

THE BEIJING UPRISING, 1989 © Ian D. Richardson

What follows is based on extracts from the diary I wrote shortly after returning to my BBC base in London:

(click on photos to enlarge)

The BBC staff driver collected me from the airport and took me straight to the BBC Bureau to unload my cases of broadcasting equipment. There were not many motor vehicles but lots of bicycles. The road was wide and lined all the way into town by trees, most of which appeared to have been planted in recent times, perhaps for the Gorbachev visit.

About halfway along the route I witnessed what was to be one of the oddest sights of my visit: an open-air roadside snooker game. The table had been set up on the earthen shoulder of the road. I was told that this was a fairly common sight around China. The tables were owned by a sort of syndicate, with each member contributing towards the cost. The Chinese Government apparently disapproved of these tables because of the associated gambling. I was told that not much effort was put into getting the tables level and the standard of play was indifferent to say the least.

The BBC bureau was in a diplomatic compound about 15-minutes by car from the city centre. [It has since moved twice.] The compound was lightly guarded around the clock by two armed policemen. The office was on the ground floor while the BBC residence was two floors up. Our two resident radio correspondents, James Miles and Tim Luard, each had a large bedroom with an en suite bathroom. There was a spare bedroom (which I converted into a temporary studio), a dining room, a lounge and a kitchen. It was spacious and comfortable. My hotel, the Zhao Long, was across the road from the bureau. It was modern and well-run and not what I had expected in a Communist country.

Soon after I arrived we were joined by Mark Brayne, the BBC World Service Diplomatic Correspondent, who had been BBC Beijing Correspondent a few years previous. Peter Burdin, a leading producer from BBC domestic radio, had also arrived and produced a most impressive number of high-class news and documentary features. Brian Hanrahan, the BBC Television's Moscow Correspondent also flew in. So did Jeremy Harris, BBC Radio's Moscow Correspondent. My job was radio news co-ordinator and program editor based in the BBC radio bureau. A separate BBC-TV team mostly operated from an hotel a couple of kilometres away.

When I first arrived in Beijing, the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square were relatively small and expected to be suspended for the duration of the Gorbachev visit. But quite the opposite happened. Gorbachev and Glasnost were projected by the protesters as a symbol of everything that China should be aiming for politically. Consequently, the demonstrations grew apace.



BBC Diplomatic Correspondent Mark Brayne reporting from Tiananmen Square, Beijing, May 1989
(c) Ian D. Richardson



BBC TV correspondent Brian Hanrahan reporting on the Tiananmen Square uprising in Beijing, (c) Ian D. Richardson

After a number of visits to the Soviet Union over two decades, I arrived in Beijing thinking that it was going to be an Asian Moscow. I was totally wrong. On the whole, the Beijing tourist hotels were excellent. Indeed, they were better - and cheaper - than most of the hotels in London. And the whole atmosphere of the city was different. Everyone seemed fairly well fed, they were well dressed, and there was none of the surliness of the Russians, nor was the constant feeling of having every movement scrutinised by the Chinese equivalent of the KGB. Although the old Beijing hands kept telling me that China was a difficult place to live in, I was constantly struck by how much better it was than Moscow - or at least it was, during my many trips to the USSR.

The few motor vehicles on the roads were owned by the government or by companies. It was an exception for a car to be owned by a private citizen. All the general public could afford was a bicycle, or perhaps a motorbike.



BBC correspondents James Miles (standing) and Brian Hanrahan, BBC Bureau, Beijing - May 1989. (C) Ian D. Richardson.

What astonished me after my visits to Moscow was to see that Beijing had a functioning electronic pager network, and the student leaders were using this as a prime means of exchanging messages between roadblocks and Tiananmen Square. In the USSR it was not possible to own a typewriter without a licence in case it was used to produce dissident material. Late one night we saw a neatly-formed triangle of a dozen or so motorbikes travelling slowly past the BBC bureau, presumably passing on student messages and boosting morale at the roadblocks.



