



PODCAST

Peking Hotel: Perry Link on June 4 Intellectuals

Chinese intellectuals played a critical role in China's opening during the 1980s, and the protests of 1989. In a new podcast collaboration, we talked to a veteran China scholar who knew them.

LIU HE — JUNE 11, 2024

HISTORY



This post is a collaboration with the Substack podcast and newsletter [Peking Hotel](#), hosted by Liu He (何流), which publishes bilingual oral histories of China experts around the world. Subscribe on your favorite podcast platform, including [Apple Podcasts](#) or [Spotify](#), or listen to selectively syndicated episodes here at [China Books Review](#).

It's a six-hour drive from Palo Alto to L.A. I normally stay overnight for any drive longer than three hours and try to enjoy the scenery. Then I learned that at the age of 79, Perry Link still drives between Palo Alto and L.A. in one go, in the evening if necessary to teach his class the next day. *If Perry can do it so can I*, I thought to myself. So I rented a Honda Zipcar, put on Link's interviews with Voice of America, and took the night road.

Perry Link is Professor Emeritus of East Asian Studies at Princeton University, and Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of California, Riverside. His engagement with China began as an undergraduate at Harvard, where he was taught by the China scholars [John King Fairbank](#) and Ezra Vogel. In 1972, he [interpreted](#) for China's visiting ping-pong team (and staged an interpreters' boycott of Richard Nixon's meeting with the team, as the President had ordered the bombing of Haiphong during the Vietnam War the day before).

Link's research focuses on Chinese literature, but he is also known for supporting China's democracy and human rights movement since the 1980s. In 1989, he directed the Beijing



Perry Link at his home in L.A. (Liu He)

office of the Committee of Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China, under the National Academy of Sciences, made friends with many Chinese intellectuals. Notable among them was Fang Lizhi, a prominent astrophysicist and elder leader of the pro-democracy movement on Tiananmen Square. In the aftermath of June 4, Link helped Fang and his family to shelter at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing. He has been unable to obtain Chinese visas since the 1990s.



Fang Lizhi working inside the U.S. embassy, 1989 (*Standoff At Tiananmen*)

Link has also been involved in overseas human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, Human Rights in China, and Chinese Human Rights Defenders, and regularly translates articles by Chinese overseas intellectuals. In 2001, with Zhang Liang and Andrew Nathan, he published [*The Tiananmen Papers*](#). In 2008, he became acquainted with Liu Xiaobo and became the English translator of the [*Charter 08*](#). Last year, he published Liu Xiaobo's biography, [*I Have No Enemies*](#).

My conversation with Professor Link below — which was conducted in Chinese, with the English transcript following — is part of an interview series I am undertaking with China experts around the world, publishing bilingual oral histories of their engagement with China. In the below (itself an excerpt from a much longer interview), Link told me about his relationships with Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s, his experience of the Tiananmen protests of 1989, and how he helped Fang Lizhi escape after June 4:



“ On the morning of June 4, I cycled on the street before I went to Fang Lizhi's place. ... Students who walked back from Tiananmen Square told what they saw. Even thinking of that scene makes me want to cry. ”

— *Perry Link*

Guest



Perry Link is Professor of Comparative Literature/Chinese at University of California, Riverside, and Professor Emeritus of East Asian Studies at Princeton University. He received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1976, and specializes in 20th-century Chinese literature. His publications include *The Uses of Literature* (2000), *An Anatomy of Chinese* (2013) and, in Chinese, *Banyang Suibi* (Notes of a Semi-Foreigner).

