Interview Robin Munro

As a researcher in 1989 for Human Rights Watch in Beijing, Robin Munro witnessed first hand the weeks of pro-democracy demonstrations in the city and the People's Liberation Army's final assault on June 3-4. In this interview, he describes what he saw, the threat the Tiananmen protest movement posed for the Party and the symbolism of the young man who stood up to the tanks. Munro is a Hong Kong-based specialist on human rights in China. This is an edited transcript of interviews conducted on Nov. 11, 2005.

I think a common perception in the West among people at large is that the events of 1989 were just a student protest. Actually, the students did light the initial flame, but this soon became a mass protest all over the country.

Oh, absolutely. The students started the '89 pro-democracy movement, and they played a magnificent role in inspiring ordinary citizens in Beijing, Shanghai, dozens of cities. They became icons to the general public, especially after they started their mass hunger strike in Tiananmen Square. ... [At] the height of the hunger strike, every few minutes there was a hunger striker collapsing, and there were ambulances going in and out all the time down this emergency avenue. ... [T]his spectacle of students starving themselves for the good of the nation, this scene of self-sacrifice, really touched the hearts of ordinary Beijing people, and they came out in the hundreds of thousands to show support for and solidarity with those students. They began to think of them as "our" students.

... Once all those ordinary Beijing residents, workers and others were out on the streets, then another momentum began. Those people began raising their own demands. They had their own class interests and complaints to raise, and then it snowballed, and every single sector of Chinese society came out overwhelmingly in support of the students and [began] to press their own demands. Those demands were pretty consistent across the board: It was freedom of speech, press freedom in particular, end to corruption and some kind of movement towards more democracy. ... [T]his became a multi-class, across-the-board, national movement for democracy and greater freedom. ...

... Every sector and interest group and strata of Chinese society was out there with their own banners, saying: "We are the Beijing journalists. We demand press freedom. We demand the right to tell the truth." ... Then you had the Beijing steelworkers out, saying, "We demand better working conditions, higher pay, an end to corruption in society." All the groups were out there. It was a carnival of protest. So yes, it was very, very widespread. ...

What were the ordinary people protesting?

... [T]he economy had run into real trouble in the couple of years before May '89. Inflation was rampant. The cost of living was soaring. Meanwhile, workers' wages were staying steady, and they were hurting economically. On top of that, there was intense anger and resentment at what was perceived to be just corruption within the Party. It's almost ironic when we look back from our current vantage point some 16 years in the future, and what we see is that corruption then couldn't hold a candle to the level of corruption that we have now all over the country.

It's important to see it in context, because ... the Mao era was still a very recent memory in 1989, and Mao did many things wrong, but one thing that he did do

Highlights

RECENT STORIES

November 18, 2015 / 5:27 pm
In Fight Against ISIS, a Lose-Lose Scenario Poses Challenge for West

November 17, 2015 / 6:13 pm
ISIS is in Afghanistan, But Who Are They Really?

November 17, 2015 / 1:59 pm
"The Most Risky … Job Ever." Reporting on "ISIS in Afghanistan"

that had a lasting impact on the Chinese population is insist on egalitarianism. The official ideology was that everyone was equal. Of course, they weren't in reality, but by and large, there were not big disparities of wealth and income and living standards. ... [F]or ordinary Chinese people, your neighbor would not have a lot more money than you did. This belief in equality was still very strong at that time, so the amount of corruption that had emerged by the late '80s really occasioned great resentment among ordinary Chinese people.

... [B]y giving all that emphasis to the students' movement, in a sense they were kind of playing into the government's hands, weren't they?

Yes, I think it served the government's interests to focus on the student dimension of this whole movement. Once the workers began to get involved, this was the Chinese Communist Party's worst nightmare come to life. ... They knew that as long as protest stayed with the students and/or the intelligentsia, they could handle it. What could the students or the intellectuals do? They could boycott classes. Intellectuals could stop writing. ... [A]s long as it was mainly students and intellectuals, they felt that they could keep it under control.