BBC correspondent Simon Long interviewing Tiananmen Square protestor, Beijing, May 1989
(c) Ian D. Richardson



BBC correspondent Tim Luard, Beijing, May 1988

The layout of Beijing was modern with wide avenues running east-west and north-south, with three ring roads. Most avenues had six or eight lanes for motor traffic, with one wide lane each side for the cyclists. There were traffic lights, but only on the main intersections. Most of the cyclists moved at a very sedate speed. The bikes were old fashioned, with only one gear. The lack of gears didn't matter much in Beijing because it was so flat. When I mentioned that most people seemed to move at the same steady speed, the reply was: "Well, you'd take it easy too, if you had a two-hour ride each way to work!" Memories of my childhood in rural Australia came flooding back seeing all the children, wives and girlfriends 'dinking' on bikes. Most of the women in Beijing sat side-saddle on the parcel rack at the back.

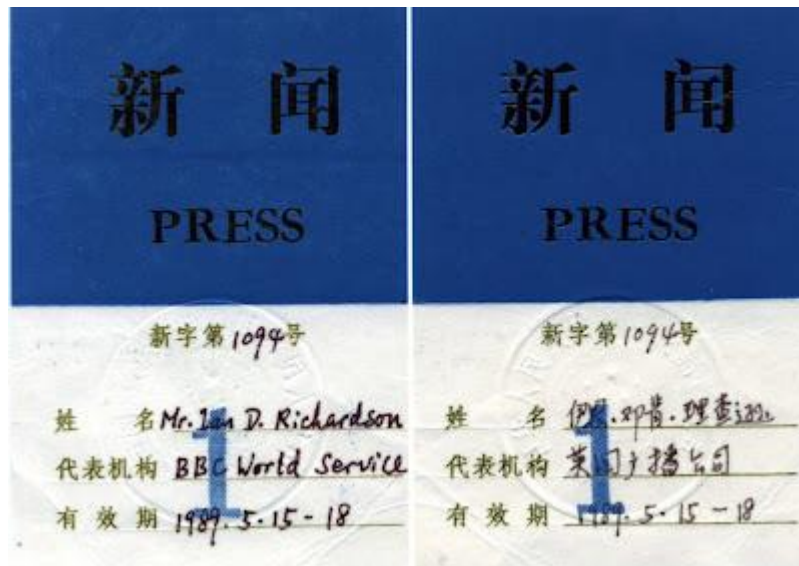
Very few of the men in Beijing were wearing the traditional Mao suits. They wore quite modern western clothes. The women also usually wore western dress. Mini-skirts were fairly common among teenagers and young women. Tights (or pantie hose) appeared to be unknown. Instead it was the vogue to wear stockings rolled up just above the knee. Style leaders among the girls wore broad-brimmed hats turned up at the front, while the young men got about in regulation sun glasses, short-sleeved shirts and baggy cotton trousers.

Despite appearances, the population was exceedingly poor by our standards. We would earn more in a day than the average Beijing worker would earn in a month. Most people lived in very crowded two-room government flats. The flats had replaced most of the more traditional accommodation built around communal courtyards. Residents didn't get much more space, but they usually did get a bathroom and toilet.

One of my abiding memories from Beijing was crossing the 10-lane avenue between the BBC office and my hotel one day at 4.30am, just before dawn broke. There was near-enough to total silence, with not a motor vehicle to be seen or heard in any direction. All I could hear was the murmurings of a couple of policemen having a quiet cigarette under a nearby tree and the slow approaching rattle of a chain on a bicycle. It was quite eerie, as though the city had been evacuated.

My visit was marked by many oddities, one of them concerning my press pass. All journalists covering the Gorbachev visit were expected to get proper accreditation. This involved my requiring a journalist's visa in my passport, filling in an accreditation form, and providing a couple of passport-type photographs. When I turned up to collect my pass, I was astonished to have a photograph attached to the form, but not to the press pass. The

spare photograph was handed back to me. So, although the pass carried my name and organisation, there was no photograph to confirm it was being worn by the correct person. Not once did anyone check my pass, even long after Gorbachev had gone and I was no longer supposed to be working in China as a journalist. What a change from Moscow - and London.



