

In talking to Chinese democracy demonstrators in Tiananmen Square, Tom Wren, Ph.D., professor of philosophy, got the inside story about the "Goddess of Democracy" statue. "The purpose of the statue was to force the government into an embarrassing position—the government tearing down democracy," Wren said. (Wide World Photo.)

Monica Walk
Aug. 17, 1989
Legisla World
IATBC Silver Quil
1990

Bannan, Wren on the spot during Beijing demonstration

LAKE SHORE — Amazingly, each had scheduled a departure date the day before the bloodshed.

Professor Tom Wren, Ph.D., and Professor and Chair John Bannan, Ph.D., both of Loyola's philosophy department, were in China on independently arranged scholarly trips. Although their paths never crossed in the throngs of demonstrators, each man made several visits to Tiananmen Square during his time in Beijing.

Bannan spent one month in China, the latter three weeks in Beijing. He and his wife Rosemary, a professor of sociology at DePaul, both lectured at Beijing University during their time in the city. John Bannan spent one week as an invited professor in residence at the university; Rosemary Bannan also lectured at several other institutions and conducted research.

The Bannans departed Beijing at noon on June 2. Military violence in the square began at midnight on June 3.

"I found the demonstrations and hunger strikes very moving," Bannan said. "I was terrifically impressed by the widespread support of the students and the seriousness with which both the government officials and the students took the demonstrations."

Bannan described his first ten days in Beijing as festive. "People went to the square as if it were a fair," he noted. "Chinese and foreigners alike went there to enjoy themselves."

When martial law was declared May 20, Bannan says the mood tensed although the law was not enforced.

"I went to the square most days, and I spoke with students who knew English," he said. "They were very happy to see Westerners. The students were warm and welcoming and eager for us to tell the world about their cause. They would smile at us, flash the 'V' for victory sign, and even ask for autographs."

"These students were not trying to overthrow the Communist system. They simply wanted to end corruption and promote democracy," Bannan continued. "On May 16 nearly one million people gathered in the square—on the 17th, there would be one million demonstrators. The mood on the 16th was wonderfully festive. It was like the August 1963 civil rights march in Washington when Martin Luther King gave his 'I have a dream' speech. Both gatherings had friendliness and warmth and commitment to ideals."

As he departed Beijing, Bannan noted the mood was more tense. Soldiers were everywhere. "But the students thought of them as the Peoples' Army," Bannan said. "They didn't believe they would take action against the students."

"It is remarkable that my wife and I left Beijing the day before the violence," he noted. "It could have been more adventuresome had we had a later departure date. Or it could have been harder to get out of the country. We learned of the military action on a stopover in Hawaii as we made our way home."

"I am somewhat concerned about our Chinese friends," Bannan acknowledged, "but I am hoping things in China soon spring back in a better direction."

(Continued on page 3)

TWO Loyola priests caught in eye of history

(Continued from page 1)

Tom Wren spent three days in Beijing on a side trip to a conference sponsored by the Chinese academy, Academia Sinica, in Taiwan. He presented a paper at the conference.

"My original plan was to spend five days in Hong Kong, because of its tourist charm," he said. "I did plan to make the couple-hour train ride into Communist China and stick my toe over the border, so to speak, so I would have visited all three Chinas.

"When I arrived in Hong Kong on Sunday, May 25, a million-and-a-half people were demonstrating for solidarity, and I was caught up in it. It reminded me of the general strike in Paris in the '60s, in which I also was caught up by accident," Wren said. "It occurred to me to cancel my other plans and go where history was occurring. I felt the Chinese students would welcome my show of Western solidarity. I also was curious."

Wren acquired an express visa and flew to Beijing.

"The students were scheduled to be disbursed the following Tuesday. I thought

my visit would be a one-day deal when I got there Monday afternoon," he recalled. "As I was leaving Hong Kong airport, students there asked me to take along literature describing the Hong Kong demonstration. They knew students in Beijing were sorely lacking communication with the outside world. The people in Hong Kong were very frightened by the situation."

'Goddess of Democracy'

On Tuesday, May 30, the "Goddess of Democracy" statue was erected. According to Wren, the statue drew many onlookers and the students decided to stay on rather than disburse as scheduled. The statue had been constructed secretly by art students, he said, and the crowd was surprised and excited by it.

"The students were very pleased with the effect of the statue," Wren said. "Many pointed out its likeness to the Statue of Liberty; they seemed to get a kick out of sharing that with us. The statue was erected next to a government building so that when the students left the square, government workers would tear the statue

down. The purpose of the statue was to force the government into an embarrassing position—the government tearing down democracy. The students were really playing for very small stakes. Symbols go far in a government committed to iconography."

The statue faced a government building painted with the likeness of Mao Tse-tung. While government officials portrayed the students as defying Mao with the statue, Wren said the students in fact cherished Mao. "They were very orthodox in their ideology. The students said they were not defying Mao, just the corrupt leaders behind the wall. They said Mao was looking on with approval. An agent provocateur—a government person—defaced the Mao portrait with ink and the students caught him. The papers reported the opposite," he said.

"I was in Beijing for three days—even a full 72 hours," Wren said. "It sounds like a superficial visit, yet it was an enormously moving experience. I spoke English and German with many Chinese students. I felt like I was of some use to them because the typical Chinese student felt concern that his feelings were not noticed by the outside world. They really wanted to talk to me and express their feelings to a foreigner, even though they know I was not a reporter."

'Like Northshore Republicans'

"I had a small tape recorder. The students knew it was dangerous to talk to me, so they would step behind a post and talk into the recorder. Most of what they said did not have particular news value. What was important was their need to say it," Wren said. "They said things that by American standards did not sound revolutionary. They didn't perceive of changing the system; they simply wanted the existing system to work as it was supposed to work. For example, they did not want to pay bribes to get a marriage license. Many of them were, in essence, saying 'This is

our country. We will be the leaders; we want a little voice in things now.'

"They sound more like Northshore Republicans than revolutionaries, don't they?"

Wren says the students were not worried when they learned Mongolian troops were massed outside the city. "They said 'Mongolian or any other kind of Chinese soldier will never fire on a civilian, especially a student,'" Wren related. "My original fears of violence faded as the students convinced me. The bloodshed surprised me; the gentle students had lulled me into a false sense of security. I had taken photos of people; they gave me their addresses and asked me to mail them prints. Can you imagine that I did this? Those poor people now are probably shaking with the fear of receiving a photo in the mail."

"I'm not condemning their naiveté," he continued. "In fact, not expecting the worst is to their credit. They believed in the power of the popular voice. I wish we could do something to keep the story alive and further their cause. I'd be happy to speak with anyone about my experience."

Wren read the false accounts of events in official Chinese papers and saw students and civilians line up at kiosks to read photocopied accounts from other sources. "I've never been particularly reverent toward the media," Wren acknowledged, "but I was struck by the seriousness of Western journalists and the need for the media in this situation. I saw both the good and the ill of the media."

"A week after the bloodshed, I heard a radio report here in which the newscaster spoke of the 'alleged massacre' in China," said Wren who arrived home in Chicago the morning of the day of violence in Tiananmen Square. "It unsettled me that our own good media people were talking as if they were not sure there had been a massacre. I think he was just using the standard journalistic formula, because if he had been there, he would not have said 'alleged.'"



A truck is almost buried in the crowd of thousands gathered for a pro-democracy rally in Tiananmen Square. (World Wide Photo)