

Translated excerpt from the book

## A Line Across China

*(En linje över Kina)*

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### Bill Clinton

About Wu Jing, and some extremely large dogs

In early May 1999, news broadcasts across the world were full of news about the war in what was then still the Yugoslav province of Kosovo. The Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic was accused of brutal ethnic cleansing and genocide against the Albanians living in the area. At a meeting about the future status of Kosovo at Rambouillet outside Paris, Milosevic had refused to sign a treaty negotiated by the USA and EU. It was a clear act of provocation, and, ignoring the UN, President Bill Clinton responded by invading Yugoslavia. The attack was preceded by seventy days of intensive aerial bombardment. At midnight on 8 May, an American B2 bomber dropped five 1000 kilogram missiles on the capital, Belgrade. They all hit their target: the Embassy of the People's Republic of China. Three of the missiles exploded near the Embassy's information centre, and three Chinese journalists, Xu Xinghu, Zhu Ying and Shao Yunhuan, were killed, and twenty-three others were wounded. China was the only country whose Belgrade embassy was still open, and China was a whole-hearted backer of Slobodan Milosevic. The Americans claimed that their maps were out of date, and that they thought the Chinese Embassy was a Serbian weapons store. The Chinese believed that the USA had intentionally carried out a military attack on China, killing Chinese citizens on Chinese territory. The result was a serious diplomatic crisis between the USA and China.

When the bombs were exploding in the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, Magnus and I were asleep in the Kumbum Jampaling monastery – the monastery which had been built around the sacred sandalwood tree bearing the image of Buddha on its leaves. We had no idea of events out in the wider world, and spent most of our time thinking about girls, monks and porridge. Once a week we would phone Carina Gustavsson, one of my fellow-students in Chengdu. After each conversation she would carefully transcribe everything we had said and

send it in an email to our loved ones. I had just got my first email account, and at the time it was unimaginable that seven years later it would be possible to go into an internet café in practically every village on our route. In 1999 there was not a single internet café between Xining and Chengdu. Mobile phones were also out of the question; there were neither the phones nor any coverage. We had to use kiosks and shops which had a national phone-line. Often this was the only telephone in the entire village. It was not until mobile phones reached the highlands that the telephone became something owned by private citizens up here.

After crossing the Yellow River, the first town Magnus and I reached was Kanbula. We needed water for our empty tanks, and a telephone so that we could phone Carina. It was more than a week since we had spoken, and we had a lot to tell her. I asked people in the crowd that had gathered around us if there was a phone we could use. They looked more angry than curious, and instead of a reply we were questioned back.

*“Are you from the USA?”*

I replied that we weren't Americans, but Swedes, from a small country in northern Europe.

*“Is your country a member of NATO?”*

I said that it wasn't, and suddenly the tension eased. A podgy policeman became my guide, and with his help I was able to find both water and some muffins in the best shop in the village. There was also a public telephone in the shop.

Carina told us about the bombing. She said that the USA and NATO were now engaged in a diplomatic war with China. Massive demonstrations were taking place in more than twenty big cities in China. In Beijing the American Embassy had been occupied for several days. Staff cars had been destroyed, American flags were being burned, along with effigies of Bill Clinton. Thousands of demonstrators were throwing homemade bombs, stones and lumps of cement at the Embassy, while the Chinese police and military looked on. The American Ambassador, James Sasser, had not been able to leave his residence for several days. In Canton the windows of McDonald's restaurants had been smashed, and tens of thousands of demonstrators were marching through the city chanting *“blood for blood”* and *“down with the barbarians”*. In Chengdu, where we were studying, the American Consulate was surrounded. Demonstrators were throwing fire-bombs at the building and had set fire to the gates. The foreign students at Sichuan University, my friends, were under police curfew, and a couple of German students who had gone out to watch the protests had been surrounded by the crowd and had had to be escorted back to the student hostel in armed police vehicles. Programmes in memory of the three dead Chinese martyrs were being broadcast around the clock on all the national television stations. The USA was condemned by Chinese government spokesmen, and the official party newspaper, *The People's Daily*, called the bombing barbaric and criminal, an “attack on a China which would no longer allow itself to

be oppressed by western imperial powers". The fact that Bill Clinton had tried to apologise personally to China's president, Jiang Zemin, and that both the American Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, and the Secretary General of NATO, Javier Solana, had made public apologies, was suppressed by the Chinese press and broadcast media.

