

1989

China Journal

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Recommended Citation

Armour-Hileman, Vicki. "China Journal." *The Iowa Review* 19.3 (1989): 59-81. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.3804>

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THE APPROACH OF THE CYCLONE

Saturday, May 20th, 1989. On what seemed the verge of civil war in China, during the approach of Typhoon Brenda, five missionaries sat in the Maryknoll Center House in Hong Kong and watched the impending storm. This day had been set for the beginning of our ten-day tour of China. But by 5:30 A.M. a signal 8 had been announced, shutting down all public ground and sea transportation, and closing schools and businesses. Half of our group was due to fly in this morning from the States, but they were diverted to Taiwan. It was still early morning and the typhoon was not expected to peak until 4:00 in the afternoon.

There was something both lazy and exciting about the morning—that feeling of being inside a house you love with good company while gale force winds gather in your garden. It was my first typhoon, and I was naive enough to be enthusiastic. I went through the halls as instructed, pulling blinds down to stop glass from shattering too far into the rooms if we should get hit by the full force of the winds. From the second-floor window I watched Sean Burke, our superior, get in a taxi and ride off in the driving rain. Watching him leave, I felt that delicious loneliness the rain sometimes brings. I milked the feeling, wandering the halls and settling finally in front of the radio which had been on continually that morning to catch the troubled news from China.

At ten in the morning things took a turn for the worse. Last night there had been news of troops on the roads travelling towards Beijing. Now came the announcement that martial law was imposed on much of the city. News to the West was shut down. More troops were on their way to Beijing and Shanghai. We heard that peasants had blocked the roads, letting air out of the tires of army vehicles and whenever possible trying to convince the soldiers to turn back. By mid-morning, there was an impasse: no attack, but no real retreat either. Rumors flourished in the official news blackout: perhaps Zhao Ziyang had resigned in sympathy with the students. Perhaps Li Peng had already won the powerplay among the leaders. The first reports of beatings came through. One thing was sure, no one was going to China today.

At the time, because this was the day I had expected to be in China, by that coincidence I felt a special connection to events unfolding there, as if we had been partakers in this history instead of onlookers who waited ignorant and hopeful before China's gates. Despite the fear of an army takeover of the square, much of the news of the morning sounded like a Hollywood production: millions of common people, their hearts swelling with love for their country and one another, rushing out amidst banners and patriotic songs, and though unarmed, turning back an entire army. Soldiers confessed they had wronged their fellow citizens, laid down their weapons and went home. The radio announcer said more than once that memorable soldier's line: "The army loves the people."

I thought of how the future would replay these moments and interpret them in the light of its own reality. If peaceful demonstrations by unarmed students overthrew a corrupt and oppressive government, from now on we would believe in the power of non-violence and in the people of China. If Li Peng and other hardliners won the day despite the demonstrations, we would think these students noble but naive. And if the students were not only put down, but put down with violence, we would say we always knew it would happen, that we were always wise and cynical and never believed in any other outcome. But today we waited, the students waited, the world waited. And our ignorance left us free to imagine and to hope.

We know now what happened on Tiananmen Square on the morning of June 4, 1989. I have been afraid that our memory of the armored personnel carrier smashing through the barricades would outlast, and seem more real than the days when the students gathered with their tents and banners, and when we all hoped for better. I write this journal to honor those days of hope, to honor those who took part in them, both those who died because they dared to believe in a freer China, and those who still live with the memory of their days of triumph in the Square, and with the memory of the defeat we now know was coming.

But during the morning of the 20th, when we were still uncertain and optimistic, the hours wore on with little change in the geographic or political weather, and we ceased thinking of such exalted things and began to settle down for a long day's radio-journey, all other forms of transportation being beyond us. We expected mahjong and novels, old movies and long conversations about what an exciting and troubling place the world is and how quickly it changes. We had taken out the half-finished letters no other

day had given us liberty to complete and at 12:30 we went down to lunch complacent and smug, happy with our house and our company.

Then the phone rang. The travel agent wanted us to get to the airport immediately. We were going to China.

THE JOURNEY

The next hours were chaos. There were reports of trees blowing across the road, rumors that the airport was closed, and further rumors of conflict on Tiananmen Square, but we and the travel agent engaged in a heated and deeply felt bluffing game in order not to lose the nearly \$2000 U.S. a head that was resting on this trip. If the agent cancelled the trip, perhaps he would have to refund the money. If we cancelled (even in the light of a typhoon and martial law) we would lose everything.

At 2:15 a van arrived at our door. We climbed in, already soaked in the few yards between the building and the car, and, still in disbelief, we set out for the airport. We were almost out of gas. The travel agent, Xavier, who was also our driver, stopped at a gas station and we saw him gesturing to a man nearby, but no gas was forthcoming. The rain was blowing at a 45-degree angle across the road, and he ran back to the van, his shirt now clinging to him, and his skin showing through, like white fish through saran wrap.

We proceeded at a speed that kept my knuckles white and my hands twisted around the fabric of my jacket and we hoped we'd have just enough gas to make it to the airport. Suddenly we swerved out into the wrong lane, screeched past two or three cars, and jerked to a stop. A large tree had just fallen across the road and was lying dark-skinned and ominous ahead of us. Beside and behind us cars crunched into each other and came to a halt. I barely had an invective out of my mouth before Xavier had backed up the van, turned us around, and at an equally alarming speed was winding and turning along another road that would lead to the airport.