Recommended readings

- [*The Most Wanted Man in China: My Journey from Scientist to Enemy of the State*](#), Fang Lizhi (2016, Henry Holt)
- [*Evening Chats in Beijing: Probing China's Predicament*](#), Perry Link (1992, Norton)

- [I Have No Enemies: The Life and Legacy of Liu Xiaobo](#), Perry Link, Wu Dazhi, (2023, Columbia University Press)
- [People or Monsters?](#), Liu Binyan, ed. Perry Link (1983, Indiana University Press)
- [A Higher Kind of Loyalty](#), Liu Binyan (1985, Pantheon)
- [About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China from Nixon to Clinton](#), James Mann (1999, Knopf)
- [At Middle Age](#), Shen Rong (1980, Chinese Literature Press)
- [What Should I Do?](#), Chen Guokai (1979)
- [An Open Letter to Deng Xiaoping](#), Fang Lizhi (1989)
- [Charter 08](#), Liu Xiaobo, tr. Perry Link (2008)
- [方励之自传](#), Fang Lizhi (2013, 天下文化)

Transcript

What was it like interacting with Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s?

In the early 1980s, I mainly spoke with writers, including Wang Meng, Shen Rong, Zhang Jie, Cong Weixi, and Bei Dao, as I was researching scar literature [about the Cultural Revolution]. In 1988 and 1989, I worked as the Director of the Beijing Office of the National Academy of Science's Committee on Scholarly Communication with the PRC. Due to my work, I got to know a wider range of intellectuals, from poets to astrophysicists and social scientists. I found that intellectuals across disciplines were deeply concerned about the fate of China, and they would constantly discuss how to fundamentally fix 'our country' and 'culture'. This differed from the American intellectuals who often talked about buying a house, sending their children to school, or buying stocks and did not tend to ask those big questions. Of course, now that the United States is politically divided, some American intellectuals have begun to ask more fundamental questions. In the late 1980s, many asked those questions in China.

It was very exciting. Chinese writers collectively proclaimed that we should liberate our minds and open the door to our own creativity. The sales of literary magazines such as People's Literature (人民文学), Harvest (收获), and Guangdong Literature (广东文学) were rapidly increasing and widely discussed. For example, the fiction "[What Should I Do](#)" (我应该怎么办?) was published in Guangdong Literature. The story was about an intellectual couple who were separated in 1957. The wife waited for her husband to return from the countryside and heard he had died after a long wait. She was distraught and remarried. In fact, the husband did not die and returned a few years later. The final punch line was: What should I do? The story was simple but emotional; university college students commonly discussed this piece. At that time, it felt like mushrooms after rain, which was very exciting. So, by 1988 and 1989, something had already been built in the decade of the 80s.

Who left a deep impression on you at that time?

Wang Meng (王蒙) did. Not only did we meet and do interviews in China, but he also shared my interest in *xiangsheng* [comedy] and had a good sense of humour. I enjoyed his short fiction. Between 1981 and 1982, when I was teaching at UCLA, Wang Meng came to the United States to attend a writing workshop in Iowa. He stopped by and stayed at my house in Los Angeles for four days. He wanted me to translate his novels. I listened very sincerely and tried my best.

I liked Shen Rong's (谌容) fiction "[Middle Age](#)" (人到中年) very much, and I assigned it to my students in the United States. She pointed out a problem. A female intellectual and ophthalmologist performed surgery in the morning, ran home to cook for her husband and children at noon and returned to surgery in the afternoon. She worked and worked until she collapsed. The piece illustrates the struggles of female intellectuals at that time.

Did you know the writer Bing Xin (冰心)?

I didn't personally know Bing Xin. In 1989, Bing Xin signed an open letter to Deng Xiaoping to support Fang Lizhi, who advocated for an amnesty of Wei Jingsheng and other political prisoners. Bing Xin — over 90 at the time — was one of the 33 signatories from literary and artistic circles, and I was shocked. I had never met her in person, but I had read and taught some of her novels.

What was the story behind this open letter?

There were three open letters at the time.

On January 6, 1989, Fang Lizhi wrote a [letter to Deng Xiaoping](#). He called me and said, "Come to me, I have something that will interest you." I rode my bicycle there. He had written a letter to Deng Xiaoping and handcopied it three times. One copy was to Deng Xiaoping in a mailbox addressed to "Chairman Deng of the Party Central Committee." One was sent to a Chinese scholar he met in Hefei. The third letter was to me. I

was unfamiliar with Fang then, but he knew I was the US National Academy of Sciences representative.