We phoned Chinese friends in Chengdu to try to understand what was going on. Wu Jing was the same age as me. She was studying to become a journalist, and, of all my friends, she was one of the better read and most inclined to critical thought. She wanted to promote democracy and improve China's contacts with the outside world. She wanted to change and modernise her country. But now she was more than just upset. She was so angry that she very nearly wouldn't speak to me when I said that, just possibly, the Americans might have made a mistake when they bombed the embassy.

*"They want to humiliate us. You westerners don't understand China. You'll never understand us and what we've had to put up with throughout history. You want to oppress us and belittle us, but you're cowardly and bomb us on the other side of the world. China can defend itself. We're strong. We're going to be the strongest country in the world."* Wu Jing spat the words down the crackling telephone line.

Only when we got back to Chengdu several weeks later did I find out that Wu Jing had herself taken part in the demonstrations in the city. She usually thought that China needed to learn from the west, and try to introduce more openness and less corruption into its administration. And here she was, joining in with the burning of the American flag. She had screamed her approval when her friends beheaded an effigy of Bill Clinton, and was happy that the American Consulate had been set alight. It should have been burnt to the ground, she said. I had a lot of problems with the war in Kosovo, and with the USA's suitability to police the world, but this was showing me a new aspect of China. An extremely nationalistic aspect.

When I had hung up, I went back to Magnus and the bikes, and told him what I had heard about the bombing, the unrest and the tension between the USA and China. Magnus was surrounded by fifty or so angry men who were doing all they could to make it clear that we were not welcome here. Magnus couldn't speak Chinese, so couldn't explain to the new arrivals that we were from a country that wasn't a member of NATO. We left as soon as we could. We were now cycling towards two high mountain passes and the Labrang monastery. Grand, abstract ideas about global politics, distant wars, the power of propaganda, and psychological phenomena affecting entire civilisations soon faded away. Instead we were faced with extremely concrete challenges. We made our first acquaintance with Tibetan mastiffs.

The Tibetan mastiff is an extremely large breed of dog that has been used as a guard-dog on the Tibetan plateau for more than 3000 years. Throughout this time the dogs have effectively and aggressively defended monasteries against raids, villages against

robbers, and nomads and livestock against wolves and snow-leopards. The beasts were used as war-dogs by Genghis Khan in the thirteenth century, and it was thanks to him that they first reached Europe. The mastiff is the probable ancestor of breeds like the St Bernard and the Great Dane. In recent years they have become rather fashionable in the west, and a pure-bred Tibetan mastiff puppy can cost up to £10,000. But the mastiff is no pet. They are wilful, antisocial, strong and stubborn. They are also highly intelligent, and use all of their talents to defend whatever they are set to watch over. The nomads who own livestock are themselves always armed with rocks or an iron mace in order to defend themselves against their own dogs, whose jaws are said to be so strong that they can bite through wood, steel and cement.

The first time we were attacked I thought it was exciting – fun, even. We were cycling down from a 3,600 metre pass on a pitted gravel road, when suddenly I saw something black and shaggy come racing across the mountainside to our left. I called out to Magnus to speed up, and a few seconds later we were cycling with a large, angry dog hot on our heels. We were on a downward slope, but the dog managed to keep up with us for a good while. The next dog was more difficult, because we met it going uphill. The dog bit both my and Magnus's packs. Magnus's bag had a large tear which had to be sewn up. After being chased twice more, we took a break to consider the situation. Neither of us knew much about dogs, but we realised that we were probably arousing their hunting instincts by trying to get away from them. Instead, we decided to get off our bikes the next time we were attacked, and stand between the bikes, trying to look as unthreatening as we could. The new strategy seemed to work. The dogs lumbered off when they saw the way we behaved. We passed the Labrang monastery and continued on to Sangke, a wide expanse of grassland, full of nomads' tents, yaks and dogs. After two days of cycling our non-aggressive approach to the Tibetan mastiffs was dealt a heavy blow.

