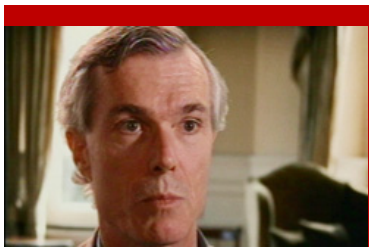
Interview Timothy Brook



Timothy Brook is a professor of Chinese history at the University of British Columbia and author of several books on China including *Quelling the People: The Military Suppression of the Beijing Democracy Movement*. He details here the extraordinary June 1989 confrontation between the citizens of Beijing and the People's Liberation Army and talks about the confusion and mistakes that were made by the Chinese military and political leadership. He also discusses the man who stood his ground before the tanks, the huge media silence about Tiananmen that was imposed afterward by the regime, and the role of Western IT companies in the struggle for control of information in China. This is an edited transcript of an interview conducted on Dec. 11, 2005.

Can you, from your own investigations, give me a sense of the scale of the uprising?

The scale of the movement before Tiananmen was massive. The events of 1989 started as a student movement, and initially the students were very careful about not involving anyone else. In China, the student world and the worker world are very much separate from each other. The students are looked on as people who are going to become the next governing leadership of the country. The workers have no such expectation. The students initially felt protected by the fact that they were speaking as the voice of reason against failures on the part of the government, and they knew that as long as they did that and didn't involve people in society at large, they were more or less protected. When the students started taking to the streets and protesting against the government, the boundary very quickly broke down. It was so amazing for Beijing people to see the students marching against the government; it touched a chord.

When the army comes in on May 19, there is a huge groundswell of support, not so much for what the students were doing, but a groundswell of anger that the government would send in the army to solve the problem. When the army first made its move, they were stopped not by students but by the people living on the outskirts of the city. The students didn't even know that this was going on. I think the working population of Beijing had its concerns, but these were concerns that affect any place that is undergoing rapid change -- concerns about taxation, the stability of their income, medical support, corruption in the government. I don't think they would have thought of taking to the streets over any of this, but when the army comes in, that just galvanizes the population.

I think the population of Beijing pushed the movement much further than it was prepared or even expecting to go. It transformed it from being a student movement into being a genuinely broad-based urban uprising, which caught the students by surprise, and it certainly caught the government by surprise.

What is so remarkable is that for 15 days, from the night of May 19, when martial law was declared, right up until the night of June 3, the citizens were able to keep the army at bay. How did they do that?

The army had the disadvantage of having to come in through the suburbs, where there were a lot of high-rises being built in the 1980s. So as the army appears on the streets of Beijing, the high-rises just empty out. People pour down into the streets to challenge the army and ask the army why they think they're coming in. At the same time, they move into the end of the convoys and block the convoys from retreating. So there are three or four major military convoys in the suburbs of Beijing that can't go forward to Tiananmen Square. They also can't withdraw.

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They had them fixed there and imposed on them 24, 48 hour street seminar to explain to them why they shouldn't be doing what they're doing.

They were stuck there for two, sometimes three days. They were being both treated well by the citizens. They'd bring them water and food, but they wouldn't let them leave. And they set up a kind of street seminar in which they took the soldiers through their responsibilities to the state, and those responsibilities included protecting the citizens, which meant that they shouldn't even be there in the first place. Beijing was for the people who lived in Beijing. Beijing was not for the army, and they wouldn't let the army leave until they had made that point clearly.

The other thing, though, was that once you've sent units in, they have no independent leadership. All decisions have to be made from the military headquarters, and they were waiting in turn for the political leadership to make up their mind. Eventually the order comes in to withdraw, but in each case the convoys have to negotiate with the students for permission to withdraw, because also it's very hard to turn around convoys in a city street; people have got to clear a space. The citizens were in control.

"They know this event happened, they know it's an event they can't talk about …Tiananmen is becoming bigger and bigger as it remains silent and unaddressed."

It was a mess. Most of that mess we can't see because the mess was happening at very high levels of the leadership. What we saw, what the photographers caught and what people remember are these convoys stuck in this sea of Beijing citizenry.

And then, of course, everything changed.

And then everything changed. On May 22, May 23, the army columns withdrew to their bases, which were well outside the city. This created a sense of euphoria in Beijing, particularly among the citizens, because they had effectively told the People's Liberation Army [PLA] that they could not come into the city. I think the students were a little cannier. You have to remember that the students have family connections to top leadership in Beijing, so I think they were hearing indirectly that the army would be used again. The students were trying, in fact, to wind the movement down; they knew there would be another confrontation. So when June 3 comes around, the people go out into the streets and try and repeat what they did on May 19, but the army went in this time with live ammunition, knowing that if necessary it would use it. There is this difference of expectation on the two sides that perhaps caused the citizens to be bolder than they would have been.