"The symbolism of what he did was overwhelmingly clear. … You had one man … who took it on himself to speak for everyone else who had been silenced by that time."

What was surprising is that they allowed it to go on for so long. That, I think, signaled that there was division at the highest levels of the leadership over how to act. There was clearly a policy paralysis of some kind within the Chinese leadership. But once you had hundreds of thousands of workers and their families coming out -- by the end of the week of [Soviet President Mikhail] Gorbachev's visit, there were more than a million people in Tiananmen Square; that number of people is just astonishing when you're in the middle of it -- that, I think, is when the government really realized that this was out of its control.

The decision was made to end it by any means necessary, because once the workers were involved, they can actually shut down the economy. It's as simple as that. ...

You gave me moving descriptions of the protests you saw during your walks around this city, the peacefulness of the popular demonstration and the new spirit among Beijingers. Can you tell us about that?

This was in a way the most extraordinary thing. ... [T]he whole tone and ambience of the protests was, first of all, absolutely peaceful. I am not aware of any violence that occurred throughout those several weeks of protest from the demonstrators' side. The second was a sense of extraordinary civic responsibility that people in Beijing at all levels of society consciously displayed. You talked to them, and they'd tell you: "We have a great responsibility here. We must not allow our peaceful pro-democracy movement to turn into disorder, chaos, violence of any kind."

People were on their best behavior, but also [they had] the feeling of being engaged in this totally unprecedented enterprise for China. The sense of empowerment they had was very much coupled with a deep sense of responsibility, so they were determined that nothing would upset the apple cart. ...

If you had seen between 1 million and 2 million people out on the streets in almost any other capital in the world, it would have inevitably led to genuine violence, disorder. There would have been clashes with police. Hot-headed people would have prevailed. It would have unraveled quickly. But nothing of that nature happened in Beijing. They were immensely disciplined and most impressive. ...

Why did the government use overwhelming force to quell the protest?

Well, I think on the decision to impose martial law, from what we know now, was probably several weeks before May 19, when Deng Xiaoping met with military leaders from around the country. ... [H]is goal there was to make military leaders from every part of the country sign off on the coming crackdown. Everyone was to be involved so no one could criticize it later. They were all to share the responsibility.

When they sent in 300,000 troops, ... I believe the government and the Party leadership had no doubt that they would prevail at that time. The thought that

huge numbers of citizens, including old ladies, old gentlemen, would come out and lie down in front of the tanks never occurred to them. Really, it was beyond their political experience. No one had ever done this kind of thing in China before. ...

This changed the whole equation entirely for the Chinese leadership. They had, from what had been a peaceful protest movement, they now had a civil resistance movement under way, showing all signs of being utterly determined to resist martial law, and they prevailed. The people prevailed. There was no martial law imposed that night and not for the next two weeks, until the night of the massacre. ...

But can you describe how they blocked the army?

Oh, they just came out in human-wave tactics and just stood in front of the advancing tanks. I remember the following day I went down to the southwest of the city, where a major highway came into the city, and that had been one of the main points of advance for the army the night before. The scene that greeted my eyes was just unbelievable. I could see for about a mile in the distance, endless series of tanks and APCs [armored personnel carriers] and troop transport trucks simply standing there. All lanes on the highway going as far back as the eye could see [were] completely surrounded by tens of thousands of people, citizens blocking them in the front and by the sides. ... Young women, middle-aged housewives, elderly retired workers were coming out, climbing onto the troop trucks where the PLA [People's Liberation Army] soldiers were sitting with their steel helmets and AK-47s. ... Probably millions of Beijing citizens took to the streets that night, put themselves physically in front of those tanks and said: "We're staying. You're not coming in. Sorry, this is our city. Go back where you came from. You're not needed. There's no chaos. Leave us alone." ... This went on for days and days.

