

Losing the Mandate of Heaven

Perspectives from Four Princetonians on the Unrest in China

Beijing, June 1989

FOR DAYS afterward, I tried to calm myself to sleep, but haunted by memories of savage carnage in Tiananmen Square and fears for the safety of friends in China, I would sit up and turn on the light. There were always a few articles I hadn't read from the day's papers. I never used to watch television, but I became a news addict, sometimes even calling the East Coast for news rather than waiting the additional three hours. I attempted to call China, desperate for clues, desperate for insights, not knowing when they'd come. Weeks later, I still felt a gnawing fear that sometimes edged into panic.

My trip, cut short by that fear, was the shortest one I've taken to China. My relationship with China goes back to 1981, when I toured the country as a first-year

Tiananmen Square, Saturday, June 3. A worker bloodied in a clash with troops displays a captured army helmet.



REUTERS/BETT MANN NEWSPHOTOS

student of Chinese. Since that time, I have mastered the language and studied and worked in China. I had just returned from China a month before the democracy movement began, and since then, I had not been able to lead a normal life, to think or talk about anything but the changing situation in China.

So eight hours after a friend called to tell me of a job possibility in Beijing, I was at the airport. I had cleared all the obstacles, the last one being fear. I was aware of the dangers. I was careful not to pack anything that would arouse suspicion, such as books about the Cultural Revolution that I had purchased for friends. Oddly, I left worried not about myself, but about my parents, for I understood my mother's tears as she said goodbye. But this trip to Beijing went beyond ordinary fear and worry; those eight days taught me about terror and its use as a tool of repression.

I arrived in Beijing to the warm midnight air of May 27. I immediately called to tell a friend of my arrival. We reminisced about the walk we had taken to Tiananmen Square during my last trip to Beijing, when

it was at least eighty degrees colder. On the following day, a Sunday, I made the trip down Changan Avenue to the Square. Contrary to my expectations, the feeling on the street seemed light and peaceful, as if speaking out had relieved the people of a heavy burden. I was exhilarated by the spirit and determination of the students in the Square, the people who lined the streets for that afternoon's parade, and especially the new Democracy Wall at Xidan, a reminder of the movement's roots in the brief period of protest in 1978.

That day, I found myself stuck in the Square with a dead camera battery and no transportation to a store. I approached one of the many students who were photographing a section of the Square that contained tents donated by Hong Kong Chinese. He eagerly offered to bicycle to a camera store for me. When he returned with the batteries, he smiled and told me he admired the movement and wished to participate in it. I encouraged him in this aspiration. "I can't," he insisted. I wondered why he was so cautious amid the students' display of boldness. I pressed him for a reason. He looked nervous and switched into English: "Please." Was he asking me not to question him? When he repeated his plea several times, I finally realized he was saying "police": he was a student at the police academy. With an apologetic look, he rode away.

I found myself growing more and more cautious as the week went on. I was staying with a reporter whose phone was surely bugged, so I made no phone calls to Chinese friends from the apartment. To communicate, I rode my rented bike around to various hotels, whose public telephones I used. My conversations remained circumspect. I didn't visit my friends' homes, which I had done regularly when I had previously been in China. The crowds worshipped the Western press and asked any foreigner in the Square for an autograph. They seemed sincere, but I was careful not to sign my real name.

Later I visited the headquarters of the newly formed "Workers Autonomous Federation" and interviewed some of its leaders. It was situated at a corner of the Forbidden City that had supposedly been lent to them by a group that manages that relic. After talking my way through the wrought-iron gate and passing a row of Federation volunteers within the walled area, I met several leaders—including a Mr. Shen, who called himself a Standing Committee member of the Federation. We talked about the Federation's plans, its purpose.

Shen was extremely articulate and seemed better educated than the average Chinese worker. During our meeting, he warned other Federation members who were present that they had to be responsible for what they said on behalf of the Federation. His tone was patient, not harsh. He seemed to command the respect of other Federation officers, and indeed I could imagine him emerging as a leader for his charisma. He passionately defended the "democratic patriotic movement," saying, "We are not anti-party. We support an up-right party. The party is our mother. But we need to tell our mother, 'Your children have grown up. We know what you've done wrong, and you need to correct your mistakes.'"