Can you describe that moment when lethal force was used for the first time?

The army comes in on all five major arteries into the city. The major force is coming in from the west along Chang'an Boulevard [the Boulevard of Eternal Peace], which is this east-west belt that cuts straight across the city and right into Tiananmen Square in the middle. [There are] probably 5,000 infantry, long columns of armored personnel carriers [APCs]. There are also perhaps 1,500 People's Armed Police, who are kind of a militia, who did have some training in riot control.

Coming in from the west, the first major intersection is called Muxidi. This is an area that had been developed in the 1980s largely as a residential area for government employees. This means that Chang'an Boulevard, coming in from the west, is lined with these rather large apartment buildings, and it forms a kind of canyon down which the army had to proceed. The army has to follow this path; there's no other way for them to get in. At the same time, they're being overlooked by thousands of people working and living in these buildings, so all of this was happening under the watchful gaze of a lot of people.

The column gets to Muxidi; the progress of the army is stopped, stopped by simply crowds of people, but also stopped by disabled vehicles that are dragged out onto the street, traffic dividers that are pulled across, buses that are jackknifed to prevent the army from getting into Tiananmen. Now, the People's Armed Police have some riot-control equipment; there's an attempt at the very front of these columns not to use guns. But right behind them are the police, and then the soldiers who are armed with AK-47s. The army, however, has an order to get in.

We don't know for sure, but the order seems to be that they have to get [to the square] by midnight. So by 10:00 p.m. they're getting desperate. They cannot fight their way through thousands of people with riot shields and billy clubs, so each of

these columns coming into the city starts radioing into headquarters, asking for permission to go ahead at any cost. Finally that permission starts coming down sometime between 10:30 p.m. and 11:00 p.m.

The first rounds of fire catch everybody by surprise. The people in the streets don't expect this to happen. There are a couple of hospitals right near Muxidi, and the casualties start showing up within 10 or 15 minutes of the first round of gunfire. The casualties run very high because people didn't expect to be shot at with live ammunition. When they start firing, people say, "Oh, it's rubber bullets." Even after it becomes clear, even after they realize that the army is going to go ahead at any cost, people still pour into the streets. This is the amazing thing: People were just so angry, so furious at what was happening in their city that they were not going to step back and let the army do what it was doing. This is why the casualties from Muxidi on east towards Tiananmen Square were so high. This is the major military confrontation of the evening.

It took hours and hours to go those few kilometers from Muxidi to Tiananmen Square.

Every time a blockade was knocked down going east from Muxidi, another one would be set up at the next major intersection, so the army had to plough its way through a series of blockades. Sometimes it's breaking through buses and trucks that have been strewn across the street, in other cases it's breaking though human barriers and they have to be shot. It takes about three hours; eventually, the army converges on Tiananmen Square sometime about 1:30 a.m.

There's another rather sad story that develops at this point. The first APCs to get to the square get too far ahead of their column, and from all we can determine, the drivers had no idea where they were; they didn't even seem to have maps of the city. So you had two APCs trying to figure out where to go because they'd become detached from their column. The crowds are so furious that they drag materials out into the street that eventually block and disable the APCs. They attempt to set fire to the carriers; the troops inside panic, and they get out. A few of the soldiers were killed, but the students actually seem to be the ones who came forward to provide protection to the soldiers from the anger of the mobs that would, I think, fairly cheerfully have killed them if they'd had the chance.

Can you give some idea of the kind of weapons that were used?

The army was using AK-47s, a semiautomatic rifle that's standard issue for the PLA. There seemed to be no other weapon, in fact. There were detachments of the Beijing police force that had riot equipment, but not very much, and they seemed not to be trained to use this stuff. The army was sending in soldiers who were generally very young, had very little urban experience, and had only AK-47s in their hands. The army was counting on the fact that the citizens would respect the soldiers for whatever they were trying to do to maintain the good order of the country. That backfired.

You have described the copper-clad bullets that they used which literally tear the body open.

The PLA had issued its soldiers with bullets that explode on contact with the target, so you have very small entrance wounds and very large exit wounds. It's the kind of ammunition an army wants in the field because it creates much damage and incapacitates the other side because of the medical burden of dealing with this kind of casualty. It's not the sort of thing that should be used in an urban setting.

Are we talking about an army that was just completely improperly prepared for urban warfare, or are we talking about, as some people have told me, a deliberate, maximum show of force to make sure that nothing like this ever recurred for a generation?

When the army first went in at the beginning of June, the assumption on everyone's part is that it was acting according to plan; that the army had been charged to go in, use a maximum show of force and effectively intimidate anyone from ever trying this again. My own research leads to a very different conclusion. I see it as nothing but a trail of disasters from the first time the army appears in Beijing on May 19.

