

The Washington Post  
June 1, 2019

## Imprisoned after Tiananmen, still speaking out

*An ordinary, apolitical man, he joined the protests of a sense of solidarity. Thirty years later, he feels a responsibility to tell his story.*



*A truck is almost buried in people as it makes its way through the crowd of thousands gathered in Tiananmen Square in the early days of a pro-democracy rally that turned into despair in 1989. (Sadayuki Mikami/AP)*

by [Anna Fifield](#)

BEIJING — Dong Shengkun survived June 4, 1989, with his life, but with little else.

His decision to go to Tiananmen Square in the days and weeks leading up to the violent crackdown ended up costing him almost everything: his wife, his son, saying farewell to his father. It also cost him his job and any hope of a halfway decent job in the future.

But Dong, who is now 59 years old, says it was worth it.

“Yes, I paid a price, but I have never regretted it for a moment,” he said in an interview in Beijing, where he still lives despite everything. “I feel so much more fortunate than those who lost their lives, and I feel a responsibility to make sure that our people know our history — not the history written by those in power, but the truth.”

Now, near the 30th anniversary of that bloody event in Tiananmen, Dong is doing his bit to counter the authorities’ efforts to erase the memory of those days in 1989, when hope and solidarity quickly turned into despair and then apathy.

The Communist Party apparatus has powerful tools to try to mold China’s collective consciousness, including rewriting textbooks and controlling state media.

But a small group of people have told and retold their stories of Tiananmen. Some of the student leaders have recounted the events of 1989, usually from the safety of Taiwan or the United States.

The mothers of the students who were killed that night have become inadvertent activists. Artists try to convey the feelings that have remained. The photo of the still-unknown man who stood in front of a column of tanks has become the quintessential image of that day.

But often forgotten in the efforts to remember what happened are the ordinary people who joined the students to show their support for the movement. The uneducated, the apolitical, the simply interested, who were pulled into the square by some kind of magnetic conscience.

People like Dong. Their role in the 1989 protests has often been overlooked. And their punishments were often much harsher than those endured by the high-profile student leaders.

Tens, then hundreds of thousands of people flocked to the square on April 15, 1989, to mourn former Communist Party general secretary Hu Yaobang. Hu had been an economic reformer and had led a campaign against the corruption that had come with China’s economic opening, but had been ousted in 1987.

The first mourners to arrive were students from the four big universities in Beijing, who wanted to keep alive Hu’s vision for a more transparent political system. They gathered around a model of the Statue of Liberty made by art students, called the Goddess of Democracy. They held

banners and sang songs. And they were joined by people from all walks of life. As many as 1 million people gathered in central Beijing at the peak to support the student movement.

In May, China's alarmed leaders put the capital under martial law. When that didn't stop the protests, they resorted to previously unimaginable measures.

On the night of June 3, China's leaders ordered the military to clear the square — by whatever means necessary. The square is now synonymous with the bloody events that took place in Beijing and in other cities across the country that night. No one knows how many people were killed. But by the time dawn broke on June 4, there were no more protests.



*Thirty years after the events of Tiananmen Square, Dong Shengkun is doing his bit to counter the authorities' efforts to erase the memory of those days. (Anna Fifield/The Washington Post)*

Dong was 29 when the movement began. He'd done three years in the military and was working at a print factory. He had a wife and a 3-year-old son, and they lived not far from the western side of the square. And something about the protests struck a chord with him.

“The movement triggered a lot of agreement among the common people,” he said over lunch in a private room in a Beijing restaurant, away from prying ears. “I didn’t have political goals or pursuits — I didn’t get much education — but I just wanted to be with them and to show my moral support.”

The students’ slogans about democracy and about changing their society affected him, and he began to believe in the cause. He went back to his print factory and put up posters telling his co-workers about what he had seen in the square. He encouraged them to come with him. Some did.

“The atmosphere was one of a kind. It felt like almost everyone in Beijing was joining in, believing that victory was in sight,” he said. “We were making a difference.”

Victory was not in sight. On June 3, waking up out of an evening nap, Dong heard his neighbors saying that the soldiers were opening fire. A curfew had been announced, and traffic controls were in place. In Dong’s neighborhood, people started warning that the army was coming. Buses of soldiers were arriving in the square, armed with tear gas and guns and live ammunition

Dong went out into the streets. He saw armored vehicles and armed soldiers. He heard incessant gunfire. Soldiers were shooting randomly down the alleys in his neighborhood, at no target in particular. It was, he said, an indiscriminate rampage.

“There was blood and brain matter all over the ground. There were dead people lying in the streets. Those who survived got up and helped the injured back indoors or into the alleys,” he said. “I was hiding by a kindergarten gate and tried to peek out to see if the soldiers had left. A bullet whizzed by my face, and pieces of the wall fell on me.”

During pauses in the shooting, residents poured into the street, trying to reason, plead or argue with the soldiers. Dong tried to appeal to the soldiers, too.

“In tears, I told a major that I was in the army, too, and that I never imagined that some day my own comrades would be pointing their guns at me,” he said.

He went home, covered in blood from trying to help the injured. Then he, his parents and his younger sister sat there, crying and crying.

“We didn’t know why but we just couldn’t stop the tears from pouring out. My younger sister and I felt humiliated,” he said. “It was a massacre. No one could have imagined our army would do such a thing to their own people.”

He returned to the square after dawn. The students were withdrawing from the site. They were hugging and weeping and vowing to remember the dead and continue the fight.

Then they saw the tanks. Some students managed to flee. But Dong saw at least six young men “crushed to a pulp. I just couldn’t believe my eyes. We started wailing, shouting at the soldiers,” he said.

Six days later, he returned to work, but he was quickly summoned to see the factory director. He was bundled into a Jeep by soldiers, who handcuffed him and beat him, he said. He was thrown into a prison and eventually charged with arson.

When he’d been in the square the morning of June 4, he’d seen some students trying to burn army vehicles. They’d given him a rag soaked in gasoline, he said. But he said he had not used it to set fire to anything.

In the prison, a police officer held a pistol to his head and threatened to shoot him if he didn’t confess. “After what I saw on the streets, I knew what they were capable of,” he said. He confessed.

He was originally sentenced to death, but that was ultimately commuted to a prison sentence. He felt lucky. Other inmates had been sentenced to life in prison, or executed. In prison, he worked hard to win his release. He studied and earned the equivalent of a college diploma.

It took 17 years and three months, but he was finally let out on Sept. 9, 2006.

His father had died of cancer three years earlier. His wife had long ago divorced him. He had no relationship with his son, who is now in his 30s. He hasn’t tried to force a relationship, seeing his son just a couple of times a year now.

He hasn’t been able to get a proper job either. That would require passing a criminal-background check, which Dong cannot. So instead, he’s tried to make ends meet by doing odd jobs like selling crockery or working as a warehouse security guard.

He sometimes borrows his girlfriend’s car and drives drunk people home. He can’t marry his girlfriend because he needs a basic living allowance that he gets from being single.

Dong is one of the untold number of victims of those events of June 4, 1989. His life has been irrevocably changed for the worse, and yet he has no regrets. In fact, he relives it constantly. He’s trying to make sure that June 4 is not forgotten by future generations.

“The government has an official strategy of trying to erase the public memory,” he said. “But as long as I’m alive, I will try to tell my story and what I have witnessed. It might seem futile and many people don’t want to know about it in the first place, but I will not give up. I’m here and I’m supposed to speak out and tell people the truth.”