I first met Fang through my friend Orville [Schell]. We met at the Mid-Autumn Festival home party at the hutong house of Zhang Hanzhi, the English translator of Mao Zedong, the wife of ex-foreign minister Qiao Guanhua, and Hong Huang's mother. Orville took Fang, his wife Li Shuxian, and me to the party, which was my first time meeting Fang. My initial impression of him was that he was reticent. He had a good sense of humour and spoke wittily and playfully.

In November 1988, the Editor-in-Chief of the New York Review of Books (NYRB), Robert Silvers, came to Beijing. The NYRB was the most prestigious intellectual magazine in the world at the time. Silvers was an old leftist disappointed with the Soviet Union and the Communist Party of China. Upon Orville's suggestion, I introduced Silvers to Fang, and we talked for an evening. Silvers was so impressed that he immediately invited Fang Lizhi to write for NYRB and asked me to translate it. This was Fang's first article in NYRB, '[China's Despair and China's Hope](#)'. Silvers loved it, and Western readers began to notice Fang Lizhi.

When I read the letter on January 6, it read that 1989 was the '40th anniversary of the founding of PRC', '80th anniversary of May 4th', and '200th anniversary of French Revolution', so it was the perfect time for amnesty of Wei Jingsheng and other political prisoners. I asked him if I could translate this for media, and he said that was exactly what he wanted. So I translated his letter, which was reported by the Associated Press and other foreign media the next day.

The news spread among Chinese intellectuals. I remember that 33 natural scientists signed a joint letter to support Fang, and Xu Liangying was one of them, Xu Chenggang's father. Two or three weeks later, the poet Bei Dao and writer Bing Xin led the arts community to sign another open letter. I remember that there were 42 people, mainly in the humanities. There were three letters in total. These developments were the prelude to the spring of 1989. Of course, the death of Hu Yaobang was the final push but the soil of change was prepared before that.

What was the atmosphere like in Beijing at that time? Given the petitions and the protests later, there must have been broad expectations for change.

I had expected this to happen because, before I left in the spring of 1988, I arranged for the writer and journalist Liu Binyan to come to UCLA to lecture. I had a lot of contact with him. Before I left for Beijing, Binyan urged me to keep a diary because he sensed seismic changes coming. Liu Binyan was an experienced observer of China. As the poem says, "The duck knows first when the spring river water warms up." (春江水暖鸭先知) He was the duck. [laughs] He had a 6th sense. I didn't ask him why he felt it, but his premonition was not out of thin air. Binyan was concerned about social development in China, especially the movements of ordinary people and intellectuals. When the three joint letters came out, I felt an oncoming political development for the first time.

You went to Beijing in 1988 as an official, not a research scholar. How did you feel in Beijing this time?

I first encountered Chinese bureaucratism with the issue of my daughter's school bus. My daughter was eight years old and went to the Fangcaodi International School. She had to take a big school bus daily since the school was located on the other side of Beijing.

One day, my daughter came back crying. It turned out that the head teacher on the school bus bullied the kids. My daughter was timid on the bus but told me about this, so I went to the Chinese cadres for a solution. Soon, I encountered the hidden rules within the Chinese bureaucracy, especially on who knows whom and who can talk to whom. It was all very complicated, and I was just a parent who cared about my child, a problem that I thought was relatively simple but became a mess. Many people confronted me and asked "what right do you have to complain," "why didn't you speak with so and so," etc.

Another interesting story is about the problem of our official registration. At that time, China had not officially recognised our organisation, so we registered the office in the name of a business. When I went to register, the cadre's first sentence was, "You are late. The law requires registration within three weeks of arrival. It is now five weeks. You have not registered and made a mistake." I asked what I should do, he said I ought to write a self-criticism. I didn't know how to write it, so he wrote it for me, but I refused to sign it because of phrases I could not agree with. The cadre was unhappy and said my refusal to sign presented a serious problem. Then, after a long thought, he said something interesting, "We will forgive you this time, considering that you have so many children and family burdens." He knew that my daughter had problems at school. Later, I wrote a humorous article about this matter. Not that I was unhappy, I just thought it funny. My self-criticism was not written correctly and not timely enough, and I failed to admit mistakes sufficiently, but in the end, it was forgiven because of my children.

