beijing that I had heard on a Hong Kong videotape the night before. The few other passengers all sat silently with bleak expressions on their faces, adding to the surreal atmosphere of my hasty departure from my blood-soaked, smoking homeland.

On June 7, two days later, three central government bureaus in Beijing — the National Committee on Education, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Organization Department and the CCP's Propaganda Department — issued a document to the authorities at my university (the East China University of Science and Technology, then known as the East China University of Chemical Engineering) saying that I was not allowed to leave China. But by then I was already gone.

I had originally planned a research visit of only six months, after which I would return home. Now 17 years have passed, and I have unexpectedly learned the meaning of the old saying, "Home turf turned into a foreign land."

On the 17th anniversary of my departure, I found myself looking back at the events that led up to June 4th: From late 1985 until 1987, I worked at Fudan University. In early 1988 I moved to the East China University of Science and Technology, where I founded and chaired an Institute of Cultural Studies, and also served as editor-in-chief of a magazine called *The Thinker*.

On March 14, 1989, a conference I organized in Beijing for the first issue of *The Thinker* was disrupted by the Ministry of State Security. Before the conference was brought to a prema-

ture end, Dai Qing, Su Wei and I collected signatures for the third petition by Chinese intellectuals in support of Fang Lizhi's call for amnesty for political prisoners. At the same time, Dai Qing's new book challenging plans for the Three Gorges Dam was distributed alongside the first issue of *The Thinker*.

On April 15, Hu Yaobang suddenly died, and the Beijing student movement was born. I sent two researchers to Beijing as observers to keep me informed of events. Meanwhile, I was in Shanghai along with several academic colleagues working day and night to collect signatures in support of the demands of students in Beijing and Shanghai for a dialogue with the authorities. Because of the student movement and a visit to our institute from a U.S. university delegation, I delayed my departure for Boston College until June 5.

On the evening of June 4, my colleagues at the institute, including the university president Chen Minheng, gathered at my house for a going-away party. During the party someone rushed in with a videotape taken from a Hong Kong television broadcast that showed students and workers being massacred in Beijing. We watched in horror.

These events became a turning point in life for many people — certainly for me. After I departed the blood-soaked streets of my homeland on June 5, a series of events triggered a chain reaction that was to shape my new life.

On June 8, 1989, the *Boston Globe* interviewed me, and I spoke out about the June 4 tragedy.

On July 13, 1989, Yan Jiaqi and Wuer Kaixi escaped from China and arrived in Paris. They and some French scholars invited me and some other overseas Chinese scholars to discuss the crisis in China at a week-long meeting in Paris, where we were treated with the unique romantic enthusiasm of the French. The French refused to invite a Chinese government representative to a ceremony commemorating the 200th anniversary of the French revolution on July 14; instead, we exiles occupied the VIP seats. The greatest cause for tears was the opening ceremony, when Chinese artists and students played three huge Chinese drums decorated with the six Chinese characters for "Freedom, Equality and Fraternity." The scene caused the whole audience to rise in a standing ovation. French people applauded and wept. (Where is the enthusiasm of the French today?)

In January 1990, I was invited to Princeton University as a visiting scholar to participate in the “Princeton China Initiative” research project, and became the chief editorial writer for the magazine *Democratic China*.

At the end of 1996, Radio Free Asia invited me to host a discussion panel of “China in Perspective”.

From early in 2002 until the present, I have been editor-in-chief of the China Information Center’s internet magazine and news portal “observechina.net.”

As a result of these “crimes,” I have become an “untouchable” and persona non grata in my motherland. Chinese authorities have not allowed me to return to China for 17 years.

I have tried thousands of times to imagine how I would feel at the sight of my homeland, but to no avail. The opening lines of a poem by the Tang Dynasty poet Liu Yuxi help me form a vague mental image:

*Purple street worldly dust was blowing,  
Everyone speaks of the flower showing.  
Thousands of peach trees in Xuandu Temple,  
All planted after Liu’s leaving.*

Circumstances and people have all changed since the fateful year of my departure. Some of my old friends enjoy high-ranking official positions, some have pupils or fans around the world, some own huge luxury houses, and some keep to themselves. Each has his own destiny and role to play, and I have neither the intention nor the right to judge the choices they have made. Likewise, when people ask whether I made the wrong choice, I feel a somewhat surprising sense of peace. “Never,” I say.