When we arrived, all flights were cancelled or delayed, with no time specified for their re-assignment. There was nowhere to sit, though on the whole the waiting area was not crowded, all sane people having given up any hope of travel in such weather. Our tempers, frayed from the trip, did not improve with waiting on our feet for several hours, and we quarrelled with Xavier, who insisted that neither China nor the typhoon held any

threat. His cheerfulness put me in a thoroughly bad mood and I muttered unforgivable things under my breath.

Some time after 6 P.M. we discovered to our surprise that a plane to Shanghai was scheduled for 8 P.M. I abandoned myself to my sense of adventure, thinking the possibility of being stuck in a hotel in China while students and armored personnel carriers blocked the streets was at least something of historic interest. Xavier, disturbed by our anxiety, at the last minute decided to go with us.

Once on the plane, despite a bit of turbulence right at the beginning, we had a smooth ride. I was sitting with an Italian priest who would be part of our group just to Shanghai where he had lived 40 years ago and had been ordained. Our conversation was so ordinary that I inwardly congratulated myself on my steadfast nerves and my bravery in the face of known and unknown dangers. Then I went to the bathroom and was violently sick. I looked at my face in the mirror, bloodlessly white, now, with sweat rimming my forehead. I felt so ill I wondered if they'd have to take me to a hospital, or even whether someone would eventually find me if I passed out here in the toilet. The indignity of that possibility fortified me, and recovering something of my sense of humor, I grinned at that forlorn face in the mirror and, holding my stomach like a sack that did not quite belong to me, I moved slowly back to my seat.

SHANGHAI

Even this far north (though Shanghai is still officially in the South of China) the people are a different breed from the tiny Gwangdung people. Many women were my height (5'6") and above. The men, after my five months in Hong Kong, seemed enormous. I was in love six or seven times before we left the airport.

I unclenched my stomach a bit on the ride to the hotel, staring in wonder and joy out the windows at the road which told me what I still did not quite believe: that we had really arrived in China. I wondered then if all my fears in life could be like today's—belied by the gentle rocking of our van through quiet, moonlit streets, the sleepy hum of the engine as we passed under a row of interlocking trees in a mist-filled road in Shanghai.

Our group consisted of seven priests ranging from a young nipper named Peter, in his mid-forties, to several over seventy; four sisters of equally re-

spectable ages, and two lay people: Regina, a married woman in her thirties, and myself. We made peculiar, if not outright eccentric, tourists, often bypassing the tourbook spots to get a look at some obscure relic of Chinese Church history: Ricci's tomb; China's only basilica. What we found in these churches was varied and often moving. There were priests who, under the years of persecution, had married, and now, in the new openness to religion that had characterized the last ten years, had moved back to take their place once again at the pulpit, presenting the conservative world church with an interesting problem; an aging nun who had stayed faithful, but like many of them silent, during the years of persecution and had now moved back, even amidst the confusion and the controversy with Rome, to live once again with a new generation of sisters, shy, young girls who we often coaxed out to greet us from the simple, if not by Western standards dilapidated hallways of their convents and who huddled together, smiling uncertainly in the doorways. We also found full churches, often packed with peasants and farmers, people with rough, sun-burned faces who came before Mass and stayed late to chant and pray in their strange, beautiful language, their high, nasal voices cutting through the spring air.

In Shanghai people were on the move, believing in a new world. I suspect that many of my fellow travelers felt the same. Whenever the tourvan stopped and began to back up for no apparent reason and the guide said, "sorry, we cannot get through. It is the students," suddenly the van came to life. What had moments before been half-slumbering lumps of inertia became a swarming and chaotic mass of humanity. We climbed over each others' laps, put our elbows in each others' ribs, poked each others' ankles to get at our camera bags, and then hung out the windows, undignified and enthusiastic, and with a strange sort of pride. I think we viewed the demonstrations with a sense of ownership, as if, being here under these circumstances, we were somehow specially and inextricably connected to the hopes of these people and to their success or failure.

Our first view of the proceedings was not actually the demonstrators, but a small group of people gathering under sheets of paper taped to a wall. John, our handsome national guide, told us that these were hand-written accounts of the news from Beijing. Given the silence of the official media on anything volatile, these were often the only accurate sources of news. From then on we saw such posters up all over the city.

Around midday we were briefly set at liberty on the Bund, the heart of the student movement in Shanghai. I slipped away from the others, already tired of always being surrounded by a group, and eager for a bit of adventure. The feel of the place was excited and happy, like a fair, a carnival. There were men in the trees watching the demonstrations over the heads of the crowd. Hawkers sold ice cream and snacks from white wooden boxes carted around on bicycles. They clicked little blocks of wood against the boxes to attract the people who came to consider and to buy. I listened to that comforting click of wood on wood as I wandered down the long avenue, weaving in and out of the crowd that gathered under the old, European-style buildings.

A group of students rounded the corner and my heart swelled up as it does for sudden understanding or love. Little waves of applause surged up at the head of the marching column of demonstrators. It amazed me I could get this close. I had read about these demonstrations in the papers for weeks, and now here I was, among them, rounding the curb of the wide, divided street and coming into the midst of the crowd. The marchers came right by me, so close that I had to cross the street to give them room, though they were so pressed with onlookers that I still saw mostly banners—few faces, except for those of fellow spectators.

Police in green suits lined the walks, the only ones with closed faces. Unsure I should take pictures, I slipped behind them to higher ground. I snapped the students standing on the stairs, a few tree-hangers, the crowds below with bright red banners. I was right behind the police, their heads and their crossed arms just below me through the trees. When I looked up nervously after taking a picture a man raised his hand solemnly and saluted me, then smiled.

