Bedlam in Beijing

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By Isabel Marcus

If you've been to China for one week, you think you can write a book. If you've been to China for three months, you try to write an article. If you've been to China for one year, you're so damn confused you can't write anything! That caveat remained with me during the fateful week I spent in Beijing last spring, the week of "democratization" — the brutal suppression by the Chinese military and the heroic resistance by the Beijing citizenry.

I flew to Beijing on May 29. Arriving in Beijing's scruffy, dingy airport, I was struck by the absence of military personnel or of a luggage search, and the rather casual manner in which passport control was exercised. The 45-minute drive from the airport to the Beijing Teachers College was uneventful. A roadside billboard stated in English: "Tourism Makes Us Prosperous and Progressive."

I was assigned an interpreter, a law and jurisprudence professor, and during the next three days I spent hours wandering around the neighborhood surrounding the college compound. On Thursday, however, I decided to go to Tiananmen Square.

The panorama was breathtaking. Red banners with yellow lettering fluttered everywhere (each faculty in the many institutions of higher education in Beijing and elsewhere had its own identifying banner). Numerous lean-to structures had been erected to protect the encamped students from rain and the merciless sun. Thousands of people milled about. Thronges were engaged in discussions — an unlikely occurrence for a weekday Thursday afternoon well after the traditional lunch and midday nap time. I spotted only a handful of westerners in the crowd. Someone solicited my signature for a petition in support of the students. My first impulse to sign it was laced by caution. The person could be a government agent. I had similar thoughts when I noticed the number of Chinese with cameras taking pictures.

The monument at the center of the square had been designated as the students' headquarters. Facing north toward the large portrait of a benign Mao at the entrance to the Forbidden City was the statue of the Goddess of Liberty and Democracy, identified as "an Asian girl!" The statue was strategically situated. She faced Mao boldly, holding the torch as a challenge to his beneficent face. Trying hard to control the sentimental impulses I associate with seeing the Statue of Liberty — and recalling the Emma Lazarus poem at her base — I found myself deeply moved.

There was one nightmarish aspect to the square. Ringing its central part were a series of loudspeakers controlled by the students which were used to read off student demands and provide news bulletins. At the north end of the square, however, near Mao's portrait, government-controlled loudspeakers blared denunciations of the students and complaints that the occupation of the square had fore­stalled a celebration of Children's Day. By walking several yards north or south one could literally shift realities.

Nearby wall newspapers, which were handprinted on large sheets of paper, attracted crowds of readers. The papers
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The myth that the People's Army would never shoot citizens had been smashed.

contained denunciations of Li Peng. I began to feel disarmed. The physical reality overwhelmed my analytic responses to the situation based on my training as a political scientist and a lawyer.

That weekend I met with a group of students and lawyers and heard the first rumors of troop movements toward the square. My initial disbelief was dissipated upon hearing short sharp sounds reminiscent of firecrackers and louder dull noises that sounded like explosions. On Saturday afternoon I spent time with a Canadian couple, English teachers at the college, who had a shortwave radio. Beers in hand, we huddled around the radio listening to the Voice of America, the BBC, and Radio China, the government English-language station. How ironic! During the '60s in my travels outside the United States, I often criticized the VOA as an apologist for American actions. Now I dared not miss the hourly broadcast. Both the BBC and the VOA reported that tanks and other military vehicles were moving into the city from the northwestern suburbs. Radio China, which up to that time had been calling the students "counterrevolutionaries. hooligans and thugs" now added the ominous words "aided by foreign elements." "That's us, comrades," I noted.

Between hourly broadcasts we raced to the front gate of the college, where crowds of students had assembled. To the west we could hear the frequent sound of gunfire. Explosions lit the darkening sky.

Stories of civilian resistance to soldiers attempting to reach the downtown area were legion. Virtually all traffic had stopped on the thoroughfare outside the campus. Bystanders cheered as groups of students hitched rides on passing trucks en route to Beijing. Everyone knew where they were going - to the square. The battlefield was foreordained.

Around 10:30 p.m. a student came racing by on a bicycle brandishing a stick about 4 feet long and 3 inches thick. He shouted: "The government has given these clubs to the workers at the iron and steel factory down the road and has promised them several months' wages if they will go down to the square and beat up the students!" Then he raced off. The crowd was buzzing. These workers had supported the students and marched with them in April and May. How could this come about?

A few hours later, another student messenger cycled to the gate. He was bleeding. "They are shooting in the square. They are not using rubber bullets. They are not shooting at our knees, but at our hearts and heads," he said and sped off.

The myth that the People's Army would never shoot citizens had been smashed.

After a fitful sleep, I awoke to hear only the rustling of the leaves. Outside the dormitory dining room a hastily printed sign said: "All foreigners must stay on campus." At breakfast several American students who had been in China since the fall of 1988 described their efforts to cycle down to the square to be with their Chinese friends; each of them told of mass confusion on the downtown streets, of roadblocks created by flaming vehicles, of people peacefully approaching the soldiers and being shot, and of bullets whizzing by them as they rode their bicycles. Some Chinese students went to the hospitals to check on the wounded. They were grim and red-eyed.

I walked down the campus road to the hand-lettered wall newspapers. Several large sheets of pink paper described the massacre in the square - the shooting of many students and citizens, tanks rolling over the bodies of students, and the pyre of burning bodies. Students stood motionless and speechless as they read.

