

# Talking, in code, about the Tiananmen massacre 25 years ago

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A Chinese man stands alone to block a line of tanks heading east on Beijing's Cangan Boulevard in Tiananmen Square on June 5, 1989. The man, calling for an end to the violence and bloodshed against pro-democracy demonstrators, was pulled away by bystanders, and the tanks continued on their way. AP Photo/Jeff Widener

**PHILADELPHIA** — In China, historian Maura Cunningham says, there's only one safe way to hold an online discussion of the Tiananmen Square massacre: You have to speak in code.

Don't mention "June 4th," the date the tanks rolled against unarmed protesters. Instead, try "May 35th" — a count of that month's 31 days plus four in June. It's a way around the censors and to avoid the lurking presence of China's security officials.

The game being played between citizen and government isn't exactly cat-and-mouse, said Cunningham, a scholar of Chinese history from Philadelphia.

It's more like whack-a-mole — each time the government whacks forbidden online speech, it pops up again somewhere else.

## Scrubbing History

On Thursday, Cunningham will explore new and threatening shifts in Chinese digital media at a St. Joseph's University conference on Tiananmen, timed to the 25th anniversary of the 1989 protests.

"The Internet is a bigger and bigger part of life in China," Cunningham said in an interview. "But it's becoming more and more complicated."

The conference, called "Tiananmen at 25," is free and open to the public. It gathers some of the world's top experts on the massacre and kicks off what promises to be a season of international remembrance.

Harvard University holds its own seminar two days after St. Joseph's. The University of Southern California's U.S.-China Institute released a new video on how journalists covered the protests.

Among the new books is "The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited" by Beijing-based National Public Radio reporter Louisa Lim, who gave the keynote speech here Wednesday.

Lim, speaking to about 100 people, described the Communist Party's successful effort to scrub the history and memory of Tiananmen from society.

"How can people have forgotten something that occurred in living memory?" she asked.

It turns out, it's not that difficult. The massacre doesn't appear in history books. Internet searches for "Tiananmen" bring up tourist information. And people, she said, face punishment or harassment if they bring up the protests.

Lim showed the famous photo of the "Tank Man" — the lone figure who stood up and stopped an advancing line of tanks after the killings. Then she described an experiment: She showed the photo to 100 Chinese students at four top universities. Only 15 could identify the picture, and several were nervous to have that knowledge.

"It looks like Tiananmen," one told her. "But it can't be."

## **A Shifting Landscape**

Today, the huge square in Beijing's center is some of the world's most sensitive and heavily inspected real estate. It is a space bristling with historical, political and emotional implications.

Its open plain is crossed each day by thousands of tourists from around the globe — and by plainclothes and uniformed security forces. Looming from its post on the Gate of Heavenly Peace is a giant portrait of Chairman Mao.

The nature of the square changed forever during a few weeks in spring 1989. The death of former Communist Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang, a popular, open-minded reformer, led thousands of students and young people to march to the square in mourning.

More and more protesters arrived over the coming weeks, eventually numbering hundreds of thousands. They demanded government accountability, freedom of speech and of the press, and even built an ersatz Statue of Liberty figure called the Goddess of Democracy.

A sense grew as news coverage spread worldwide that the Chinese government would be toppled, as others had fallen in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

Instead, on June 4, the government ordered the military to clear the square. Army units advanced from every direction, opening fire on protesters, bystanders and people in nearby buildings. An accurate death toll has never been established, though estimates range from a few hundred to a few thousand.

“It’s vital that we keep the memory and lessons of those weeks alive,” conference organizer and China expert James Carter said. The purpose of remembering is “partly to understand China more fully, but also to prevent the people who died standing up for their beliefs from being erased from history.”

In a country where it’s foolhardy to gather publicly to demand democratic reforms, opposition has moved online, onto a shifting landscape of chat rooms and social-media platforms.

Cunningham has seen the change. A former editor of *The China Beat* — “*Blogging How the East is Read*” — and a visiting scholar at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, she’s been traveling in China for a decade.

### **Blocking Information**

Back in the mid-2000s, she noticed that a few U.S. and British websites were difficult to access. Today, more and more are blocked. Facebook is, and so are Twitter, YouTube and *The New York Times*.

The squeeze on information sparked Cunningham's interest in how people find ways around restrictions on “subversive” opinions.

Censored words include not just “massacre” and “tank” but also mentions of Tibet, Taiwan and the restless region of Xinjiang.

It’s the big discussion groups and most-read Internet posters drawing government attention, Cunningham said. As in this country, a single, potentially controversial post can easily pass unnoticed.

The government simultaneously censors and embraces the Internet. It has opened its own accounts to connect with people and promote its ideas.

In the last year there’s been a noticeable tightening online and a crackdown on those who voice complaints. The uncertainty over who else may be reading has pushed many discussions onto networks like WeChat, where users only talk with people they know.

“It limits the spread of the idea, but people feel safer,” Cunningham said.

Many people think everything on the Internet is censored in China, but actually it’s more complicated than that, she said. What’s acceptable today might be deemed subversive tomorrow.

“The line is constantly shifting,” Cunningham said. “It’s really hard to know what will get you in trouble.”

## Quiz

1 What would be another good title for the section "A Shifting Landscape"?

- (A) "Ignoring History"
- (B) "Protesting Online"
- (C) "An Important Protest"
- (D) "A Fallen Government"

2 The sentence below is the main idea of which section of the article?

*The Chinese government has a complicated and shifting relationship with the Internet.*

- (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-4]
- (B) "Scrubbing History"
- (C) "A Shifting Landscape"
- (D) "Blocking Information"

3 Which of the following is NOT a method the Chinese government has used to get people to forget about the events of Tiananmen Square?

- (A) punishing people who discuss the protests
- (B) making sure people do not learn about in school
- (C) removing every account of the events from the Internet
- (D) limiting how many people are allowed to go to Tiananmen Square

4 What is the MOST LIKELY reason that an accurate death toll has never been established for the Tiananmen Square protests?

- (A) too many people ran away before they were killed
- (B) the square was too big to count everybody
- (C) the Chinese government refused to count the number of dead
- (D) there was not enough money to pay people to count the number of dead