The street was crowded, but after a morning of driving through the shopping districts I must admit that China teems so I could hardly tell the difference between an ordinary Sunday stroll and a mass demonstration. There seemed to be many people who were there for entertainment as much as to see the students—there was an enormous sense of leisure and interest in everything. On the sidewalks, Tibetans displayed old skulls of deer and monkeys, half a pelt, long strings of dried muscles, a dead coiled snake, the long arm and claw of some miscellaneous creature (an ape, I think) up to the raw shoulder bone.

After a while of winding through the multitudes I took out my note-

book to jot notes, but before I had written two words, a head appeared between my chin and the page, and suddenly there were eight or ten around me and another eight or ten approaching, some at a run, to see what had drawn the others' interest. I shook my head at them and put my notebook in my pocket and walked away quickly, my heart skipping and jumping. I know no Mandarin and I was entirely alone and it suddenly occurred to me that I couldn't see anyone from my group, that I was not sure how long I'd been gone or how far down the shore I had wandered. There was high energy in the crowds, and I reminded myself with a growing sense of panic that I was in a country on the edge of violence, and that I did not know the rules.

I hurried back, hearing speeches sound fuzzily over the loudspeakers to my left. Eventually I saw others from my group standing on a corner waiting for the van. Crowds pressed around them, and I had to squeeze through to get up on the curb. People healed the gap my path had made, and they stood right against us, staring. A child reached out and touched my arm, then drew back, frightened. Imagine, imagine, I thought. All this history, this incredible time span of travel and oppression and trade and yet I am the first white person some of these people have ever seen. And so everything is possible again. Together we create a new history. John told us these people were newly in from the country. Our clothes, hair, faces and language were strange and new to them. "They mean no harm," he said, but he was obviously annoyed, embarrassed. We all smiled. He told them abruptly in Mandarin not to get so close, to give us space. We kept insisting they were O.K. as they were. After all, why should we get to come and stare at them and not the other way around? Besides, after my initial wariness and embarrassment had worn off, I discovered I rather liked it all, the attention, and just the feeling of closeness, of being mammals, huddling together in the cool mist.

Later I had a conversation with a Chinese who speaks fluent English. I asked: "How popular is the movement really? What do the people as a whole feel about the students and what they are saying?"

"The students *are* the voice of the people." He said this with some surprise as if I should know it already. "Still, China is a free country. Not as free as the U.S., but free. It used to be different. But now I choose my job. I can have a religion."

We asked if we were allowed to take pictures of what we saw.

“Yes,” he said. “You can even take pictures of the police.”

“Why didn’t the army attack the students when it was sent in?”

“We have heard that the army didn’t know why they were sent in to the city. They were kept without news for a long time. Then they were told they were coming to clean up after a storm. When they got to Beijing the students explained to them the real situation. They would not attack the people. They are the people’s army.”

News, real news, came to us only intermittently while we were in Shanghai, and, indeed, while we were in most of China. We were able to get ahold of a Hong Kong paper only early in the morning at the hotel—they were sold out almost immediately. Some Chinese men were going to take the paper to the Bund, make 500 copies and distribute it to the demonstrators. Someone else was going to take it to Beijing and do the same even though it would be several days old by the time he planned to arrive in the city. We learned that a million people had taken over Happy Valley in Hong Kong, in support of the democracy movement in China. There were rumors that Li Peng and Deng Xiaoping had resigned. The morning was full of brisk, hopeful energy. There was nervous happiness everywhere. John leaned over confidentially and said: “Wait till you get to Beijing. This is nothing.”

Regina called her husband in Hong Kong daily. That first day he told us that Beijing now had 200,000 people on hunger strike. By Monday, he was telling us that the British Embassy had put out a warning for tourists not to go to Beijing, which was, of course, our next stop. The American Embassy warned people not to go to China at all for 72 hours.

But in the hotel lobby on Monday morning, after we were showered and rested, the demonstrations seemed both distant and exciting. One of the older priests, Dan Schneider, said “I have been waiting for this trip for forty years.” Ordained shortly before liberation with the hope of going to China as a missionary, his plans had been dashed as the role of the missionary had become dangerous and then impossible and China had at last closed its gates to foreigners altogether. This morning Dan met the news of embassy warnings with a wonderful stubbornness in his eyes: “I can tell the rest are nervous about going to Beijing, and they shouldn’t go if they don’t feel comfortable. But on the other hand how can we get this close and not go on? I want to go.” Looking at him I was suddenly filled with joy. I think we knew that on the one hand we did not really understand what the

students were going through. But we had a sense that the world was making itself new again, that these people were on the brink of something immense and powerful, and that we were moving closer and closer to the heart of their movement. I felt that they must know what it feels like to be living in history, to know that the life you are living is somehow more than your life, is the story of a people and a time. I smiled at Dan. "If you go," I said, "I will go with you."

BEIJING

If I remember little of Shanghai other than the demonstrations, I remember nothing of Beijing. Even my original journal entries are void of anything other than the students. It was here that the group began to feel some internal conflict between those members who wanted us to remember our original purpose of visiting the Church in China, and those who had eyes only for banners and marchers. We came in to town late at night, passing through a barricade made by students and workers who huddled in small crowds at the road side in the midnight chill. John leaned out the window to tell them who we were and then we roused ourselves from the stupor evening travel and no dinner had imposed on us and we gave them the victory sign and cheered them. It was a strange feeling, this bus of tourists, peculiar tourists at that—more interested in Cathedrals than in the Ming Tombs, passing through, hungry and sleepy as if the world were its normal self, while these young people waited at the gates to their own city and pledged to hold off an army with nothing but their own slender bodies and the force of their will.