One writer reported that some troops had to ask Beijing citizens where the square was located and how to get there. The writer was telling readers that the battalion was not from Beijing and therefore might be less sympathetic to protesters and resisters. Another writer had posted a slogan: "Blood cries out for blood:"

The prospect of an army foray onto the campus was terrifying. Contemplating the possibility of an army search of my room, I began a cat-and-mouse game. I packed exposed film from the square in sanitary napkins on the probably foolish assumption that the soldiers would not rifle through such objects. And I stashed slips of paper with the addresses of Chinese whom I was supposed to contact into rolled-up socks. At the same time, I deliberately left out other unexposed film canisters and note pads as decoys. I tried to envision a soldier tearing about my room, screaming at me in a language I did not understand, and my trying to remain cool and calm. At least I could practice in my imagination.

I then returned to the campus gate.
where a crowd had gathered. Suddenly, someone yelled something urgent in Chinese. The crowd turned toward the campus and began running through the gateway arches. I was swept along, cursing myself for wearing flip-flops. Images of tripping or being tripped by falling bodies flashed before me. I would be buried alive beneath them. Or, I would be shot from behind and fall wounded or dead on a pile of bodies. Then, with perfect clarity, the photo image from the Vietnam War of a girl running, her mouth frozen in a scream, appeared before me. I became that girl.

Sobbing and breathless, I ran until the crowd thinned out. I was close to the dormitory. I went to my room and lay still for half an hour. Crashing thunder and flashes of lightning re-created a battlefield outside my window. At times I leapt to the window, unsure whether it was nature or the army at work. Of one thing I was certain: It was time to leave China.

On Monday we called the airlines to change our return reservations. We could only hope that the scheduled United Airlines plane would arrive in Beijing on Tuesday morning and be allowed to land. We then informed college officials that we were planning to leave. There were stories circulating that the two armies in the city might start shooting at each other on Monday night.

The SUNY exchange director, who was living in the Friendship Hotel, found a van to take us from the campus. The van driver appeared harassed and frightened as he drove us to the hotel. We drove on roads littered with bricks, glass shards and concrete road dividers wrenching from their moorings by the citizens of Beijing and placed across parts of the roadway to block the passage of tanks. It was the first time I actually was seeing the devastation which I could hear being wrought for the past two days. The reality made my imagination seem tame.

But there were reminders that appearances are deceptive. At hourly intervals I huddled with my hosts around the short-wave radio. The news consisted of rumors that war between the two occupying armies might break out during the night.
hotel had agreed to take us to the airport. The flight was scheduled to leave at 11:30 a.m. on Tuesday, June 6. At 5 a.m. we awoke to listen to the radio. The war between the armies had not occurred during the night. Tanks had merely remained at their stations. How to interpret this turn of events was unclear. Were more troops being sent into the city? There were rumors to that effect.

At 6:30 a.m. the driver arrived. Through an interpreter he explained that he had enough gas for one round trip to the airport, that he had no spare tire, that his tires were balding and that he had heard nothing about the road to the airport being blocked. He asked for the equivalent of two months' wages for the ride. We decided to risk the trip and three of us piled into the van.

As we drove toward downtown in order to take the road leading to the airport, the debris (burned jeeps, tanks, rubble, concrete barriers) became greater. There were no vehicles on the road. At one corner I could see a large crowd ahead with a column of smoke behind it. The driver and I had the same thought: If there were armed soldiers behind the crowd and if they began to shoot, the van would be caught in a crowd of people moving in our direction trying to escape. He took a sharp left and then a right, taking us away from the action but onto a dead-end street.

Suddenly he veered sharply to the right. We barreled down a bike path. People stood aside and waved us on; citizens had torn iron gates from their moorings and piled them on the path to prevent military jeeps from wending their way through the alley. We jumped out of the van to push the debris aside and continued down the alley. After about 15 minutes we were back on a paved road. The driver looked drained. The road to the airport was clear, but the driver did not point out an encampment of soldiers along the roadside.

At the airport, bedlam prevailed. Many Americans and Europeans were evacuating Beijing and were clamoring for airplane reservations. None of the Chinese staff had shown up for work at the ticket counters, so a skeleton staff of American employees had to manage what could have become a totally chaotic situation. Given the confusion, it seemed amazing that the plane was delayed for takeoff by only one hour. As it left the ground, a spontaneous cheer arose from the passengers—one which was repeated when we landed four hours later in Tokyo, where all planes to Beijing were delayed.

But irony and a surrealistic quality to experience are not confined by geography. I found myself sitting numbly in my seat, with tears rolling down my face, looking at the opening credits for the inflight movie. It was "Working Girl"—shown against a backdrop of the Statue of Liberty!

Several weeks after my return, the SUNY exchange office in Buffalo received a phone call from a staff person in the Beijing Higher Municipal Education Authority. He wanted to know why I had taken an unauthorized leave from my teaching position. "She was fearful for her life and her safety could not be guaranteed" was the SUNY reply.

From the other end of the phone, without missing a beat, the staff person replied: "That is not true. There has been no difficulty here. No one was killed."

Law professor Isabel Marcus was associate dean of the Law School last spring when she and Stephen C. Halpern, associate professor of political science and a 1983 UB Law graduate, went to Beijing as part of a SUNY teaching exchange program and witnessed the massive pro-democracy student demonstrations and their brutal repression by the Chinese government. She is currently on sabbatical at Harvard Universit/P Radcliffe College, where she holds a prestigious Bunting Fellowship.