Among the other oddities was a half-hour English-language television news bulletin each evening at 10 o'clock, read by two Chinese presenters made up like Dynasty stars and with ghastly American accents. There was also an English-language radio station called *Easy Listening FM*, run jointly by the Chinese Government and Amalgamated Wireless of Australasia (AWA). The disc jockeys were Australian, the music was AOR (any old rubbish), and the news was provided by *Radio Beijing*. [I have since been told by one of those involved that the Easy Listening FM output was recorded and packaged by Radio 2CH in Sydney and shipped to China to be broadcast. There were a series of music 'taste' guidelines that had to be followed, especially with songs that the Chinese might have felt were culturally suggestive or insensitive.]

The majority of Chinese men smoked. It was not only socially acceptable, but had been recommended by the Chinese medical profession as treatment for chest conditions!

If you ignored the widespread corruption at almost all levels of officialdom in China, there was very little crime. Thefts were a rarity. We were constantly reminded of this when being crushed in the crowds on Tiananmen Square. In any similar situation elsewhere in the world, our pockets would have been speedily emptied by members of the light-fingered fraternity.

Beijing was one of the few major cities in the world where it was perfectly safe to walk along darkened streets at night. This situation was best illustrated by what happened when one of our correspondents left his car parked in a street near Tiananmen Square. When he returned, he couldn't find it and reluctantly came to the conclusion that it had been stolen. He had, as he always did in Beijing, left the doors unlocked.

Because of the pressure of work, it was two days before he was able to get around to pursuing the matter. He decided to send the BBC driver to check the neighbourhood in which he'd left the car, in the hope that it might be found abandoned. In fact, the driver found the car where our correspondent had left it; he had simply got the streets mixed up.

The car was as it had been left, complete with the bits of equipment left on the seat.



Demonstrators in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, May 1989. (c) Ian D. Richardson



Ian Richardson, BBC News Intake Co-ordinator, Tiananmen Square, Beijing, during the pro-democracy uprising, May 1989

The BBC bureau had a cook who came in Monday-to-Saturday to cook lunch. While I was there, he also cooked breakfast for us. He made the strongest coffee I have ever been asked to drink, with four heaped spoons of Nescafé per cup. It took me nearly a week to break him of the habit. The Chinese do not, as a rule, drink milk, but milk was available in selected shops. It came in clear plastic sachets containing about 250ml, and was almost orange in colour. The sachets were difficult to open without squirting the contents about.

The cook was good, but the food had a certain monotony about it, compounded by the fact that our commitments meant that we were able to go out for just four restaurant meals in the three weeks I was there. By the time I got back to London, I felt I would never again be able to face a Chinese take-away. I also got tired of the sweets, which were usually sponge cake, home-made ice cream and tinned fruit. I ended up craving for a good meal of fish and chips eaten out of its wrapping paper and some fresh fruit. We snatched meals when we could, which sometimes wasn't very often. The vast majority of evening meals were the lunch-time left-overs re-heated in a wok. Breakfast was pretty basic: usually toast with eggs that had been cooked in the wok and tasted of the previous day's main course.

The atmosphere in Tiananmen Square was quite extraordinary. There was a real carnival air, and there is little doubt that the students had the support of a broad cross-section of society.



Open air press conference by student leaders during Tiananmen Square uprising, Beijing, May 1989. (c) Ian D. Richardson



BBC radio producer Peter Burdin records the sound of protest - Beijing, May 1989
(c) Ian D. Richardson



BBC radio producer Peter Burdin edits a report on the Tiananmen protests, May 1989. (c) Ian D Richardson

As events unfolded with astonishing speed, it became clear that we needed more people, but by then it was too late. I can't recall working so hard in my life. Because the story was

so complex and because we had commitments round the clock, we operated a shift system which often meant 22-hours on and two hours off.