Overt conflict broke out in our group the next evening when the entertainment that had been scheduled for us was cancelled. There was a sense of absurdity and shame in the cancellation. Transportation within the city had been brought to its knees and only rich foreigners like ourselves had the means to arrive at the scheduled venue in our airconditioned van. The performers (acrobats) were at a loss. Also, there was a sense of impending crisis. It was the twenty-fourth of May, and one got the feeling that local people were nervous to go out at night without a purpose. Though in their home cities the guides were usually expected to go home in the evening, John stayed at the hotel with us that night rather than brave a trip home in the dark. Everyone believed that if the army moved in, it would be at night.

Given the possibility of a free evening the question naturally arose what we should do with it, and several of us posed the question that had been on our minds every moment of our stay in Beijing: "*Will you take us to Tiananmen Square?*"

John looked like someone had hit him. "Impossible," he said. "Absolutely impossible." He said he was not allowed to, that it was dangerous, even that prisoners had been released from jails by authorities with instructions to disrupt the so-far peaceful student gatherings. We laughed at the time, but I have since heard that story again, and ones even more incredible, and am no longer sure I know what is realistic to expect in China. John promised to drive us by the Square tomorrow and begged us not to go tonight for our own safety and out of respect for his position. The group divided and tempers flared. In the end we returned to the hotel agreeing that those of us who wanted to would meet at a quarter to eight and take a cab to the Beijing Hotel which is only a block from the square.

When I got to the meeting place there were only four of us, three priests and myself. My heart pounding, I climbed into the cab that took us to the Beijing Hotel. I waited in the lobby while the men, in their excitement, went in to the hotel to pee. I hugged myself and smiled, noting how the momentous and the utterly mundane get all jumbled up in real life. It is only later, in newspaper accounts, that such details are left out or seem unimportant.

Down the road we went, released like children from school, among the rows of bicycles and pedestrians going home from work along the tree-lined street. Down to the Forbidden City we thought we might never see (it was the one tourist attraction we were barred from due to the demonstrations). We noted the portrait of Mao which had been splattered with ink earlier that day had already been replaced. We tried to cross the wide, divided avenue to the Square, but were daunted by the bikes and buses and thousands of people. We had to climb a few small fences even to get out into the road.

Peter, however, had other ideas. "Anyone here speak English?" he shouted into the crowd. A boy behind the rope-barricade answered, a light in his eyes, pleased to be important. He seemed, like all of them, terribly young. Peter asked if we could go in. He said we were four teachers from America, which was more or less true, since we had all at some time or another been involved in higher education in the States.

The boy asked for our identification. Peter showed his passport. The students looked at each other, at us, shrugged. And the rope was held down for us to pass.

Nearby was an old bus, one of the many the students had commandeered to live in and form a first line of protection. On top was a Western camera crew. Someone was wired and blinking under a strong light, while another yelled into a wireless phone for instructions. We stood a few minutes to see if we could catch the news or even get lucky and get interviewed, but the process dragged and after awhile we got distracted and wandered further into the center of the Square.

Ahead of us were tents with students sprawled on dirty bedspreads and blankets. "Oh, poor things," said Charlie, looking at their thin bodies, the ragged and dirty clothes of such long camping out. "These must be the hunger-strikers," he said.

"This is Tuesday," I said, "the hunger-strike was called off on Sunday night." Peter with his practicality and confidence said, "Let's check it out," and once more we were pressing into the heart of a crowd with Peter's voice booming out for anyone who spoke English.

"I speak a little," said a boy sitting at the entrance to a tent. "These people—do they eat now?" Peter asked, accenting the question with a mime of putting food in his mouth. "Eating, yes, eating now," said the boy.

I turned to go and when I turned back Peter and Charlie had been swallowed by the crowd. I went back, squeezed in and peeked over a shoulder, noting that I was quickly losing my shyness and need for personal space. I saw Charlie and Peter hunched over, signing students' autograph books. We had come so far to see them and here they were asking for *our* autographs. When they saw me a few of them thrust their books and pens into my hands. One boy had signatures all over his shirt since he had no paper. I put my hand under the soft t-shirt material to support it while I signed. He was young and thin and his face was dirty. He had longish hair, high cheek bones, an angular face. I thought he was handsome.

The only paper I had with me was an advertisement from the Hotel—I had been told to take the hotel phone number with me on this escapade and the flyer was all I could grab in my hurry. Now I offered it to them and they each took it patiently and wrote on it. I can read no Chinese, but what they wrote looked much longer than their names. I tucked the paper care-

fully into an inner pocket of my jacket to have it translated for me later. I expected that they had given me slogans of the movement, messages of freedom. But when Mary Cheng read out the characters for me later it was only this: each boy's name and the college he came from. For some reason it touched me, this simplicity. They perceived themselves not just as individuals but as representatives of their schools, and they were here giving their time and their energy, prepared to give their lives. What more, after all, was there to say?

"Hey, are you going to be there all night?" one of the priests called out, and we parted, reluctantly on my part, from the group of students we had exchanged names with. We set out then to explore the rest of the Square before it got too dark. We passed through tents and garbage, piles of old plastic, puddles, an occasional broom, students hunkering together, turning to smile and stare and return the victory sign we gave them. We were winding our way toward the obelisk when we hit another wire, another check point. Ahead of us important-looking banners were swinging.

