

# Nonviolent Struggle in China: An Eyewitness Account

Gene Sharp and Bruce Jenkins

Last May/June, news from China captured world attention. Chinese students were demonstrating for democracy in Tiananmen Square. Their campaign went on for six and a half weeks until June 4, when government troops intervened, killing hundreds, if not thousands.

The authors, Gene Sharp and Bruce Jenkins, were in Beijing studying the pro-democracy movement firsthand when the government crackdown occurred. They conducted a series of interviews with student leaders and participants in the movement and observed daily events in Tiananmen Square leading up to the June 4 massacre. All told, they spent nine days in Beijing, from May 28 to June 6, 1989.

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Tiananmen Square, the week before the June 4 massacre, as seen from the Forbidden City. At centre: The Monument of the People's Heroes and the Goddess of Democracy statue. Beyond: The Mau Mausoleum. (Photo by Bruce Jenkins)

**One of the remarkable features of the Chinese pro-democracy movement, from its launching to the night of the massacre, was its use of strictly nonviolent forms of protest. We went to Beijing to learn why the students had chosen to conduct their struggle nonviolently and to discover how much they knew about this technique. Where were the ideas of nonviolent struggle coming from? Who was leading the movement, if anyone? Were actions spontaneous in nature, or planned? Was there strategic thinking involved? We went seeking answers to these and other questions. This is what we learned.**

## Motivations for nonviolent struggle

The students' motivations for pursuing strictly nonviolent methods of resistance were practical in nature (rather than moral or religious). Students gave two reasons why they thought that the movement had developed along nonviolent lines: first, the students were no match for the army, and second, violent actions would give the government an excuse to clamp down on the students. One student cited violent acts in Shanghai in 1986 which led to the crushing of the students' protest movement at that time. "This time, no excuse," he said.

An older graduate student offered two other reasons why the movement was avowedly nonviolent. First, the

many social and economic "contradictions" in Chinese society could not be settled violently. Rather, the problems needed to be solved by "constructive measures." He equated these to nonviolent actions. Second, the students did not seek the overthrow of the government, but rather its reform. This could best be achieved by nonviolent, rather than violent, means.

## Students' knowledge of nonviolent struggle

Among all the students interviewed, there was common familiarity with past cases of nonviolent resistance in other parts of the world (the Philippines, India, Poland, and South Korea being the most mentioned cases; Burma, Taiwan, and the United States

were mentioned once or twice). A student told us that Chinese television often gave extensive coverage to "people rising against anti-revolutionary powers."

However, we were unable to uncover any evidence of more formal understandings of the nature of nonviolent struggle. None of the students we spoke with knew of any books, pamphlets, or audio-visual materials (in any language) dealing with nonviolent struggle. A Canadian diplomat told us that he had heard of books (no specifics) on nonviolent resistance brought from the U.S. circulating around Beijing University, but we were unable to confirm this. Several students spoke of their history textbooks which referred to Gandhi and the Indian non-cooperation movement. One student was familiar with Gandhi's use of the hunger strike. Later reports suggest that some limited materials were available in Beijing and other cities.

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## Organisation of leadership

Those interviewed often stated that the lack of a "universally recognised organisation" was the weakest aspect of their movement. Nearly all students were organised into small, university-based groups. By the time of the killings, the students had not produced a unified leadership structure.

(Below is an attempt to piece together the scant information available on the formation and organisation of student leadership groups. It is preliminary at best. Students interviewed did not discuss organisational issues in depth. Many questions remain about factions within each group as well as conflicts and cooperation between them.)

By late April/May, pro-democracy students had taken over existing student organisations (or had established new ones) at the various universities and colleges in Beijing. In early May, representatives from each university group came together to form the Beijing Universities United Autonomous Student Union (Union, for short). This group provided the early leadership and coordination of the movement.

Linked to the Union was the Dialogue Delegation, a group of student representatives from all Beijing universities designated to prepare for a future dialogue with the government. Although it was connected with the Union, the Dialogue Delegation was generally comprised of older graduate students who did not take active roles in street actions. Rather, they served as advisers to younger student leaders.

The mass hunger strike began on May 13. In the first few days, 6000 students joined the strike. After the first two days, the number of hunger strikers dropped to around 3000. A large number refused all liquids as well as food, thereby threatening their lives very quickly.