Two black dogs were lying in a ditch. Magnus and I got off our bikes and stood between them, according to plan. Then we tried calling for help from the nomads in the tent nearby. There was no response from the tent, but the dogs were quickly on their feet. Their tails were sticking straight out, they were barking and snarling, showing their arsenal of sharp teeth. They took it in turns to attack us. They jumped up at us, they bit the tyres and packs, and took aim at the triangular opening in the cycle-frames. We defended ourselves as best we could with our steel bike-locks. We were scared. And the more scared we got, the more agitated the dogs became. Soon they were foaming wildly at the mouth.

After standing between our bikes for more than half an hour, we got help from a friendly truck-driver. Both Magnus and I were shaking with fear and excess adrenaline. We threw the bikes onto the back of the truck, and the man drove us out of reach of the two dogs. As we set up our tent we decided to change our strategy once more.

For the rest of the journey we always checked what was ahead of us. As soon as we saw a nomad tent beside the gravel road, we took out our binoculars and checked if there was anything big, black and shaggy in the vicinity. If there was, we would stand and wait. When a bus or a truck came along behind us, often after a very long wait, we would get on our bikes and cycle off, just ahead of the vehicle. We rode side by side, to make it impossible for the truck or bus to get past. Generally the drivers were both surprised and angry. They would sit on their horns but were forced to brake and go at our pace. The dogs didn't chase motor-vehicles, and they regarded us as part of the buses or trucks. The strategy worked, and for the remaining two weeks we weren't attacked once by dogs on the road. Towards the end we each bought a deadly iron mace from the nomads on the Zoige plain. They were serious weapons, with sharp edges, attached to two-metre-long strips of yak-skin. By spinning the metal in the dogs' direction, we would be able to kill any animal with a well-aimed strike. These were the weapons the nomads themselves wore on their great costumes, beside their knives.

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### Lao wai

About Mr Zheng and isolation within groups

I cycled shakily out of Chengdu on 4 February 1999. The whole bike was trembling beneath me. I was terrified by the project I was embarking upon. Magnus wasn't by my side, and I would be encountering the Chinese countryside on my own. Everyone at home had said goodbye. Everyone was expecting me to cycle off, so I had no choice but to get going. It took me five days to cycle the 350 kilometres to the next major city, Chongqing. Five days when I really learned the meaning of what it is to be alone.

Sichuan is China's fourth most populous province; well over eighty million people live in the agricultural east. That's like the entire population of Germany being squeezed into an area less than half the size of Germany. In the agricultural region I was passing through, the vast majority are farmers. There were people everywhere. Walking, standing, hacking at the earth, sitting, eating noodles, peeing, tending water-buffalo, or just talking to their neighbours and friends. There was a constant caravan of people by the side of the road I was cycling along. Whenever I took off my blue cycle-helmet they would all stop what they were doing. They would put down their tools, stop eating, hoist up their trousers, give the water-buffalo some slack, and stop talking. Instead, they would all stare at me. They would nudge their neighbours and point at me. They would whisper to each other. They would call out to me:

*"Lao wai, lao wai!!! Foreigner, foreigner!!!"*

I had never felt so stared at in my entire life as I did on those first days cycling between Chengdu and Chongqing. Whenever I stopped to eat, drink, pee or just rest, I soon had a thick wall of people around me, often wearing their Mao costumes or bare-chested. They wanted to touch me, to see if my pale skin and blond hair were real, if my nose was really as big as it looked. I felt like an animal in a zoo, and developed a sort of internal strategy to escape the feeling. In my ears pounded the music from a cassette that Magnus had given me. It contained some very dodgy songs by Björn Rosenström, a singer popular at the time who sang about over-sexed Ragnar, blue plastic socks and boys playing with girls little mice. The music throbbed noisily in my ears and I spoke to as few people as I could along the way. I cycled alongside farmers on their way to work the fields, I cycled through medieval villages and shabby, run-down towns. A lot of people invited me inside their homes, but it would take several weeks before I dared accept.