At the second check point we again showed our passports and went in under the wire. There we paused to ask what some of the banners meant. Most of them, like the signatures of the students, ended up being relatively non-political—they identified schools and committees. People seemed to arrange themselves by the group to which they belonged.

The third and final check point was only a few yards beyond. It consisted of a solid line of students holding hands on the steps to the obelisk itself. On top of the platform were the student leaders and two news crews. This time there was a moment's hesitation when we asked to pass. They knit their brows and conferred. Then they let us through. I felt like some mythological traveler when the gates to the otherworld unexplainably open and he sees the forbidden land. I turned around and saw the crowds spreading out below us, the tens of thousands of people swarming under banners in the growing twilight.

So far I had followed closely behind Peter, each time he did something bold or brave my esteem rising a few more points until I began to feel almost embarrassingly adoring. Sometimes I followed so closely I thought if he stopped short I'd bounce off his broad back. Now I decided it was time for me to be bold myself. So I went over to the news men and introduced myself. We met with Bob something from CBS. "Can you tell us what's been happening here?" I asked rather self-consciously (wasn't that what

one was supposed to ask in crisis situations?).

He said he had been standing there for the last five hours and there had been no real change. There had been relative calm all day. Also, since it was at night that attack was expected, during the day the ranks of students somewhat diminished. It was now that the Square was starting to swell again and would be full and busy until dawn when they could relax, feeling relieved that they had survived another night. Bob asked who we were, and when he discovered that we were basically tourists he raised his eyebrows. "I don't know how you did it," he said, "but somehow you have stumbled on to the citadel of the students' movement."

We asked the usual questions. But his answers completely revised my opinion about what news, even on-the-scene news, is about. "Nothing's for sure," he said. "No one knows where the army is right now or in what direction they are heading." We had heard rumors that day: that new troops were being sought out from Sechuan and other distant places to replace the local troops that had refused to attack. Also, there were rumors of light conflict, skirmishes around the city itself that day. Bob said rumors abound but there had been no conflict on the Square itself and that elsewhere, given the general tenuousness of information, they wouldn't report anything that wasn't directly caught by CBS cameras.

Of course, officially, there was not supposed to be any reporting from the Square. News had been blacked out on Saturday. But the satellite had gone back up and reports were progressing with more or less normally. Bob said, however, that the return on the satellites might not mean anything, except that those who had control of the satellites were themselves supportive of the movement. The disorganization of the government's response showed something, he thought, about the disorganization of the Party itself. Officially, as a foreigner he was not allowed to be there under martial law, or to interview people, or to visit schools. Today he had done all three. Guards themselves had let him into places he was not allowed to go, because they were supportive.

"Do they know," asked Charlie, "how much support the world feels for them?"

"They ask," said Bob. "It's important for them to hear it. When they're interviewed they always ask whether rumors about the West and its response are true."

He said the scariest moments were when the helicopters flew over. The

students thought tear gas would be dropped. When nothing happened they began to cheer and wave, thinking the copters had come in support. When there was no response the crowds became confused and bewildered.

It was now getting really dark and we left the obelisk and made our way back to the Beijing Hotel. When we passed the bus we had originally seen, the NBC news equipment was still in place on top of the bus, but there seemed to be no one nearby responsible for it, or at least no foreigners. “I can’t believe they’d leave equipment like that untended,” said Peter.

I looked at a dozen or so students sitting at the foot of the bus, and the thousands and tens of thousands milling about on the square. “It’s not untended,” I said.

We walked home under one of those indigo skies with a few stars just starting to appear over the lanes of trees and the carpet of bikers. “You always hear this is a country where life is cheap, a country with no concept of human rights,” said Charlie. “No more will I believe that. Surely the spirit of God is at work here. We are standing on holy ground.”

I felt it too, exhausted but at peace, on the edge of something holy. I felt I should take off my shoes and walk barefoot in gratitude and reverence.

At home our elation was met with tepid, if not cold water. We heard that the leaders of the group were angry that we had gone off like that, jeopardizing our own lives, perhaps, as well as the group’s position and the tour guide’s. I sat on the bed in one of the sisters’ rooms and waited impatiently to tell my story while they watched the news in English, which ironically, we could get in the hotel though local people were left relatively without information. I believed at the moment that nothing on TV could be as up-to-date and accurate as what I had to offer. But as I watched, my initial euphoria was replaced by disbelief and dread. It was announced that Li Peng had won the power struggle in the government. News to the West would be shut down again at midnight. China had begun the silence in which the leaders intended to do what they did not want the world to witness.

Regina and I both slept little. When I lay down I could hear my heart. It continued skipping and racing all through the next day. In the morning I was very grumpy and refused to believe that the struggle was really over. I remembered what the newsman had said—that no one really knew what was going on behind the closed doors of the government. Much of the time they didn’t even know where the leaders were. So what if Li Peng an-

nounced he had won the power struggle. He had power before the demonstrations began, too. That didn't necessarily mean the students' struggle was over. The news said that Li Peng had gained control of the army and that troops were now amassing and beginning to flow into Beijing. Yet here we were and I had not seen one soldier. I wondered how much of what we take to be fact is really conjecture.