Two groups formed around the hunger strike on the square: the Committee of Hunger Strikers and the Committee to Protect the Hunger Strikers. On May 24 (after the hunger strike was called off), these committees coalesced to form the Headquarters of Tiananmen Square. The leadership of this organisation was originally comprised of hunger strikers. "The people willing to die first are qualified to be leaders," we were told. By this time,

however, numerous student groups from outlying provinces were arriving daily to join the occupation of the square. A new leadership was chosen, "through democratic ways," to incorporate the new student groups on the square. Each student group had a representative in the Headquarters command. There were hundreds of different university groups on the square.

Nearly every tent on the square flew a different university banner. One student on the square told us that his university had established a rotation system, sending a group of ten students every seven days to replace their classmates already on the square.

During the week before the killings, a massive reorganisation of the occupation of the square took place. The students had consolidated their encampment into tighter formations with larger, more secure tent structures. Efforts to clean the square were also in progress.

There appears to have been ongoing conflicts between the Beijing Student Union and, at first, the hunger strikers and later with the Headquarters of Tiananmen Square. One account holds that the Union was against the hunger strike from the beginning. During the week of our visit, we were told that the Union was trying to assert its authority over the Headquarters.

Many questions remain about the relationship between leaders of the Union and the Headquarters. It was never spelled out, for example, along which lines the confrontation was taking place: regional, ideological, tactical, or other. Furthermore, some of the most prominent Headquarters "commanders," such as Chai Ling, were Beijing University students (hence, were they tied to both organisations?).

## Organisational abilities

On the tactical level, the students showed some impressive organisational skills. They extensively employed marshals for crowd control and for maintaining nonviolent discipline. We witnessed marshals "policing" a three foot corridor between soldiers and demonstrators in front of Zhongnanhai (the party compound), both to keep people from touching the soldiers and to lecture the soldiers on the purpose of the demonstrations.

Just hours before the shooting started,

five students with headbands locked arms to form a protective ring around a soldier and escorted him safely through a hostile crowd of Beijing citizens.



*Student marshals patrolled a three foot wide buffer zone between soldiers guarding the Zhongnanhai and Beijing citizens to prevent physical contact. (Photo by Bruce Jenkins)*

We were told that the students had established a telephone information network. Students operating out of the university would receive and place calls throughout the city to keep dispersed groups of students informed of troop movements and latest developments. The Headquarters had even set up a phone on the square, connecting it by a long wire to a phone in the Museum of the Chinese Revolution.

The students had also established their own loudspeaker system on the square, from which they were able to broadcast their appeals and versions of unfolding events.

On the square, students had established a "pass" system. In order to enter the concentric security zones around the Headquarters command at the base of the Monument of the People's Heroes (at the centre of the square), one had to present special passes printed by the Headquarters. Different passes connoted different levels of access. This way the students attempted to control the flow of people into their most sensitive areas.

We witnessed a propaganda team of two students with a megaphone move through a neighborhood stating the students' grievances and pleading for

support. We were told that many such teams moved throughout the city.

Students used drums to alert citizens of troop movements, signaling people to come out into the streets. Outside our hotel the morning of June 3, a group of students pounding a bass drum passed by. Shortly thereafter, a crowd of citizens on the adjacent street had "captured" a group of forty plain clothes army members. They provided food to the troops and escorted them south, away from Tiananmen Square.

### Strategy

It was difficult to ascertain any significant degree of strategic thinking in the pro-democracy movement. We often received contradictory responses to questions dealing with strategy. Much of the planning of actions appears to have been more tactical than strategic. We found no evidence of coordinated plans which encompassed a range of mutually supporting actions over specified periods of time.

Two leaders of the Dialogue Delegation told us that they were directly involved in much planning and analysis of the students' actions. However, in discussing the development of the hunger strike and related actions, one leader told us that these actions did not take place according to a "systematic plan. But we did have some plans. For instance, we discussed the situation and discussed measures and responses every night, give ideas to other leaders. Other leaders might rush to our headquarters to ask my, our advice . . . We tried to control the direction of student movement."

This same leader told us that "within the Dialogue Delegation, we not only are thinking about the current situation, or just a couple of days, we also think of situation 10 or 20 days later and still some of my classmates who are not in the Dialogue Delegation were thinking about strategic plans, sometimes half a year later and one year later. One time a day . . . we will meet them to talk about such kind of strategic thinking." He did not elaborate, or give any evidence, of such planning.

Another leader of the Dialogue Delegation described the action-response relationship between students and the government this way:

"Because the contradictions in China are so complicated, once we start 'refusal movement' (Chinese term for non-cooperation movement), we start a kind of domino chain reaction. . . . So once movement is started, once people refuse, force government to respond to us. So, according to response of government, we will make a decision, decide what kind of form movement will be, and this movement will be enlarged and deepened. . . . (Actions have been) in response to government, but these (government actions) initiated by refusal movement."