The bureau had a small studio and a fixed broadcasting landline to London, but we were careful what we transmitted over that as it was certain to be monitored by the Chinese authorities. Although the Chinese had allowed an unlisted fax line to be installed in the upstairs room we converted into a back-up studio, they had cunningly refused to allow the fax machine through customs. But a fax line is the same as a telephone line, and when I plugged in a spare phone I'd brought with me I discovered that not only was the line live, but I could also direct dial the BBC in London. I linked our temporary studio to this unlisted telephone line and used it to transmit material that might have seriously offended the Chinese authorities. As far as I could tell, the Chinese were never aware that much of what we broadcast was via that line. We used a small device called a *Mutterbox* to lock the line open -- often without a break for 10 hours at a stretch. We were spending well in excess of £1,000 a day keeping this line open.



Ian Richardson, BBC News Intake Co-ordinator in the makeshift studio in the BBC Beijing Bureau during the Tiananmen Square student uprising, May 1989

During our busiest period, I went three days without visiting my hotel room, except to have a shower and change clothes. Most days it was simpler to snatch some sleep, as the opportunities arose, on a settee in the lounge, or on the bed in our temporary studio. On one occasion, one of our correspondents went 48 hours without sleep. Towards the end of the third week we were able to get four or five hours in bed. We thought we were in Heaven.

When I look back on it, I just don't know how we survived the hours and the pressures. James Miles and Tim Luard correspondents had the worst time. They had been hard at it a couple of weeks before the rest of us turned up, and they were still there when the massacres took place. Fortunately, we had managed to get another correspondent, Chinese talks writer Simon Long, in as back-up, but it was a horrible time for them. Not only were they exhausted and under terrible pressure, not knowing whether the authorities were going to act against them, but they had to witness the most ghastly events day after day. It was terrifying out on the streets and one of our correspondents went six consecutive days in which he saw people murdered before his eyes.

I should at this point praise the contribution of Tim Luard's wife, Alison McEwen, who played a key unpaid role as bureau "mother hen", doing a lot of the organising, and most

importantly, helping to ease stress and to smooth tempers. We also had the benefit of material shared by London *Times* correspondent Catherine Sampson who was around a lot, as she was then James Miles's fiancée and later his wife.

The events that unfolded were in themselves quite extraordinary, but for me, it was almost as extraordinary to experience the huge impact the BBC World Service was having in China. Six months previously, the BBC had only a small audience in China, but the combination of powerful new transmitters in Hong Kong and the emergence of the Democracy Movements changed all that, almost overnight. We were treated as heroes wherever we went. It was quite embarrassing at times. I made the mistake one day of agreeing to sign an autograph. Before I knew it, I was surrounded by people who all wanted me to sign their tee-shirts.

Our broadcasts could often be heard on Tiananmen Square and elsewhere and they were also recorded, transcribed and distributed in pamphlet form. As soon as any of us identified ourselves as being from the BBC, there would be cheers and we would be waved through the barriers. All the indications were that our audience extended right across the community and the country. The World Service audience, not including China, was estimated at 120-million. Although it is not possible to know how many people listened to us in China during the Tiananmen Square uprising, it was thought probable that the figure exceeded our total for the rest of the world.



Tiananmen Square demonstrators, Beijing, May 1989.
(c) Catherine Sampson)

Almost as amazing as the scenes in Tiananmen Square were those on the barricades at the intersections when it was first thought that the army was going to move into central Beijing. To give you an idea, imagine the intersection of Flinders and Swanston streets in Melbourne's Central Business District, or Oxford Circus in London mobbed by about 10,000 people with all the entrances closed off by buses and coal lorries. That sort of scene was repeated at every major intersection in Beijing. It was exceptionally well organised and cheerful, and those manning the barricades came to regard themselves as invulnerable. They were convinced that the People's Army would never open fire on the people. How tragically wrong they were!

Beijing University was also a fascinating place to visit. Wall posters were everywhere, denouncing Deng Ziaoping and Li Peng. We were taken to meet the protest leaders in the university. They were all huddled around a phone in a poorly lit dormitory room that had the size and atmosphere of a prison cell. The student who took us there had a bleeper which struck us as another oddity in a Communist dictatorship. Yet another oddity was to be able to hire a taxi with a radiophone that allowed us to make reports direct from the

scene to London.



