



# When Dragons Whisper: Haunted By The Shadow Of Tiananmen

*Valerie Horniman*

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## **When Dragons Whisper: Haunted By The Shadow Of Tiananmen** Valerie Horniman

In 1979 Australian teacher and education administrator, Valerie Horniman, began mentoring Chinese postgraduate scholars at the University of Sydney. They were the 'Gang of Nine' and were among the first scholars from mainland China to be awarded degrees at a Western university, since the establishment of the Communist government in 1949. The 'Gang of Nine' arrived in Australia in 1979, at the very moment that China began its head long rush into 'Reform and Opening Up'. The 'Gang of Nine' had endured academic repression and personal hardships during the intellectual calamity of the Cultural Revolution. Now, they found the intellectual freedom and the intellectual rigour of a Western university, as well as life in Western society, liberating, confusing and confronting. Valerie Horniman extended her friendship, support and understanding to the 'Gang of Nine', who would become important scholars upon their return to China. That mentorship was turned full circle in 1990, when Valerie began a new career as a teacher of English literature and Western culture to postgraduate students in Chinese universities. Valerie plunged head on into Chinese universities in the immediate aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square student protests and the June 4th massacre. Valerie arrived to find Chinese students seething with barely concealed discontent. Repression of intellectual freedom had returned to Chinese universities, as the hard line conservative leaders sought to regain control of university campuses. Yet the 'Cultural Fever' for Western thought and ideas which had gripped China since its 'opening up', was a genie that could not be returned to its bottle. After the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, China forged on with reform, continuing to wind back stifling totalitarian controls, while at the same time, carefully building new forms of authoritarianism over a rapidly changing society and economy. It was amidst this ambiguity and uncertainty that Valerie was given a free hand in curriculum design and content. Valerie tapped into this curiosity and thirst for Western knowledge amongst Chinese students, whilst walking on a knife edge, teaching in universities haunted by the shadow of Tiananmen. Valerie faced vast cultural gaps between Chinese and Western culture. She bridged those gaps by drawing upon her love of Chinese literature and arts. Expertly guided by Professor Hou Weirui of the 'Gang of Nine', Valerie used the universal ideas she found in Chinese literature as a key to unlock her students' understanding of English literature and Western thought. Valerie's students studied a broad range of English literature, free from the constraints of ideologically mandated scholarship. Her students studied George Orwell's 'Animal Farm' – watching the animated film and singing 60's protest songs – on an anniversary of the Tiananmen Massacre as police patrolled the campus. Challenging and innovative, Valerie's teaching satisfied both her students' thirst for knowledge, as well as their desire to covertly express critical and taboo topics in the wake of Tiananmen. 'When Dragons Whisper – Haunted by the Shadow of Tiananmen' is Valerie Horniman's memoir, documented with colour photographs. It is the story of her seven year odyssey in China – her journeys and her teaching in a China still opening up in the wake of the Tiananmen Massacre.

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