Inevitably I feel some regrets, mainly over things best kept to oneself. For me the most profound pain has been that both my parents passed away during my exile. I could not care for them in their old age, go to their funerals, carry their coffins, weep in their memory, erect a gravestone or take a cup of dust from their burial place. But my parents understood me well, and taught me that I must forgive myself. In my exile, I could only kneel to the East, accept their teachings, and pray for them through my tears.

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writing garbage papers and “theory  
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One well-meaning friend candidly told me that my choices were not worthy of my potential, referring to a very good academic position that I abandoned in China. If I had not been so stubborn, he said, I could have been somebody and accomplished something.

I do not consider myself a saint who rises above worldly allures, but there was no way I could cross my moral bottom line and compromise principles I held sacred. I could not pretend not to see troops kill innocent and unarmed people, and having seen it, I could not pretend to support the political regime or subjugate myself to it. I could not trade my soul for

moment’s peace of mind, or forsake long-term, genuine tranquility. I could not give up a clear conscience or my dignity and freedom as a human being.

I could not live with a permanent split personality, constantly living behind a mask and saying one thing but believing another. I could not stomach living in a box, nor could I live with the CCP’s discourse, obeying its “language and grammar.” I could not be part of academic circles, writing garbage papers and “theory monographs” or being an official pet. I did not want to be known as an “academic authority” or “youth mentor” or to train generation after generation to write “correct” papers.

I had lost all tolerance for the CCP’s childish, deceitful propaganda inflicted on ordinary Chinese everywhere. To stay in China would have been an insult to both my soul and my intelligence. I have no interest in living in luxury while living a lie. A life devoid of conviction is a waste, and life in China would not have been a life at home.

In short, after 17 years I still cannot file the June 4th incident away as history; justice has yet to be served, and the Chinese authorities need to tell the truth about the event. People can still not talk openly about June 4th, or judge what happened. We do not even know how many people died or were injured. The incident is still shrouded in heavy behind-the-scenes plotting; many people are still very angry about June 4th, while others still treat it as a closely guarded secret. The events of 1989 remain an important issue in contemporary life, a fundamental lever of China’s contemporary politics as they await the “final judgment.”

It is said that the Beijing authorities are very concerned about China’s recent moral standards and have launched a line of thought called the “eight honors and eight disgraces.”<sup>1</sup> I ask the authorities, why use such complicated and cumbersome concepts? What is disgrace? June 4th is the greatest disgrace, your biggest crime. What is honor? The spirit of those who died on June 4th is China’s greatest honor. If you accept these concepts of “honor and disgrace,” then anything is possible.

A Chinese proverb says: “Facing one’s shame is close to bravery.” I hereby recommend this thought to the masters of Zhongnanhai.

A Chinese version of this article was published in *Guancha Bimonthly* in July 2006, and was posted on the Web site of China Information Center ([www.observechina.net](http://www.observechina.net)) on June 4, 2006.

#### NOTE

1. “*Ba rong, ba chi*” is a slogan raised by Chinese President Hu Jintao in March 2006 as a new moral yardstick to measure the attitude, conduct and performance of Communist Party officials: “Love the country; do it no harm. Serve the people; do no disservice. Follow science; reject ignorance; Be diligent; not indolent. Be united and help each other; don’t make gains at the expense of others. Be honest and trustworthy; don’t trade your ethics for profit. Be disciplined and law-abiding; not chaotic and lawless. Live plainly and struggle hard; don’t wallow in luxury and indulgence.” See [http://english.gov.cn/2006-04/05/content\\_245361.htm](http://english.gov.cn/2006-04/05/content_245361.htm).