Wednesday the 25th, all day, the group was on each others' nerves. No one could quite let the trip to the Square drop. As things seemed more serious and the carnival-feel of the evening before was dulled by the realization that these people were risking their lives, I felt stung. I knew that as much as I had honestly wished the democracy movement well, I had also been caught up with the drama of the moment, the sense of being part of something important and the mistaken assumption that that somehow made me important too. I know that I went to the Square out of my own curiosity, and not out of any real understanding of what the Chinese must be feeling. The group viewed my continuing distrust of the news with tolerant amusement. Everyone had had some experience they felt gave them an edge to understand the real situation here. Someone had lived through riots in Detroit; Peter had survived violence in Latin America. They all had advice to give and they all told me not to take the crisis so seriously. "Life goes on," said Peter, and he laughed at the glare I gave him. I thought I probably looked silly and inexperienced. No, I thought, I *am* silly and inexperienced. But that knowledge did nothing to improve my temper.

Meanwhile, between the stress and the food, my intestines had been wrung out completely. Regina slipped me miracle pills every few hours to stop anything volcanic from happening in my intestines. But between exhaustion and stress and dehydration there were several times when I wasn't sure whether I was going to throw up or pass out. At one point Regina did pass out and Peter caught her. He had her in a sitting position on the ground. "There, I think she'll be O.K., now," he said and let go of her. Thunk. Her body slumped over onto the concrete. I told her about it later and she was duly amused. This makes us sound something like the stereotypical vision of sweet and delicate ladies of the 19th century, just the sort of wispy creatures who would follow a group of priests and nuns on a trip to China to visit churches. The vision is ironic since I do not in other ways fit the stereotype: I swear, wear large sloppy clothes, usually with stains on

them, have large, hairy legs, and weigh about as much as a small piano.

Thursday, the 26th. I am conscious as I write this date how every day brought us closer to the massacre, though we didn't expect it, couldn't bring ourselves to believe it would happen. This day we were planning originally to leave Beijing in the late afternoon, but the tour company decided to whisk us out early in the morning instead. We were told that the news had been confirmed. Li Peng was in power. But the implications were still unclear. I had some sort of vise in my upper chest that kept squeezing my heart with every mention of the events surrounding the square. But on the whole the group seemed to have regained its equilibrium. John told us he had heard there would be two days of massive demonstrations. Seventy percent of tours to Beijing had been cancelled. "If there's violence," said someone on the bus, "One hundred percent will be cancelled." Someone we had met was planning to sleep on the road that night at the borders of the city, to keep out tanks and armored personnel carriers.

As we drove out of town in the early morning, I sleepily watched the countryside. It was lovely: lanes of trees, the smell of growing things, comfortable weather, a fresh breeze. There was sunlight in the orchards, a few peasants and bikers on the road.

I had thought the earth here would show that it was China. But aside from the faces, much of this could have been America—the vastness, the open countryside, particularly here in the North, which has little of the South's obvious indications of being southeast Asia: the rice paddies, flooded fields, and banana trees.

Waiting around in airports gives a group an opportunity to get to know each other better. Occasionally I sat with Eileen, my favorite of the sisters. As we were chatting it turned out she worked with the Cleveland team and was one of the original people who set up the mission in El Salvador.

I turned to her in amazement and nearly swallowed my gum. Eileen? This tidy, self-contained sister in her sixties? I considered her for a moment, her soft, white hair, the skin of her face still small-pored and as smooth as her personality, the way she patted my shoulder and called me "dear." I, like many lay missionaries, I think, first became conscious of Maryknoll, and of the Cleveland team, when the sisters and Jean Donovan were killed in 1980. Somewhere in the back of my mind a seed was planted with their deaths, a seed which has taken me halfway around the world, to

live in a foreign culture, in an attempt to gain an understanding of a people very different from my own.

But it was always Jean's face I saw: in magazines, films, on the wall in Bethany House at Maryknoll where I did my training, and in my dreams. And even then it was only Jean after she had died. I have often been troubled by the thought that had she lived I would never have heard of her. Now beside me, not thinking she was anyone particularly brave or special, was a woman who had opened that mission in El Salvador. And I felt that something that had been missing in my journey so far had just been given to me. It is right to honor the dead, right to rally for the crisis, and to grieve and feel angry when we understand the violence in the world. But I want my own journey to be in solidarity not only with the dead, but with those who survived; not only those who became known to me in the moments of high drama, but those who lived quietly the lives they had chosen for themselves. I want to honor Jean. But I want to honor Eileen as well, and if her face is not known to me from magazines and films and pictures in the halls of remembrance, then I want it at least to be beside Jean's in my own dreams, and in my vision of what it is I have come to do.

This is not only because I think there is a temptation among Catholics to be in love with martyrdom, but because we are always in danger of making ourselves the subject of our work, instead of understanding that the short history of growth and suffering we have in any country where we work is minimal, and is given meaning only to the extent that we keep it in the context of the longer history of the local people who go on growing and suffering for years and years, in groups too large to put their faces on our walls.

Eileen for me was the bridge to that newer understanding. It seemed fitting somehow that she would be at the beginning of a mission in El Salvador which came to the world's attention in a famous moment of violence, and that now she was here in China, again in a crisis, again in a moment that threatened to become violent, and promised to be remembered precisely in proportion to the extent of that violence. Her presence reminded me, reminds me still, to be present in the crisis, but to see before and after it, into the struggle of a people who would surely want to be known not only for their despair, but for their dreams.

XIAN

In the afternoon of the 26th we arrived in Xian, a city with a much cozier and ancient feel than Beijing. The local tour guide was a tiny-boned creature named Miss Cheng. "Porcelain," said Sister Marge.

Charlie teased John: "She's good-looking and single."