Another time, I arranged a major bilateral meeting at the Friendship Hotel. More than a dozen American officials and more than 20 Chinese officials, mainly the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Social Sciences directors, flew in. I had a Chinese assistant sent by the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and we held different concepts of holding a meeting. We Americans understood that a meeting was to discuss with

Chinese officials what could and could not be done, to exchange information, and to arrange delegations to discuss cooperation projects. It was to design ahead. Little Gu thought a meeting was a ceremony, and we must state our policies and get everyone to agree. This kind of meeting is like the two Sessions in March, all the official positions had been established before the Two Sessions, and then publicly presented, just like the meeting of the Party Central Committee. It took me some time to figure that out. The meeting was not very successful.

How did you react as the Beijing director of the National Academy of Sciences when June 4 [1989] happened?

By spring 1989, the sinologists in charge of the Committee on Scholarly Communication with PRC (including Frederick Wakeman and Michel Oksenberg) were terrified and panicking. Oksenberg's main task was building Sino-US relations, including establishing our committee. At the time, President Bush Sr. held a banquet at the embassy in Beijing on his visit to China and invited Fang Lizhi. I accompanied Fang Lizhi to attend, which angered Oksenberg. After Fang was blocked by Chinese authorities from entering the US Embassy, Oksenberg called me and asked me to stay exactly where I was and not to say anything to the press; just answer "no comment". Of course, I didn't listen to him, but I wrote down the [whole process](#) of Fang Lizhi being surrounded and blocked and sent it to the press department of the US Embassy, which they shared with the press. Oksenberg was furious.

After June 4th, I helped Fang Lizhi and Li Shuxian to seek refuge at the US Embassy. This made Oksenberg and others even angrier, and they scolded me behind my back. My saviour was Frank Press, President of the National Academy of Sciences and a scientist who attached great importance to human rights. He opposed Oksenberg's opinion and said, "You did the right thing." Honestly, I think what I did was a natural human reaction. Fang Lizhi asked for my help when his life was in danger. Of course, I couldn't say "screw you." I was going to help him, geopolitics was none of my concerns in that circumstance. So I listened to people cursing me on one side and supporting me on the other, but I didn't think it was relevant to what I did.

After June 4, the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the PRC had to respond. Washington gave me two tasks: persuade all American scholars on our program to leave China and leave China myself afterwards. So, from June 4 to June 9, I spent four or five days calling and sending telegrams to scholars conveying Washington's order to leave China.

I remember contacting an American anthropologist in a remote place in Yunnan. It was difficult to find him. Finally, we got in touch. He was puzzled by the order. It had been five days since the event, but he had been in the mountains doing his research. He asked, "Why?" and eventually said, "No, thank you, I don't want to leave, I'm fine here." Most scholars did leave, and I left five days later.

After the June 4 tragedy, the committee faced a policy issue. Given the ugliness of June 4, should we leave completely and condemn the Communist Party, or keep in touch and find opportunities to stay? Surprisingly, perhaps, I supported staying. I telegraphed to Washington that we should not leave, and even if we left, we should try to return because our Chinese scholar colleagues were victims of June 4, and they would be harmed further by our absence. Besides, our research per se was politically okay. However, many people I respected held the opposite view that June 4 was so terrible that we should not continue research in this country. It took about two or three years before various projects slowly resumed.

What were you doing during those months before June 4?

Before June 4, I basically stayed at the Friendship Hotel to observe. I saw Tsinghua University and Peking University students marching with good discipline. They lined up neatly and walked forward in rows. The two outer rows of students were responsible for preventing outsiders from cutting in line. They sang, shouted slogans, and waved flags.