In Longtai, the City of the Dragon Terrace, I spent a night in a filthy hotel with an over-friendly owner. After dinner that evening I stopped at a stall selling chewy fried rice-cakes. I bought two, and the stallholder looked hard at me.

*“You look funny. Are you from Japan? They’re supposed to look funny.”*

When I set off once more across the agricultural plain of Sichuan on 18 October 2006, I am alone again, but the cities, villages and peasants have changed. Now the peasants are dressed in ribbed tunics and sporty t-shirts, and have mobile-phones on their belts. The first cities I come across, Longquan, Jianyang and Lezhi, have been totally rebuilt. There is simply no similarity between the layout of these cities now compared to when I passed through them seven years before. Their entire structure has changed. The old houses seem to have been torn down to their very foundations, and the new buildings constructed using new methods, new materials and new architecture. Pink, mint-green and light blue. In the mornings men and women do their exercises on large squares of grass and cobbles. They stretch their limbs, swaying back and forth, some doing tai chi, shadow-boxing, with great swords. They stand among rainbow-coloured plastic palm-trees. In the evenings the palms are lit up, and, instead of gymnastics, the squares are now used for dances or Chinese aerobics. Hundreds of people of all ages stand in front of a leader in pink clothes and a tape-machine playing modern Chinese pop-music at high volume.

On the evening of the second day, in the city of Lezhi, I am sitting in a small hotel-room which scarcely has enough space for a hard bed and a small chest bearing a Kaige television. My bike and luggage are in front of the door, which makes it tricky to get in and out of the room. That evening I drink boiled water from the flask of warm water that all hostels in China offer. An English-language documentary is on CCTV 9, a long, detailed analysis of President

Hu Jintao's latest actions at the annual four-day long plenary session of the Communist Party's Central Committee in Beijing. The entire meeting was devoted to a single issue: how to create a "harmonious society". The official rhetoric scrolls across the screen.

*"Over the next fifteen years, the Party will engage in improving the system of democratic justice and the protection of human rights. The Party will decrease the discrepancies in wages, increase employment, improve the state's public services, create a functioning system of social security, improve the morals of the people, enforce law and order and protect the environment."*

The text went on:

*"The Party will above all focus on limited political reforms, the battle against corruption, and on decreasing the gap between rich and poor."*

The dry statement grabs my attention. I sit there, the mug of water in my hands. For China, these are new and significant words. Theories about a "harmonious society" are President Hu Jintao's fairly radical contribution to the ideological map of the Chinese Communist Party. This is actually a real step away from the previous policy of economic growth at all costs. Now the state was going to make a real effort to even out growing social differences, and show more consideration for the needs of both people and the environment. Between the lines of these official decrees is also a recognition of the fact that the situation in China today is more desperate than harmonious. Behind each and every one of the points raised in the official text scrolling over the screen lies such a fundamental and serious problem that China's leader has no choice but to acknowledge it. The Party has realised that if nothing is done, it might soon be too late.

The next day, as I am cycling into the City of the Dragon Terrace, the city is as grey and run-down as it was seven years ago. Fifty or so children, about ten years old, are chasing me. They all want my autograph before they let me into the inn, as though I were a famous film-star. The innkeeper, Mr Zheng, is extremely friendly and smiles constantly.

*"You can feel completely safe here, there's nothing to be worried about,"* he assures me time and again.

When I have eaten breakfast the following day, and am about to cycle off, Mr Zheng asks me to sit down for a moment. He asks me in detail about the route I am thinking of taking to Bishan, the next city, and repeatedly asks if I am really alone on my bike.