John gave his "young emperor" look: crossed arms, body drawn taut to its full height, eyebrows raised. He rolled his eyes. "I am not moved," he said. "Absolutely not moved." Everyone around him laughed. I was surprised to discover a sudden sting of jealousy. I liked the way John lifted his chin, that combination of humor and arrogance. So far, as then youngest of our group I had felt I had some rapport with him, and that it didn't matter that I wasn't pretty. Now I felt irritated with everything Miss Cheng did. I found myself thinking she was overdressed in her white, frilly blouse. I was equally irritated at the notice people take of youth and beauty, though I too notice, of course. Occasionally John sat next to me in the van, and I liked the way he leaned toward me to listen, his shoulder and arm resting against me. Then Miss Cheng called him up to the front to consult with him, and he went, cheerful and charming. I felt like throwing a shoe through the window.

That evening a group of us wandered through the city, finding our way, once again, to the heart of the demonstrations. When we got to the central square where the students congregated, Peter and I split off and chatted with the students. There was still a great sense of hope, and, as in Shanghai and Beijing, our own presence sparked interest and we were soon surrounded by a small crowd who huddled together and helped the one who was answering our questions, sometimes providing an English word or two that they knew. Here there was still that carnival feel of a people who have a sense of their own power and are not afraid, people who have gathered in large numbers with a sense of delight in their own new-found unity and sense of purpose.

Regina continued to call her husband in Hong Kong for news every day. After leaving Beijing we had felt especially cut off, and there seemed to be silence from the government on anything of importance. George (Regina's husband) reported by Saturday that the news wasn't good. The government had vowed that the demonstrators would "be dealt with." On the other hand, from the Chinese we heard hopeful things: Emergency meet-

ings were to be held at which they still hoped for Li Peng to be ousted. Zhao Ziyang, about whom all sorts of hopeful and not so hopeful rumors had flourished, was now said to have completely disappeared. We heard that in Tiananmen Square hepatitis and strep had spread, and that students were urged by health groups as well as the government to disperse. There were also reports of misuse of some of the funds that had been pouring in to help them. It was absolutely impossible to sort out rumor from fact, propaganda from reality.

The next day Xian had massive demonstrations. Crowds stopped our progress completely more than once. Marchers shouted “Down with Li Peng” in Mandarin. Traffic stopped for 20 minutes or so at the side of the road and we leaned out to cheer on the marchers who waved and cheered back. They passed in a letter to all the Chinese in the world, outlining abuses of the present government. On finding out we were mostly Americans in the van, a small group passed in a long banner in English: “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death.” Other banners in Chinese said: “Are we finished? Not yet!” and “The People Must Win!” A group yelled “Democracy” and we returned the shout. We put up our fingers in a victory sign and they clapped and shouted to us through the windows.

As the marchers passed, traffic started again with gusts of fumes and volleys of honking. Children and their parents lined the sidewalks and leaned against fences to watch the end of the march. Little, bare-bottomed kids with the split in the back of their pants common in China waved to us from their parents’ arms.

A conversation with a Chinese: “Now in Beijing they don’t call him Li Peng. They call him the new Nazi. The leaders are very short-sighted,” he said.

I asked if the people are still hopeful.

“Yes, the youth are especially hopeful. They know this is a big country. They never thought one demonstration and it is all over. No. It will take a long time. We believe it may take lives.”

I said, “You must have great patience.”

He smiled. “Yes. We are a very patient people.” He looked after the retreating crowd. “If it is like this in Xian, imagine what it must be like in Beijing.”

This sort of demonstration went on all day. Our van ended up following a group of marchers slowly, like a member of the parade. People on the

roadside watched us and waved. They rode up on their bikes and gave the victory sign at the van window. An old man, oblivious to all the confusion, stood in the middle of the street eating a bowl of noodles while bikes squealed around him. A man walked by with a child of about a year on his shoulders. I leaned out of the window to take his picture, and smiling, he took his baby's hand in his own, raised it, and spread the child's fingers to make a V.

GWANGZHOU

Our last city. The 29th of May. Rain. Humid, hot weather. The city was squalid and squat. It is made of tin and pollution and dirty, drab buildings. My intestines were on the blink again. They always say the Chinese food in America is not real Chinese food. If so, I think we'd better keep it that way. My impression of *real* Chinese food (especially in the North) is as follows: Take a pot of rancid oil. Let it sit out uncovered in a city of dust and the smell of poor sewage conditions. Set it next to the box of live, but sickly chickens you are planning to butcher where it can catch bits of their loose feathers and whatever else they care to drop into it. Add bits of underdone meat, still rubbery and slimy. Add garlic and soy sauce. Put on rice and eat.

In the morning of our one full day in Gwangzhou we walked through a street market. There were cobras coiling in wicker baskets. A snake escaped its basket and squirmed across the road. Its seller brought his foot down abruptly on its tail and went on viewing us with a vague sort of interest with his arms crossed, while the snake writhed under his shoe. Chickens and pigeons, covered with sores and stuffed eight or ten into a cage the size of a small computer, shit on each other and plucked out their own feathers until they were bald. We passed tiny, furry puppies and sickly kittens, turtles of all sizes, crabs with their claws tied, eels and goldfish and fish for eating, swimming in metal tanks.

On the thirtieth, we took a train back to Hong Kong where I would go back to my life at language school in preparation for my real missionary work, whatever that means, and where others would get ready to go back to their own lives in Hong Kong or the States.

I was surprised at how excited I was to get back, to get home, to take up my ordinary life once again. This far south, in Gwangzhou, Beijing felt

very distant, almost another country. The stress we felt in the north was ebbing away and I felt mostly myself again, if a bit travel worn. The feeling in the group was that somehow things in China would be all right. It would make no sense for the government to crack down on the protestors—the original students were starting to disperse by themselves anyway, and though replacements were coming in from the provinces, there were fewer of them and there was a general sense that things would probably quiet down for a while, the students taking this opportunity to regroup and think out their next strategy.