I only visited Tiananmen once during those months. That was when Bob Geyer — a key staff member of the committee — visited Beijing and wanted to go, so I went with him on May 4. Otherwise, I didn't go due to Fang Lizhi's advice that I shouldn't allow the Communist Party to spin the story that the student movement was incited by Americans or even the CIA. He said that even he, a Chinese with a good relationship with the United States, shouldn't go. He was already an idol of the Chinese student movement.

And your driver in Beijing was rather active on June 4.

That happened on June 3. Our driver, Little Wang (小王), was a decent young man. He wasn't a scholar but always sympathised with the students. What really made me understand his sympathy for the students was that, on the night of June 3, my wife and I went to a Mongolian restaurant in Dongcheng district for dinner. On the way back from dinner, the atmosphere on the street was visibly strange. We saw people giving flowers to tanks on the street and saying, "Don't go into the city." I saw all this with my own eyes.

When I got off at the Friendship Hotel, I said to Little Wang: "Little Wang, take care of yourself." He replied: "The atmosphere is not right. I have to help. I must help the students and am ready to fight with my life." He suddenly took out a machete from under the car seat. I said to him again: "Take care of yourself." But he still

went.

On June 4, the American Embassy was closed, so I took Fang Lizhi, Li Shuxian and their son Fang Zhe to the Shangri-La Hotel near the Friendship Hotel, where I stayed. I chose Shangri-La because the office of CBS TV was upstairs. The next day, I rode my bike to see them; they hadn't left the room. We turned on CNN and saw the tanks rolling by Tiananmen Square.

Li Shuxian was agitated. She was worried about her husband's life. Since leaving Hefei and arriving in Beijing, they had learned through some friends with connections that the top leaders were discussing the issue of Fang Lizhi due to his high profile and popularity among students. Shuxian was worried about the possibility of a "car accident" to kill him. So, in the room at Shangri-La, she asked us to go to the embassy immediately. However, Fang was ever the idealist. He said he had done nothing wrong, so why run away? In addition, he originally had a lunch plan with the physicist Tsung-Dao Lee (李政道) that day and didn't want to miss it.

Li Shuxian called students at Peking University. The more she listened, the more she couldn't stand it. After hanging up the phone, she said the People's Liberation Army would enter the Peking University campus. This was disproven later, but the students believed the rumour. The students advised Li Shuxian and Fang Lizhi to stay alive while they would fight the tank to death with stones and bricks. It was dramatic. After Li Shuxian finished, Fang said, "Okay, let's go and see if we can make it to the embassy." So I called Little Wang, and he took us from Shangri-La to the American Embassy.

We talked for about three hours in the embassy. The American ambassador was absent, so we spoke with the interim ambassador, Ray Burghardt, and McKinney Russell from the press office. The American diplomats explained that the Fang family could not apply for political asylum because they must be on American soil. That same rule applies to immigrants crossing the Mexican border today. The Fang family could apply for temporary refuge. The standard is that you are under direct physical threat, such as someone chasing you with a gun. According to this standard, Fang Lizhi's family probably qualified.

The People's Liberation Army troops were already outside the American Embassy then, right?

That's right. So, should we apply for temporary asylum? After entering the U.S. Embassy, Fang Lizhi's first question was whether the U.S. diplomats could keep his visit a secret because he didn't want to give the Communist Party an excuse to discredit the protests with U.S. government influence. The diplomats immediately said no because the room was likely already bugged and many embassy staff sent by the Chinese side already saw Fang entering. Besides, there was no timeline for when Fang could leave. The diplomats mentioned several historical European cases, such as Romanian nuns who took refuge in the U.S. Embassy for 15 years.