Before I go back upstairs to my room I see him standing and talking to some of the motorbike riders who had been listening to our conversation. I stop on the stairs, out of sight of the door, but am unable to hear what they are saying. After a few moments the motorbikes drive off, and Mr Zheng goes back into his room. His wife is scrubbing the floor and I hear Mr Zheng say to her in a low voice:

*“He doesn’t understand anything. The foreigner, he doesn’t understand anything at all.”*

I start to get worried. Mr Zheng and the motorbike riders are not interested in me as a person. They are interested in my money. I realised as much from the way they looked at me and from their questions. Perhaps I am exaggerating, but I think about how the motorcyclists would be waiting for me on the road to Bishan, and about how they were going to rob me.

I pack my things and, as I climb onto my bike, I ask Mr Zheng once more how far it is to Bishan. He replies with a broad smile:

*“Ninety-five kilometres. It’s a nice ride,”* he assures me. *“Don’t worry, nothing will happen to you.”*

I take out my mobile-phone and pretend to dial a number. I wait a moment, and then give my name.

*“Yes, of course, everything’s fine. I’m at Mr Zheng’s in Longtai, but I’m about to set off.”*

I speak in a loud, clear voice, and explain that I will probably be a bit late. I make out that the person I am talking to is offering to meet me en route, and, after pretending to protest, in the end I accept the offer. I exchange some polite phrases with my plastic phone, say “mmh” a few times, nod, nod again, and finally thank the person I seem to be talking to for being so kind as to want to help.

*“Goodbye then, until this evening. Goodbye, yes, bye. Thanks, thanks very much. Bye!”*

When I hang up, Mr Zheng has gone pale. I tell him that the person I was talking to works as a policeman in Bishan, and that I met him in Chengdu. That he is a good friend and is going to meet me en route. It is all a lie, but Mr Zheng reacts as I suspected he would. He refuses to give any change for my 50-yuan note. The room costs 30 yuan, but I literally have to prise the 20-yuan note out of Mr Zheng’s hands. His smile has vanished and all his friendliness has evaporated. Mr Zheng does not even say goodbye when I cycle off.

For the rest of the trip I never tell anyone I am cycling alone. My fictitious Chinese friends, often policemen, are always slightly ahead of me, or just behind me, in the next city or the last village. In my pocket I always carry a small can of pepper-spray.

A Very Tough Dog

About Zao Lihui, and the largest migration in history

I have a long day's cycling ahead of me when I leave Bu Rufang and the whitewashed house behind me. I have the picture of the five children from the Hill of the 72 Hairpins in the bag on the front of the handle-bars. Fu Hong with the small bag, Fu Zangmin in the blue tracksuit, Jiao Jiao in the yellow top, Ming Juan in the pink cardigan, and Zang Hui in the pink puffer-jacket. Where exactly did I meet them? Could I really expect to be able to find five peasant children again, seven years after taking their picture? It is raining.

The rain and low clouds mean that I hardly see any of the scenery all day. Dusk falls early and, as usual, I am struggling up a long hill. People along the road give me wildly differing information about how far it is to Tongzi, anything between 18 and 50 kilometres. The long hill I am now climbing might well be the Hill of the 72 Hairpins. I don't feel like showing the picture of the children to anyone here, however. I am worried about nightfall. Where on earth was I going to sleep? I continue up the hill, my stomach rumbling; in half an hour it will be pitch-black, it is wet and misty and I don't really know where I am. I come across a young man on a motorbike. He stops his bike in front of me and takes off his helmet.

*"You've got a problem,"* he states, in a matter-of-fact way.

Liu Mingjun lives in Xinzhan, the City of the New Station, but works as a driver in Tongzi. He tells me that the road ahead is lethal. The fog, the darkness and the rain make the top of the series of hairpin bends a dangerous place at this time of day. With no light on my bike, I'll collide with someone, or drive off the road. And I couldn't sleep in a rice-field! Now that he has discovered my problem, he sees it as his responsibility at least to find me somewhere to sleep. We go around the houses along the road. Small, widely spread-out shacks where the rice-farmers live their lives. My new friend goes ahead, explaining the situation to the men of the house. In the third house we strike lucky. The building is so new that the family has not had time to paint the cement walls inside. The family: grandmother, grandfather, mother, father, and three children, running a small shop selling noodles, Chinese spirits and padlocks, and they have a spare room on the first floor with a four-poster bed with no mattress. This is to be my bed. That evening we watch a clumsy television adaptation of *Journey to the West*, one of China's most famous folktales.