BBC World Service reporter Simon Long interviewing demonstrator during Tiananmen Square uprising, Beijing, May 1989

After my experiences in Moscow in which the activities of journalists were closely monitored and often restricted, I was amazed at how much freedom of movement we had in Beijing. It was, at that time anyway, a pretty open society, once you got below the top tiers of government. When we first began getting reports of troop movements, one of our correspondents went out and found a couple of convoys surrounded by swarms of local people, refusing to allow them to move. A major in charge of one of the convoys was quite happy to be interviewed in English.

I also went troop hunting on a couple of occasions. The first time I got an English-speaking taxi driver to take me to the Great Wall at Badaling, where we had heard rumours of troop concentrations.

My driver was excited by the idea of trying to find troops and took me on a lung-wrecking climb up to a lookout on the Great Wall. It was a beautiful clear day, and he and I dragged a public telescope across the path to look down on the plain beyond the Wall to scour the countryside for any sign of military movements. We spotted what looked like a camp and drove there for a closer view. We found a lot of evidence of a military presence, but eventually decided it might be unsafe to go further.

The next day I went troop hunting in another taxi with a correspondent for the *Times of London*. Again, the taxi driver was enthusiastic about helping us. He took us to an area in west Beijing where the troops were reported to be gathering, and he even got a local to hop in the taxi and take us to the exact spots. We found one lot of troops had taken over a military warehouse, while another was hiding (rather badly) in a vast building supplies storage area. We later spotted soldiers going into the Army Museum in central Beijing. It was good fun, though I imagine that if he had tried something similar in Moscow, we'd have been lifted by the KGB before we'd got more than a block or two. In fact, we finally came to the conclusion that the Chinese authorities didn't mind us discovering and reporting troop movements because it helped them in their war of nerves with the student protesters.



BBC correspondent Tim Luard watching Chinese Army tank movements, Beijing, 1989

Throughout my visit, the weather was mild to hot. There was a colossal downpour one day, but otherwise it was dry and sunny. Despite this, there were only a couple of days with a bright blue sky, because of the terrible pollution. Most of the pollution seems to come from coal fires. There was also a lot of dust in the air, causing everything to feel gritty. Anti pollution measures are almost unknown in China. One of our correspondents recounted how he had been taken by an official to a hill overlooking an industrial town and proudly told: "Look, every chimney is smoking."



News team outside BBC Bureau, Beijing, during the Tiananmen Square uprising, May 1989
 Left-to-right: Catherine Simpson (Times correspondent & fiancée of James Miles), Peter Burdin (BBC producer), Tim Luard (BBC correspondent), James Miles (BBC Beijing Correspondent), Mark Brayne (BBC World Service Diplomatic Correspondent), Simon Long (BBC World Service Far Eastern Talks Writer), Alison McEwen (Mrs Luard) and Ian Richardson (BBC World Service News Intake Co-ordinator - team leader)

As the end of my third week in Beijing drew to a close, I was exhausted and it was decided that there was little need for me to stay further, so I pulled out at the weekend and flew back to London. Peter Burdin and Mark Brayne followed suit a day later. We were not to know that within a week, the

situation would soon take an appalling turn for the worse.

I must say I felt quite shattered when it happened – partly because I knew what James Miles, Tim Luard and Simon Long would be going through, but mostly because it is reasonable to assume that many of the people we met and interviewed in Tiananmen Square and elsewhere are now dead or in prison. It was most difficult to reconcile the scenes with the cheerful, spontaneous protests that had been part of my life for three eventful weeks. The people of China had really been asking for very little, yet it was clearly too much for those who had no compunction in turning Tiananmen Square and surrounding streets into a slaughterhouse.

I still find it hard to believe the way the Democracy Movement was so brutally crushed. Up to the point I left Beijing everyone was in fairly high-spirits, hoping for a new age in China, despite the fact that the hard-liners appeared to be winning the power struggle. Instead, the country was plunged back into darkness.

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