They suggested that we apply for a visa, which was impractical. The pressing issue was getting to the airport, not the lack of a visa. Nonetheless, we filled out the form, which was the moment we saw the "tank man" on TV for the first time. We were stunned. Peeking through the windows, we saw military vehicles patrolling the street outside the embassy, firing machine gun bullets into the air, probably to scare away the diplomats who were still in the consulate area. That night, many Americans and foreigners hurried to the Beijing airport, including my family, who saw an utterly chaotic Beijing airport with long lines. Eventually, they boarded a commercial charter flight to Hong Kong.

After talking for a whole afternoon, Fang weighed his options and said, "Let's leave." I took them to the Jianguo Hotel, where my old Harvard classmate and journalist Jay Matthews left me his room, Room 400, in case I needed it for any emergency. We arrived at the Jianguo Hotel, went to Room 400, and then had dinner at the Cantonese restaurant downstairs. Several people recognised and greeted Fang Lizhi. I left at around eight o'clock after Fang returned to the room.

The next day, I called, but no one answered. I couldn't get through for two or three days. I was concerned and didn't know what was going on. Three days later, a journalist friend asked me to confirm the rumour that Fang Lizhi had entered the American Embassy. I said I didn't know; I took them in, took them out again, and didn't know the current situation.

A long time had passed before Fang Lizhi finally arrived in the United States, and he told me about what happened then. At twelve o'clock midnight on June 5, the same two American diplomats who had talked to us for three hours knocked on Fang Lizhi's door and said that they solemnly invited Fang's family to return to the embassy as personal guests of President Bush and to stay as long as they needed. Li Shuxian immediately said OK, let's go, and Fang Lizhi agreed. On the way, Fang Lizhi asked if the diplomats could keep his return to the embassy a secret. The diplomats agreed, but the news was immediately leaked at the press conference the next day. Fang wasn't too pleased.

Why did the American diplomats suddenly invite Fang Lizhi and his family back to the embassy? I later learned about it from James Mann's *About Face* book. He is a reporter for the Washington Post and investigated the event. When we left the American embassy, the diplomats telegraphed Washington about Fang's incident. Washington held an emergency meeting. Bush Sr. was angry that China's most famous dissident entered the embassy and left. He immediately said, "Go get them". Bush was likely afraid of the

political repercussions of the United States. If Fang Li had a car accident or were imprisoned for a long time, it would be embarrassing if the outside world knew that he had been turned away by the US Embassy. So Bush ordered to bring Fang back no matter what.

The newly appointed ambassador, James Lilley, treated Fang Lizhi and his family well. He delivered them meals and arranged a secret room to protect their safety. Only five or six Americans knew his room during Fang's 13-month stay at the embassy. Fortunately, he could contact the outside world through a computer. I helped him write an article for NYRB, so he was not bored but not very comfortable living in a room without windows for 13 months.

This was a strange period. As soon as the June 4 massacre occurred, Bush secretly sent the National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft to meet Deng Xiaoping in Beijing, bypassing the ambassador, not to denounce Beijing but almost to apologise. Of course, he did not say "sorry," but he expressed American support to the Party and hoped to maintain diplomatic relations.

And the word "friendship" was used in that conversation.

Bush was double-faced on this matter. On the one hand, he publicly invited Fang Lizhi to present U.S. support for human rights and democracy, but on the other hand, he was making deals behind the scenes.

The annoying thing is that after June 4, Bush issued a presidential order to cut off all high-level contacts, but three weeks later, he secretly resumed them himself. Scowcroft's plane flying from Washington to Beijing could refuel in mid-air because they did not even dare stop in Alaska for refuelling. So, I do not think highly of Bush Sr.; he is two-faced and weak.

What was the Bush administration thinking? June 4 just happened, and the whole world was watching. The situation was extraordinarily disastrous, yet Bush sent Scowcroft begging for sympathy and understanding from the Communist Party in a servile manner instead of standing up for the values of democracy and freedom.

I don't know George [H.W.] Bush personally, but two factors may be related. First, the American business community always dreamed of fortune in China. In the years after June 4, foreign investment in China significantly increased, far exceeding the second half of the 1980s. Foreign capitalists couldn't wait to return and make money. Second, between 1973 and 1979, China and the United States established liaison offices in Beijing and Washington. Bush was the director of the liaison office in Beijing. He probably believed, naively, that he was China's "old friend," even their most important friend.