When the mother of the house, Zhang Yaan, has cleared away the remains of the meal and poured boiling water into our paper tea-mugs, I take out the picture of the five children I met seven years before.

*"You've been here before. Good grief, you've been here before,"* the mother says, looking at me with new eyes.

In the midst of the rain and fog I have somehow managed to find exactly the same spot where I took the picture of the children. I am halfway up the Hill of the 72 Hairpins. Mother Zhang Yaan recognises all the faces on the picture, she knows them well. Zang Hui, the girl in the embroidered pink puffer-jacket is married and has moved to the City of the New Station, she's now twenty years old, the minimum legal age for marriage in China. Little Jiao Jiao is now fifteen, and works in a factory by the coast, even though she is actually too young to work, but many employers turn a blind eye. Ming Juan is seventeen, and is the only one of the children attending upper middle-school, the equivalent of sixth form. She is said to be smart. But her parents are having to pay too much for her education. The cheeky boy, Fu Zangmin, who did all the talking when I met the children, and was wearing a scruffy blue tracksuit, is working in a shoe-factory in Beijing. Fu Hong, the girl with the lop-sided fringe and tank-top, is working in a factory in Canton with her sister.

*"Almost all the children around here are working by the coast. That's how it works, that's how we earn money,"* Zhang Yaan says, topping up my tea.

The following morning I am invited to visit Fu Hong's mother, Zao Lihui. She lives just down the hill, in a two-year-old house covered in light-blue tiles. She offers cold water with tea-leaves, and tells me about life on the hill. When I cycled past last time, the whole family lived under the same roof. Mother, father, daughters and son all lived in a small house between the rice-fields. They had a water-buffalo, a dog, and a few fields that required a lot of hard work to produce rice and cabbage. The income was very low. None of the children could have more than six years of schooling.

During the seven years since I was last here, four of the five members of the family have left. Now only the mother, Zao Lihui, is left. Her husband works in a chemical factory in the city of Liuzhou, in the neighbouring province, Guangxi. Their son, nineteen years old, works in a shoe-factory in the provincial capital Guiyang, and their daughter, sixteen and twenty years old, work in a condom-factory in Canton. Now the family is only reunited one week each year, over the Chinese New Year in January/February. But although the family meets less often, the household income has improved. The house is newly built, and the Tomico television was purchased this spring. The four family-members working in factories do not earn much, but they send most of what they do not need to their mother, at home in northern Guizhou. A lot of the rice-fields on the hill are overgrown, and the economy of the whole area is now dependent upon the ever larger number of its inhabitants working in factories in the big cities and sending money home.

Most of the families on the Hill of the 72 Hairpins have similar stories. This development, whereby people move to the east coast of China to work, eventually settling

there, is not unique to this mountainous region of Guizhou. The migration taking place within China, from impoverished inland provinces to the wealthy coastal region is far and away the largest migration ever seen in history. China's transient population, people who are registered in inland rural provinces but who actually work in cities along the coast, is estimated to exceed 200 million. That's more than the combined populations of Britain, France and Germany. The pace of this flight to the cities is also unparalleled. In 1995 more than seven out of ten Chinese lived in the countryside. Now, just ten years later, the figure is six out of ten. In thirty years the Chinese authorities reckon that a clear majority of China's population, almost eight out of ten, will be living in the cities. This signifies a move, and a total change of lifestyle, for more than half a billion Chinese peasants.

Sixteen-year-old Fu Hong moved to Canton in February. Her big sister Fu Zaomei had found jobs for them both in a good factory, and her little sister left her home and school in order to work. The older sister had already been working very hard in a toy-factory, sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, for fifteen pence an hour, with no contract or sick-pay. The new factory, the one producing condoms, is much better, says the girls' mother. She gives me the girls' mobile-phone numbers, and the address of their factory. Perhaps I would be able to find them when I reached Canton in several weeks time.