I returned the next day after learning that three Federation members had been abducted. I figured that asking for Shen by name would make it easier for me to get through the gate, but when I did, I was told that he had been arrested by the police the previous night. Suddenly I felt violated. I rushed over to the Public Security Ministry, where a protest was forming. It was still small when I arrived—approximately twenty workers with banners and an equal number of police officers.

As I tried to approach the workers, policemen ushered me in other directions. I joined the crowd across the street. Buoyed by the crowd's indignation, I thought to myself, "What could they do to me anyway? I'm going to try again." This time I walked beyond the police, who tried to move me away and toward the protesters. Suddenly a man in plain clothes started speaking to me, and I found myself surrounded by seven or eight policemen, all saying, "Do you understand martial law? Do you understand martial law? Do you understand martial law?" I noticed that a small video camera had been pointed at me for some time. I acted as if I understood neither Chinese nor martial law, and simply got on my bike and rode off.

When I went out the next day, still feeling spooked, I discovered "anti-bourgeois liberalization" banners on foreign hotels, hinting at the 1987 campaign in which the reformer Hu Yaobang was purged. Perhaps



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Riot police and soldiers charge a barricade of buses on June 3. The black marks are slogans written on the bus window. The author, who took this photograph, escaped without injury.

they were aimed at foreign reporters. Or was this the government's attempt to make sure the slogans were reported in the Western press? Seeing the propaganda machine operate so quickly fed my paranoia. I was still scared, but I was angry for being scared. This was exactly what "they" (whoever they are) were trying to achieve. If I, an American who could leave at any time, was so frightened, how could a Chinese, with very real memories of labor camps and political purges, withstand the intimidation? With my fear, my admiration for the Chinese activists multiplied.

The next two days were slightly calmer, because I decided to serve as an interpreter for a journalist rather than work alone. But on the afternoon of June 3, it became clear to me that my fears were well founded. I was at an intersection in a crowd of perhaps five thousand, all of us excitedly viewing a display of rifles and uniforms that had been confiscated the previous night, when government troops had attempted to invade central Beijing. Suddenly a road to the intersection filled with a sea of several thousand green helmets. White-clad riot police formed the vanguard. I began photographing the ensuing clash from inside a bus full of people that had been used to block the intersection.

I soon realized that the soldiers were closing in rapidly, that they were beating people, and that I was surrounded by glass. I put away my camera to protect the photographs, and then scrambled around, trying to find the least conspicuous way of leaving the bus. An officer then ordered us out the door, and as I tried to navigate my way through the columns of running soldiers and over a pile of bicycles, a policeman threw something that exploded into the

crowd. It sounded like a hand grenade, but later, when red spots appeared all over my body, I realized that it was a canister of tear gas and dye that is used to mark demonstrators. When I reached the company of a British man and the security of a coffee shop, I was shaking wildly.

I spent the rest of the weekend indoors, cloistered by my fear. I learned of what happened in the Square by looking out the windows of the Beijing Hotel and the diplomatic compound. I was much too afraid to venture often onto the streets during my final two days in China. I was kept awake all night by the sounds of machine guns, tanks, helicopters, ambulances, and angry crowds. I could not decide if the crowds I saw running into gunfire to block roads or set fire to army vehicles were heroic or foolhardy. But it was clear that, at least temporarily, their fear had been surpassed by their incredible outrage. Earlier that week, a friend and I had been trying to decide how posterity would designate this period in Chinese history. Around 5:30 A.M. on Sunday morning, as tanks cleared the remaining students from Tiananmen Square, he turned to me and said, "Now we know. It will be called the June 4 Massacre."

As I write this, I have stopped shaking, and I no longer think I hear gunshots at night. But I am still very afraid. The calls to China, the reassuring connections to friends that would finally allow me a few hours of sleep at night, are growing fewer as I sense the apprehension at the other end about receiving suspicious calls from overseas. Beijing residents who once thronged Western reporters now run from them, whispering of plainclothes police. The arrests continue. And so I still think about China, about my Chinese colleagues and friends, and salute the brave souls who showed that they would sooner be crushed by tanks than by their own fear.

—Pamela Burdman '84

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