This was the typical "engagement" strategy in American China policy. The same was true for Clinton, who initially claimed to be tough on China but later opened his arms to invite it to join the WTO.

Both the Republicans and the Democrats were "engaging China," and it was not until the Xi and Trump era that hostility took hold. Trump's hostility certainly had nothing to do with human rights; he was not an "engager."

Even for [Jimmy] Carter, the "human rights president," human rights weren't necessarily a priority in China policy. Moreover, as a president who came to power by opposing the Vietnam War, Carter received Deng Xiaoping in the United States in 1979, who launched his Vietnam War immediately upon returning. In the United States, the Vietnam War was politically incorrect at the time, but when Deng Xiaoping started it, the Americans acquiesced.

I didn't know Carter, and I didn't have first-hand experience, but I felt he was perhaps naive. Unlike Nixon, who was a jerk but smart and successful in China. Clinton was similarly smart.

Let's go back to the 1980s and June 4. Fang Lizhi entered the embassy, and you returned to the United States.

Upon request from the National Academy of Sciences, I flew from Beijing to Hong Kong to stay for two months and monitor the situation in mainland China.

I came out of Beijing and saw terrible things. I didn't witness the killing myself but I saw blood, tanks and machine guns on the street and heard scary stories. On the morning of June 4, I cycled on the street before I went to Fang Lizhi's place. Opposite the Friendship Hotel was Renmin University, where students set up a radio station. Students who walked back from Tiananmen Square told what they saw. Even thinking of that scene on June 4 makes me want to cry now.

My memories and impressions were messy when I arrived in Hong Kong. Journalists kept asking me, "What did you see?" I started to tell my stories. The next day, they asked the same question again. After repeating it countless times, the originally messy impressions gradually became a story. I wondered if my story had become too smooth; the original experience was not smooth. By telling these experiences repeatedly, they became a coherent narrative. I began to wonder: have I departed from the truth? Is my experience just a "good story" now?

As a storyteller, you feel the audience's reaction and naturally cater to those reactions. Especially after repeating three or four times, you will repeat the parts others will enjoy hearing. Therefore, the story becomes too smooth and almost too good to hear. I worry that the story consequently deviates from the truth. The problem was exacerbated upon my return to the U.S. At UCLA and Princeton, I told the same June 4 stories for the 103rd time; it had become a narrative rather than a memory. I have tried to return to those messy impressions and re-describe my experience.

It's almost a James Joycean worry. Just like in *Ulysses*, you are worried that the dominant narrative can no longer describe the truth as it is, so a uniquely chaotic expression is needed.

Your contrast is correct because of the contradictory relationship between the messy impression and the smoothly presented narrative. Whereas Joyce deliberately created a messy story, my experience was originally messy but became a good story afterwards. I never complicated it.

I remember listening to the students outside Renmin University, and some farmers pushed carts from the suburbs into the city with vegetables to sell; they also listened keenly. The radio station had foreign students, too, including African students, and everyone listened together. This was a very interesting experience because, as an American, I was with Africans, Chinese farmers, students, and all kinds of people. We looked at each other, regardless of our skin colour or origin; we were all human beings, listening to and touched by the same things. That moment left a deep impression on me.

Of course, being there felt completely different from talking about it afterwards. I remember a moment on June 4, in the corridor of the Friendship Hotel, when suddenly, a woman screamed. I did not know why; it was a random incident. All of a sudden, all kinds of strange phenomena outburst around you. Those were incredibly strange 72 hours. ■



Liu He (何流) is a visiting scholar at Hoover Institution, Stanford University, where he conducts research on the oral history of China experts in America. He has spent most of his career in Chinese civil society, where he has worked on various rural development and global health projects. He holds an MA from Tsinghua University, as a Schwarzman Scholar, and a BA in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from the University of Oxford.