It is quite easy to find Gao Ping in the city of Tongzi. The man who helped me and my bike to escape the angry demonstration on my earlier trip had changed his phone-number, but he still lives with his mother at the same address, on the North Road of the Republic. I call in at lunchtime and am given a lift on motorbike by a neighbour, to the bank where he works.

Gao Ping does not quite know what to do when I turn up in his bank-office with a seven-year-old photograph of him in my hand. He is surprised, to put it mildly, and very pleased. He remembers me clearly, my name, where I came from, the fact that I was studying in Chengdu, and that I was complaining about the hill. But that seems to have been forgiven now. He says that I am the only foreigner he has ever spoken to. Gao Ping shakes his head time and time again.

*"My friend! You came back! I never thought that you would come back!"*

Gao Ping's plans of becoming a teacher have had to give way to a better paid career working in a bank. He's put on weight, he laughs, patting his stomach. He explains that he gets no exercise, and often eats well. Now he is twenty-six, and a man of style.

Gao Ping takes his lunch-break at once, and phones his friends so that they can all meet his foreign friend. We eat lunch at one of the city's better restaurants. Bean-noodles with beef and masses of chilli, duck soup, chilli meat and garlic cucumber. Gao Ping pays for all of us, although I try in vain to protest. Things have gone well for Gao Ping, he has a very respectable salary of almost £200 a month. He got the job in the bank last year after studying

economics for four years at college. The greatest sorrow in his life is that his girlfriend, Li Mei, finished with him a couple of months before. She was his fourth girlfriend, but she was the one he liked best.

Between mouthfuls we talk about life in Sweden and in Tongzi. Gao Ping and his friends don't understand when I assure them that we don't have to pay anything for our education, and don't have to pay fines if we have too many children. Instead they tell me about all the new houses being built on the streets of Tongzi, about the increasing number of cars, and about the differences in Chinese dialects.

The massacre which took place in Tiananmen Square on the night of 3-4 June 1989 was the bloody climax of one and a half months of mass-demonstrations in many cities in China. Official Chinese figures count the number of dead in hundreds, but international estimates speak of more than a thousand civilians killed on the streets around Tiananmen Square. The demonstrators were a mixture of people, with very diverse goals. Students and intellectuals wanted the economic reforms which had then been underway for about ten years to be followed by political reforms and popular participation in decision-making. The workers thought the reforms had gone too far and that their jobs were in danger. Both groups were united in their criticism of corruption. The number of protesters is thought to have approached one million people. When the situation had become critical, the Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, decided to send in the army to clear the city. They used live ammunition, semi-automatic machine-guns and tanks.

After the massacre the Chinese government was condemned around the world. Today the massacre is regarded by the Chinese government as having been absolutely necessary to maintain the stability of China. The subject is extremely sensitive for the country's leaders, and the films of the battles we saw at home with Dr Li are utterly forbidden. But Dr Li does not think people have forgotten what happened.

*"The government thinks that we do not know what happened. They think we have forgotten that they ran people down in tanks and shot hundreds of innocent people."*

He stops to think.

*"Actually the very opposite is true. Everyone knows how dangerous it is to discuss politics in this country, so no-one dare say anything any more. And with no discussion, things can only get dangerous."*

After Gao Ping helped me escape the demonstration in Tongzi in 1999, the number of protests in the Chinese countryside has certainly not diminished. The Communist Party has started to publish statistics covering unrest, and, according to these statistics, the number of protests has increased by 50% in just three years, from 58,000 in 2003, to 87,000

in 2005. The instance most noted in the media was in the town of Dongzhou in the province of Guangdong. In December 2005 thousands of the townspeople demonstrated against the local government. They thought they had been poorly paid for land that was needed to built a power-station, and were worried that the power-station would pollute a local lake. The authorities deviated from the usual policy of the 1990s, of treating the demonstrators with respect. At least three, and possibly more than twenty, of the townspeople were shot and killed when the police broke up the demonstration.