The army was ill prepared. They had a plan of which units would move in along which corridors to try and get to Tiananmen Square, but the details of the operation were a shambles. The army went in without sufficient provisions,

without sufficient medical teams. They didn't seem to anticipate the damage they would cause. They didn't anticipate situations they would get in. APC drivers didn't even seem to have maps of the city. The soldiers didn't know how to behave. I think a lot of the soldiers had never even been in a city before; they were country boys. They didn't have the proper equipment; they didn't have the proper training. It was a mess.

There's any number of different techniques that you can use to try and intimidate urban crowds into dispersing. None of these were used. All they could do was send in APCs with teenage soldiers with AK-47s, and of course the destruction and the violence were beyond imagining. I think it surprised the Chinese leadership. I don't think they expected this to happen, and it took them four or five days to try and figure out what to do politically after this had happened.

The soldiers were also kept isolated before they went into the city.

The student movement had captured the imagination of the people of Beijing. It had broad public support, much to the students' surprise -- I think much to everyone's surprise. The army didn't want the soldiers to know about this, so they kept the soldiers very carefully sequestered well outside the city in the weeks leading up to the operation, so when the soldiers went in on May 19 they had no idea what was going on. They knew nothing about a democracy movement; they knew nothing about the conditions in the city. They had been told only that there was turmoil and that they had to go in to stop the turmoil. Once the soldiers were in the city and were, I think, shocked by the scale of opposition, that led to a sense of desperation and panic that made the violence that much worse on the night of June 3.

There is evidence that quite a large number of soldiers, non-commissioned officers [NCOs] and officers, refused to obey orders and were court-martialed. Is that correct?

After everything was over, the PLA selected about two, three dozen exemplary soldiers who had died in the course of the occupation of Beijing. They celebrated their role. Stories did circulate after June Fourth that NCOs and officers had been court-martialed and executed for failing to follow orders. There is no independent confirmation of this. There is extensive eyewitness evidence that soldiers surrendered to student monitors to get themselves out of an intolerable situation.

The thing is, we just don't know, do we? We don't even know for sure the number of people who were killed.

The fact that we don't really know much of what happened that night is one of the great puzzles of contemporary Chinese history. Casualties have been extremely difficult to ascertain. I was able to get numbers for a dozen Beijing hospitals, but Beijing has several dozen hospitals. The numbers that I was able to find have not been corroborated by any other evidence.

I've been assured by many people that both the people and the government have extensive documentation about what happened through these days, and I'm hoping that someday that information will come to light. The Chinese government's hope is that people will just be willing to forget, allow the government to just go forward, but I don't think you can do that. You can't do it to a city, and you can't do it to those who were in their 20s in 1989. This is the generation that still carries with them confusion, doubt and resentment about what happened in Tiananmen. Someday the government has got to address that. They couldn't do it immediately because it would affect the authority of the men who were leading China through the 1990s. It will probably take yet one more generational turnover in the Chinese leadership before they can finally come back to this, but they have to come back to it. You can't set aside an event like that and expect it to just disappear.

What do you say to those people who say: "Why dig up the past? It's all over; China's moved on"?

Tiananmen was a trauma for the people who experienced it, and the people who experienced it were in the millions. Anyone who was living in Beijing at the time knew what was going on. The people of Beijing have a blank space in their memories. That space is actually filled with memories, possibly memories of friends or relatives who died, but it's a space that they can't show to anyone else. So they live their lives with this part of their experience, this part of their memory on hold. There is no way to forget something this terrible.

For the moment, the Chinese government is hoping that the prosperity that its economic reforms have brought about will buy them all the time that they want, that people will set aside these political issues because they are content to live better lives. But ultimately it's going to come back. You can't keep this kind of trauma out of the public memory forever. Eventually the diaries, the letters, the photography, the film footage that the people took, this has all got to come back. Whenever I'm in China I take a copy or two of my book back, because I'm often asked what I, as a foreigner, might know about what happened on June Fourth. People are keenly interested to know what went on, even people who weren't in Beijing at the time. They know that this event happened, they know it's an event they can't talk about, and they're desperate to know more. I think that desperation only grows with time. Tiananmen is becoming bigger and bigger as it remains silent and unaddressed.

Can one make a film on China now without reference to Tiananmen? It seems to us that the reaction to these events was this extraordinary decision to go full throttle on liberal capitalism while blocking off any kind of political freedom. Does that make any sense?

It does. I hadn't thought of it quite that way. If you go back to the 1980s, you see the Chinese government trying to experiment with new ways to develop the economy. One suspects that they might have continued in this kind of experimental fashion of both liberalizing the ideological realm as they're liberalizing the economy. When Tiananmen came about, they knew they couldn't continue with any kind of ideological liberalization; they had to focus on the economy.