We were told that the hunger strike and the original blocking of troops and trucks occurred spontaneously, not according to some plan. Only after the first massive street blockades did student leaders try to coordinate (through drum signals and telephone alerts) subsequent efforts to prevent the attempted reentry of the 38th Army into downtown Beijing.

### Provocations to violence

In the late-afternoon prior to the killings, we witnessed deliberate provocations to violence. To the best of our knowledge, this has not been reported elsewhere.

During the week of our visit, the Autonomous Workers Union (three of its members had been detained earlier

that week) had set up a tent on the far north-west corner of the square. In the evening just prior to the killings (June 3), they had set up their own loudspeaker system at this corner. Earlier that day, citizens had "captured" (encircled) soldiers at various points in the city. A shrill, female voice came over the loudspeaker calling on the gathered people to "kill the soldiers," claiming that only "revolutionary violence can defeat the counter-revolutionary violence of the government." These exhortations, which continued for nearly thirty minutes, met with mild, sometimes excited, applause. Curiously, neither the government's nor the students' loudspeaker systems were broadcasting at this time (highly unusual considering there were over 100,000 people on the square that evening). A Chinese-speaking Western diplomat standing next to us on the square confirmed our interpreter's translation of the broadcast and stated that a French journalist had witnessed someone cutting the students' loudspeaker wires just hours earlier.

These calls to violence stood in stark contrast to the students' appeals for discipline and nonviolence. Many questions arise in this connection: Who were the members of the Autonomous Workers Union? Why were they so physically separated from the student



*The day before the government crackdown a festive atmosphere prevailed in Tiananmen Square. People from Beijing and distant parts of China poured into the square to express support for democracy. Many proudly posed for their friends to take pictures of them in front of the Goddess of Democracy statue. (Photo by Bruce Jenkins)*

occupation? Were there *agents provocateurs* in their organisation? It was reported late that night that this group left the square with their tents about 11:00 p.m.; the first troops and armored personnel carrier entered the square about 12:15 a.m.

### Strategic errors

In analysing the student-led democracy movement, two preliminary strategic lessons become apparent. First, a nonviolent occupation of a physical spot of whatever symbolic value is always risky for the protesters. They are easy for the opponents to remove. Indeed, the greater the symbolism of the place, the greater the danger and stimulus for the opponents to act strongly.

In this case, the occupation of the vast square containing the Monument of the People's Heroes, the Mao mausoleum, flanked at either end by the Forbidden City and Qianmen (the front gate), and on the sides by the Museum of the Chinese Revolution and the Great Hall of the People, was a daring challenge to the legitimacy of the government and an assertion that the government had failed to bring to fruition its own ideals. Added to this was the occupation of much of the front entrance to Zhongnanhai, the compound where the highest government and party officials live — an act of audacity far in excess of, say, anti-war activists camping for weeks on the porch of the White House during the Vietnam War!

The students would have been better off to have shifted strategy on their own initiative away from the occupation of the square towards a major campaign of communication with the population. (Most Beijing students had earlier withdrawn from the square. On May 27, student leader Wuer Kaixi called on all the students on the square to withdraw. However, the thousands of students who had recently arrived from universities all over the country demanded to stay to be able to express their convictions.) In retrospect, a very good moment for withdrawal would have been after the people of Beijing had repeatedly halted and turned away the 38th Army. The students could then have claimed victory and gone out to thank the people, spreading their message of anti-corruption and democracy throughout Beijing and eventually the countryside. They could

have linked this with further popularising the need for massive non-cooperation in the future, especially among dissatisfied party members, civil servants, police, and soldiers. It is, of course, easy in retrospect to make these suggestions, but at the time it must have been tempting to believe that all other military units would also be dissuaded or would, on their own initiative, refuse to implement martial law. Perhaps, even the party and government would bend to the popular demands.

As it was, it was clearly tempting for hard-line party and government officials to think that by removing the students from the square the challenge posed by them could also be eliminated. It was a further step for them to think that mere removal was not enough: it must be done in a way so as to strike terror into the rest of the population. As goes a Chinese saying, "One kills the chicken in order to frighten the monkey." Withdrawal from the square could have removed an easy striking target for the government.