Eventually, after a few days, the troops withdrew to temporary barracks in the suburbs of the city, ... and the police stopped coming onto the streets of Beijing. There was effectively no civilian authority imposed for those two weeks, and this makes it all the more extraordinary that crime didn't suddenly escalate, that there wasn't violence, that there wasn't disorder or anarchy of any kind during those two weeks. The sense of civic responsibility just got stronger, because "[Without] the government controlling us through police and troops on the street, our duty is even greater now to be restrained, reasonable, peaceful."

... Can you describe that what happened on the night of June 3 and [the morning of the] 4th out there and your personal experiences?

I was an observer for Human Rights Watch in Beijing at that time. I arrived in Beijing on May 13, which was the day when the mass hunger strike started in the square. After June Fourth, I interviewed many eyewitnesses who had been in different parts of the city on that night. I was in the square itself that night myself, throughout the night. ... Basically, there was a one-sided pitched battle waged by the PLA all the way from the western suburbs several miles through the city until they finally, several hours later, at about 1:30 a.m., began to actually arrive at Tiananmen Square, which was ground zero. ...

I arrived at Tiananmen Square just after 1:00 a.m. on June Fourth. ... There were people running out from all directions, and I could see this massive blaze of flame up in the northeast corner of the square from hundreds of yards away. ... I went up, and I could see this was an armored personnel carrier that had been set on fire and tremendous heat and flames coming up all from it. The whole sky was illuminated with this. ...

On the Monument [to the People's Heroes] itself, there was a determined band of students who had remained. [It was] very difficult to estimate how many -- there could have been 1,000 or there could have been more -- but the whole monument was covered in students on all the different levels, just sitting there. I went up to talk to them. Many of them were writing wills. They knew the end was coming. They were convinced that this was it, and I was so impressed at their resolve in the face of this Armageddon force that was descending on them. They were simply sitting there, determined to make their point and to go ahead and make history that night. It was just stunning, so impressive. ...

[W]e all -- everyone in that square -- really thought that all hell was about to break loose and that the troops were going to fire. ... [B]ecause I was the human rights observer, I was supposed to see what happened and record it, so I decided I would try to find a vantage point where I would be able to see what was happening

without being in the direct line of fire. I decided I would go up to the top of the History Museum steps. To my horror, when I turned round, ... I saw this horrifying sight of literally thousands and thousands of PLA troops occupying every spare square inch on the steps. ... [T]he massive steps of the Great Hall of the People were covered with this human sea of troops, just stationed there. There were tens and tens of thousands of them, so you had that on both sides. And up in the north under the Mao portrait, Tiananmen Gate, were just increasing numbers of military hardware, tanks, APCs all facing down. ...

... [At] about 4:15 in the morning, suddenly all of the lights in the square went out -- pitch, pitch dark. This was very frightening. ... We knew that the troops had orders to clear the square by dawn -- that was the deadline. Dawn was approaching. Dawn came at 5:00 a.m. in Beijing. ... We could hear a lot of noise; there seemed to be a clattering of boots over on the west of the square. ... I thought, this is it; this must be the signal. They're going to start the attack now; they're going to start firing. ... [B]ut, in fact, nothing happened.

After about 10 minutes, the lights came on again, but not the normal lights of the square. They stayed off. Instead, they put on the special display lights that lit up the Great Hall of the People from the front, which was an extraordinary sight. ... It was like this Gotterdammerung ["Twilight of the Gods"] effect of this vast cavernous Great Hall of the People, lit-up floodlights and smoke rising all around. At that point, we could see that thousands and thousands of troops were running out of the Great Hall of the People onto to the steps and deploying ... in the front of the Monument to the People's Heroes. It was clear that this was the crunch time. [For] the students, this was their last chance to get out. ...

Several older intellectuals -- there had been four of them who had been staging a hunger strike on the top of the monument starting on June 2 -- they took the initiative. They took up the loudspeaker, the microphone, and announced over the student PA, "Look," they said, "we have to leave now; otherwise we're all going to be killed needlessly. There will be a terrible bloodshed in the square unless we leave now. The sacrifice will be pointless." They said, "We should preserve our revolutionary forces and not be squandering them here."