THE TAIL OF THE STORM

On the night of June third I went to bed relatively content. The people of Beijing had once again turned back the army in the last twenty-four hours. It seemed that things were resolving themselves.

So I woke to the radio in the morning with feelings for which there are no words. Like tail winds that seem even more violent for the deceptive calm that preceded them, the reality of the massacre in Beijing affected us both for its brutality and for its unexpectedness. Even before I saw the news clips I could picture the armored personnel carrier smashing through barricades on its way into the Square. I kept saying, *"I was just there. How could it happen?"* As if my coincidental proximity to the event in time and space meant that I should have some say over what happened. My mind kept playing over and over images of what I heard on the radio. How the army which just yesterday was turned away returned to fire on the unarmed crowd. How people wept and screamed at the troops even as they were fired at, how they wept and screamed in the hospitals, showing reporters their wounds in rage and disbelief.

In the streets where we had so recently been they say there are blood stains and bodies left along the road. We heard of a fourteen-year-old crying out, "Uncle, don't shoot," before being gunned down. We heard of people trying to reach a twelve-year-old as soldiers kicked her chest in and watched her die on the street.

Hearing these things I felt a kind of shame that I ever wanted excitement, that I had ever thought there was something romantic and dramatic about going to see the demonstrators. The fact that I was not myself in danger, and was not even in China anymore, only brought on a sense of

helplessness, as if I waited before something immense and terrible that gathered without regard for human frailty: someone who from a safe window watches the destruction at the heart of a typhoon.

By the sixth of June I was staring in disbelief at the calendar. Could it only be two days since the news had reached us? It seemed like weeks at least that every day someone I knew had burst out crying. My body felt overwrought, my heart slipped and hurried, as if by trying harder it could change what it knew to be true. Everyone tossed or wept at night instead of sleeping. When I did sleep, there was blood in my dreams.

The people of Hong Kong organized to do what they could. News was smuggled out of China by journalists of all nations, at the risk of their lives. And then Hong Kong smuggled it back in. Newspapers printed small half-page synopses to fax in to families and friends in the Provinces. A memorial concert by all the Chinese choirs in Hong Kong was announced for Saturday. In the choir I sing in I raised my hand and found myself the only Westerner going. I felt embarrassed and wondered if the Chinese might prefer to be alone in their grief.

There is a group of young, mostly unmarried women in the choir and I have wanted to be a part of their group since the first night I saw them. Like most Chinese young people, they drape themselves over one another, and I have looked with longing at them and wished, like one of them, to stroke their silky hair. Now, after I raised my hand to sing in the memorial concert, two of them came over to me. One put her head on my shoulder. The other held my hand. "*Thank you.*" they said. "*Thank you.*" I couldn't think of a single thing to say.

Later they approached me and invited me to one of their houses for next Monday, the Queen's Birthday. Hong Kong can be a cold place. In five months of living here, this is the first time I have been invited to someone's home on my own (once I was invited to a fairly well-to-do home as the friend of a close friend). I felt awed and moved and saddened. There was nothing I had to offer them in their sorrow. I felt like a guest who appeared at the door with nothing but grief as a gift. But the thing that moved me most is that it *was* a gift, this ability to grieve, and had been accepted as such, and it was in the wake of tragedy that a door I had been knocking on had been opened for me and I had been taken in.

The next days were still chaotic. The stock market plunged. Hong Kong was a city in mourning. There were constant memorial services of

one sort or another to go to. Taxis and buses and even some of the doors of the trains were tied with black ribbon. People wore black or white, the traditional colors of mourning. A general strike was declared for Wednesday. In the language school we spoke of nothing else. No one could concentrate. One friend told me she thinks about marriage and children, but thinks she will be freer to fight if she remains without a family. "If there is a way to fight the government I will do it," she said. But how, I wonder. And fight for what? What do they mean by democracy? Chinese history for the last century has been one tragedy after another. They say as recently as the seventies, when the Gang of Four were arrested, forty thousand people disappeared. Yet many Chinese people seem surprised to think that Chinese could kill Chinese. Is there a generation prepared to really think these issues through, a generation that can ask new questions, and that, when these present leaders fall, can guide China to a future that is more than a repetition of the same old story with new faces?

As time has gone on, the explosive and insane attack of the fourth has been replaced with a policy more calculating, and, if possible, all the more horrible for its apparent calm. China has presented a bold and unmovable face before the world and has supported its decisions without apology. The first verdicts came through on those who, enraged by the deaths of friends killed by the train in Shanghai, set the train on fire. And the condemned have been taken out and shot. There is more weeping in Hong Kong, and the lines before embassies get longer every day as masses of people apply for passports which will take them away from here. These people cannot forget that when they look at China they look at their future. 1997 suddenly seems very close, and then no one will say from here "I went in to China" or "I returned to Hong Kong." It will all be one country.

In my room I have a little platform for my treasures. On it I have the signatures of students in Tiananmen square. I keep it there in honor of those students who so simply signed their names and the names of their schools when I met them during that twilight journey. Somewhere in China a young man wears my name on his shirt. A little part of me goes with him into whatever future he has. He carried not only my name, but the names of dozens—well wishers, compatriots, and fellow demonstrators. I keep his name, too, holding a little part of him in safety, and for his sake I continue to hope, so that part of him can go forward into a better day.