Second, regardless of the power of the students' symbolic challenges, there was a failure to mobilise on a large-scale massive non-cooperation with the system by the very people whose work made its continuation possible. This included especially the civil service, the military forces, the police, and the operators of communications and transportation. The methods of non-cooperation, especially in this case political non-cooperation (as well as strikes and economic boycotts), usually constitute the most powerful of the many methods of non-violent struggle. Forms of non-cooperation can present a grave challenge to the ruling group and are less provocative than the methods of nonviolent intervention, such as the physical occupation of Tiananmen Square.

There were many cases of individual acts of non-cooperation by police officers, civil servants, and workers. There were also many examples of collective protests and expressions of sympathy by journalists and teachers' groups. And perhaps most troubling to the government was the open letter by over 100 retired military officers objecting to the martial law order. However, these acts were not translated into a systematic withdrawal of

the main pillars of support of the Chinese communist system. (One could speculate that the potential for such massive non-cooperation was growing daily, causing the government to act when it did. But one would first need to know the internal situation in the various armies as well as the workers' organisations before making any conclusions on this point. The willingness of the soldiers and officers of the 38th Army to turn around when blocked by the citizens of Beijing and not to proceed to Tiananmen Square as ordered was remarkable, perhaps the first such case in history. It demonstrates the power potential of such action.)

### Gains of the movement

The movement from April to June should be viewed as the initial campaign in a long struggle, for which both gains and losses must be counted.

The thousands of deaths and injuries and the ending of open defiance are obvious losses of the movement. The ideological retrenchment of Communist rule may complicate future nonviolent action. Also, the mass killing of nonviolent protesters may lead some Chinese towards violent action against the government.

But the movement had its accomplishments as well:

- The pro-democracy movement made an open challenge to the system.
- The students conducted what was probably the largest hunger strike in history.
- The movement successfully defied martial law for about two weeks, as though it did not exist.
- The movement aroused mass student participation all over China, involving 350 colleges and universities.
- Demonstrations against corruption and for greater freedom took place in all major cities.
- The student-initiated movement aroused the deep sympathy of much of the urban population (at least) and mobilised it into expressions of support.
- The movement split and confused the party and government leadership and led to temporary impotence in face of the audacious challenge.
- The movement produced open opposition among serving and retired army generals to the use of troops to suppress the movement.

- In Beijing, the population blocked the entry into the city of the 38th Army, produced hesitancy and disaffection among some of the troops, and even turned back many of the soldiers sent to infiltrate their way into Beijing in partial civilian clothes.

- The student movement before the massacre had delegitimised the government among much of the population.

- The movement set the pattern of nonviolent struggle, although it is unclear whether reliance on this type of struggle will continue.

The massacre continued parts of this process of undermining the regime. Among its consequences are the following:

- Permanent alienation of hundreds of thousands of students within China.

- The system was exposed as one willing to kill massively and apply terror to maintain itself.

- Without major policy and governmental changes in China, many or even most of the 60,000 Chinese students studying abroad may never return to apply their knowledge at home.

- The world image of the Chinese

government has dropped to the bottom of the list of distasteful regimes.

- The Chinese government has suffered grave diplomatic losses.

- The economic sanctions widely imposed following the massacre will set back the efforts to expand the Chinese economy.

- Only major policy and systemic changes are capable of correcting and reversing these losses.

### Conclusion

Our trip was one of extremes: extreme amazement at the total defiance of martial law orders and extreme sadness at the brutal killing of unarmed civilians in the streets. The images of defiance and bloody repression will remain with us forever.

Although the length of the trip was cut nearly in half, its results were significant. We learned that 1) the students' motivations for pursuing nonviolent means of protest and resistance were purely practical; 2) the students had no detailed knowledge of the history or dynamics of nonviolent struggle; 3) organisation in the movement was weak and divisive; 4) there was very little, if any, strategic planning; and 5) there appear to have been

attempts at provoking the students to violence.

In addition, insights were gained into "real time" thinking at different levels of the movement, insights which could never be reproduced. We were able to experience firsthand a whole range of nonviolent methods in action: a nonviolent occupation, marches, street blockades, appeals to troops, speeches and declarations, slogans, banners, illegal broadcasting and printing, a student strike, the rejection of authority, popular non-obedience, civil disobedience, sit-ins and ride-ins, symbolic displays, and more. Also, we were able to directly witness the crucial overcoming of fear which all of those interviewed displayed.

Since the government crackdown, there have been various reports of further acts of nonviolent struggle in China. These include work slowdowns and the insertion of pro-reform ideas into news stories by journalists, increased sick leave and work slowdowns by other sections of the work force, and veiled student demonstrations at Beijing University. These acts are both encouraging and inspiring, showing once again that brutal government repression will not necessarily halt nonviolent resistance.