Then one of them proposed a vote. ... A voice vote was taken, and ... we couldn't actually make out which of the shouts was louder, but it didn't matter, because the guy with the microphone announced that the democratic decision had been to evacuate, and sure enough, within a few minutes, people started getting up off the monument. They ... started filing out. The column was about five, six, seven people across, gradually formed, and they began walking away from the square. ... I'll never forget those faces, those young people's faces. They were walking out with their heads held high. They'd finessed their retreat from the square so well. They'd performed so bravely, and finally ... they'd made the right decision. There would have been no point in staying there. Everybody would have been killed. ...

... The students' decision to peacefully evacuate the square minutes before the final assault was definitely going to come, was a triumph of rationality over violence. It was a triumph of political wisdom and sanity over what was, on the government's side, panic, fear, cowardice in mobilizing an army against an unarmed citizenry. ... The future prevailed in the sense of those students who walked out of the square and said: "We've made our point. OK, you have the tanks. We're not going to let you kill us pointlessly."

The theater of the massacre was, by and large, elsewhere. It was the rest of the city, and that was where the Beijing citizens fought and died to protect their students, and also to protect the sense of civic pride and consciousness they themselves had developed in those crucial few weeks leading up to that.

... Reports in the week after June Fourth stated that troops had assaulted the monument about 4:30 a.m. and massacred all the students on the monument, saying that thousands of students had been shot down in cold blood. That didn't happen, and had it happened, I wouldn't be here today -- as simple as that. ...

Can I talk to you about the young man who stood in front of the tanks? I think it's clear from most people's accounts that he wasn't a student; he was another ordinary Beijinger. He may have been an office worker; he may have been a factory worker. But seeing him as a symbol for those citizens you've talked about, who showed that courage and dignity, does that have any value to you, judging it in that way?

Yes. In a sense, it could have been anyone who went up there and played this almost mythic, symbolic role of simply saying no to the PLA. ... It could have been anyone, but he did it. He did this extraordinary heroic act of standing in front

of a column of tanks, no one around him. He was all on his own with his shopping bag in his hand. He stood there and wouldn't move. He climbed on top of the tank, banged on the lid, said: "Get out of my city. ... You're not wanted here." He spoke for the Beijing people, who had fought this magnificent campaign of civic, peaceful resistance for weeks against all the odds.

From the footage we have and the pictures we have, he didn't look at all like a student. He looked like someone on his way to work or who had just knocked off and was on his way home, doing the shopping on the way home. In a sense, he stood for the ordinary people. The symbolism of what he did was overwhelmingly clear. ... Before June Fourth, you had millions of people all over China, in the cities, up in the streets, peacefully demanding more rights, freedom, democracy, press freedom, end to corruption. After June Fourth, what did you have? You had one man, one sacrificial figure almost, who took it on himself to speak for everyone else who had been silenced by that time.

What does it say about China, the system, that we don't have a clue about who he is?

Oh, it speaks volumes about the system. ... This lies at the heart of the Communist enterprise in China: control of knowledge; control of information; the official version of what happened, which must be endlessly worked on by historians and hacks to get just the right message to justify the Party's continued monopoly on power. The facts have to be bent so that the story can be totally rewritten. ...

Most Chinese people have no idea that this incident even happened. It did not appear on Chinese television, needless to say. Foreign footage was censored. Pictures were cut out of any newspapers that came into the country that had this figure of the man in front of the tanks. ... They're robbed of their own history, of their own political symbolism as a people, [of] acts like this, and it's because of the obsessive, seamless control of information that the Communist Party has evolved over the decades. ...

... It's quite extraordinary, though, that even after the market reforms, the freeing up of the economy, the great proliferation of the media that you now have in China, the commercialization of the press -- still, even with all that ferment going on, the key political issues in which no debate is allowed are still completely defined and crafted by the Party to suit its purposes.