The decision to develop the economy exclusively does stem from the experience of 1989, and it's a deal that I think a lot of the Chinese people have been willing to accept. The improvements they've seen in their living standards, compared to the changes for decades before 1989, the improvements have been extraordinary, have been massive. So I think a lot of people have been willing to accept this deal with the devil, to say, all right, things went very badly in 1989, but in a sense we have been rewarded by not asking the government to return to that event and account for the way in which it conducted itself.

I also think it was a turning point because it was the moment when there was nothing left to believe in. ... So you just fill those empty spaces with crass commercialism. You have to fill it with something.

You phrase it better than I possibly could. Tiananmen created a crisis of belief for Chinese people. They could no longer really believe in the Chinese government as their government. They could no longer believe in the People's Liberation Army as their army. It left this huge well of cynicism for the first couple of years of the 1990s, and then the Chinese government is finally able to get its economic reforms going, hoping to buy off the people of Beijing with the promise of a better life. If you go to Beijing today, the city is transformed. You can still find Chang'an Boulevard; you can still find Tiananmen Square; but somehow the evidence of Beijing's past is quickly disappearing, and this is what the government hopes will happen.

And interestingly, the payoff really is only to those people who created the disturbance in 1989. But going out into the countryside, free medical care, free schooling had been abolished.

Yes, the economic changes have created great imbalances between the educated elite in the city and the rural poor. Also, there's a mass of urban poor that did not exist 10 years ago. There are huge polarizations in China as a result of this emphasis on economic development, and this creates a different kind of tension that the Chinese government is going to have to face. They're going to have to deal with the gap between rich and poor, between urban and rural. These are gaps that they've largely not spent any time really working on, and I think the fear is that the gap between rich and poor will be the next source of tension and conflict in Chinese society.

The photograph of the young man standing in front of the column of tanks -- do you remember your reaction when you first saw that?

That's the most extraordinary picture of the last half of the 20th century, as far as I'm concerned. It's absolutely extraordinary. You could look at him as unusually brave, but he probably wasn't. He was probably just an ordinary person who was so disgusted at what he had seen for the last few days. This young man, who's

obviously on the way to work, sees a column of tanks coming down Chang'an Boulevard, and he says, "Right, that's it, I'm going out and I'm just going to just stand in front of that column, and I'm going to talk to the commander of the tank column and ask him what he thinks he's doing in the city." He actually gets up on top of the tank, bangs on the lid, and he actually has some sort of a conversation. We don't know what he said. Then after he hops off the tank, he goes back and stands in front of the tank again. The film footage shows several other young men run out of the crowd, grab him and then hustle him off the street, because I think they were afraid that he'd just end up getting run over if he stayed there any longer, and these people then just melted into the crowd and they were gone. We never see his face; we only see him from the back.

It certainly has captured the imagination of people around the world. This is the image that expresses all the frustration of the individual in the face of the massive might of armies and governments. And it's one of those anonymous moments in modern history. We don't really know who he was; there's no certainty about what's happened to him. In fact, he may never have been identified.

What does it say about China that we don't even know?

At first viewing, it looks like the lone individual up against the massive power of the state, and I think that's simplifying things too much in China. He was a lone individual indeed, but I think he was simply taken up by the frustration and anger of the moment. He wasn't trying to be a hero; he was caught in events. And so, too, that column of tanks. We don't know anything about the column of tanks; we don't know who was commanding it. But the army showed itself surprisingly ill organized and somewhat undisciplined during this whole event.

It's not that the government sent in these tanks to crush these people. It's much more ambiguous than that. But that doesn't take away from the fact that it was an extraordinary moment in which a spark of heroism that came from nowhere motivated this young man to go out and face this massive force that he really couldn't do anything about. But I wouldn't want to reduce China to that. China's a much more complicated place. Many of the people at the higher echelons of the Chinese government were not happy with the suppression. Many -- probably most -- continue to be unhappy with the memory of Tiananmen, wished it had never happened and would probably like the record to be set straight someday.

We did an experiment. We showed that photograph to four [Beijing University] undergraduates. ...

Had they seen it before?

They'd not seen it. They were perplexed. I could tell there wasn't fear; it wasn't that we'd given them something contraband. One of them said, "Is this some sort of military parade?" Another one said, "Is this an example of your artwork?" I found this astonishing.

The media silence imposed on Tiananmen was huge. Chinese in China don't know this image. They don't see this image. This is not part of their visual repertoire. [The government] made a couple of propaganda videos in the summer of 1989 to sell events in a certain way to the Chinese people, and those videos have clips showing very carefully selected events. But the visual record that we have living outside China is a very different one than Chinese people have.

Finally, what do you think happened to that young man? Do you think one can speculate at all?

If he had been identified and turned in, he would certainly have been put in prison, potentially executed. He didn't do that in an empty street with no one watching. Potentially there are hundreds of people who could identify him. If he has not been found, then he must be living a very careful life, and the people who saw him, in a sense, must still be protecting him all these years later.

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