Inconvenient facts, or facts which totally undermine that official version, are excluded totally. They can still do that. They still have the means and the determination to do that on key issues that strike at the heart of the myth of the Communist Party's right to rule China indefinitely, without elections. ...

... Walking around Beijing, looking at the faces of ordinary Beijingers, what does it do to you, psychically, to have been through an experience like this -- to have had an army double the size of the army that the Americans sent into Iraq occupying your city, deaths, and [you're] not allowed to speak about it?

... I think it's deeply painful for countless Beijing citizens and residents even today. What they experienced in May '89 was, for the first time, a real sense of civic pride, civic responsibility and a feeling that their efforts would contribute to a better China. There was great sincerity and commitment on the part of the average person in Beijing at that time.

After the massacre, the enforced prohibition on any discussion of it, no challenge allowed to what the government did that night, no debate -- that has induced deep cynicism among those same people who were active participants in the May '89 movement towards the realm of politics as a whole. They have been beaten back. Once again, the message has been driven home that they have no role in politics. They're not wanted. None of their business! Stay out!

They've gotten the message. They're now deeply cynical about anything like that. Those aspirations have been crushed, and all that's left is what the Party is now offering them, which is the chance to make more money, if they're lucky. Who wouldn't take up that offer if it's all that's on offer? We all would. It's all that's left is just to just think of your own life, your own family, getting ahead in life, making more money. Just don't even think of entering into the big debate about China's future and political reform. ...

It doesn't surprise you that for today's students at Beijing University [also called Peking University], the picture of him was absolutely meaningless?

... I think it's terribly tragic that Beijing University students who were at the forefront of the May '89 democracy movement, ... that several generations of students later have no conception of what happened, don't even know that this incident of the man in front of the tanks ever happened. It tells us the depth extent of the government's monopoly over truth and knowledge in China. ...

The first article claiming to identify him appeared in the *Sunday Express* giving him the name Wang Wei Lin. Later, the *London Evening Standard* said that it had hard evidence that he'd been executed. You were very skeptical of these reports. Why?

Well, my job was as a China human rights researcher, working both for Amnesty International and then at that time for Human Rights Watch, to get the facts, [and] if I could, to get names of detainees, find out how long prison terms they'd been sentenced to. After June Fourth, ... I followed the paper trail of the reports that appeared in the Western press, naming him as Wang Wei Lin, the reports that he'd been executed.

... So I talked to one of the journalists from Britain who had published that story naming him and saying he had been executed, and I interviewed him. By the end of the interview, I had a very clear sense that actually this man's sources were not reliable. ... I just concluded at the end of that investigation that we actually had no idea of what that man was called, what his real name was, and we had even less idea of what had happened to him. He'd simply disappeared. ... He may have been executed, but those reports were not based on information that I thought stood up to examination. So we were left with just a huge question mark over that man. ...

But we know what he stood for.

We know what he stood for. ... [H]e didn't need to have a name. He spoke for the masses, the many who had been silenced on June Fourth. He was all of them, you know. He didn't need a name, because the point he made, everyone got it. Everyone heard it. It will endure long after this regime has become history. ...

But there's another dimension that's important: [It's] that the government allowed that slaughter of the ordinary Beijing people citizens to take place. It could have said no. It could have stopped it, could have pulled back from the brink. It didn't, and I think there we see a very ruthless determination on the government's part. ... The tactics of overwhelming force that were used had a point. They were meant to shock, terrify and awe, and they did. Terror works. The crackdown of June '89, combined several years later with the sudden inauguration of the market economy and Chinese-style capitalism -- I mean, how bizarre that a Communist Party which has spent decades trying to fight capitalism should suddenly turn to capitalism as its savior! There was a point to that. This was meant to buy ... the Communist Party a new lease on life on the one hand, intimidate opposition for a generation on the other hand, and give the people bread and circuses. The deal is there must be no challenge to one-party rule. That's the terms of today's China. That's the deal, and that's what we still have. ...

posted apr. 11, 2006