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Nicholas Joe is here today. Nick is a writer and a former Australian diplomat. Nick has written a new novel that is set in Australia and Washington and East Timor in the lead up to East Timor's Vote for Independence in 1999. And this was the moment when the Timorese people delivered a resounding yes vote, which was followed by an explosion of violence perpetrated by pro-Indonesian militias across that island, which lies so close to the Australian mainland. Nick just has seen firsthand how people are sometimes chewed up in the grinding machinery of powerful nations as those nations relentlessly pursue their interests or what they believe to be their interests. Now, full disclosure, I should mention that I first met Nick a million years ago when he was my English tutor at uni and shortly afterwards, Nick started to take up a diplomatic post in China, completely unrelated. Nick lent the language and was then posted to the Australian Embassy in Beijing as a cultural counsellor and translator.

Nick arrived in Beijing in the mid-1980s and this is when China was beginning to open to the world and there was an air of excitement of possibility.

This wave of expectation and optimism crested with the pro-democracy rallies in Tiananmen Square and then in June 1989, the army was sent in. The protesters were massacred and some of Nick's friends became wanted men. Nick is the author of several books and novels that are centred around Chinese history and that tragic moment in 1989 and his new novel is called *The Idealist*. Welcome back, Nick. Hello, Richard. Nice to see you again.

The Idealist, your new novel is centred around the death of an Australian defence analyst who's caught between his love of the Timorese people and the disgraceful actions of the Australian government at that time. What do you remember of that time during the vote for independence? Well, I remember the lead up to it when there was so much difficult to decipher and positioning around East Timor because Soeharto had finally gone, Habibie took over for a while as president, Indonesia was democratising and Habibie was open to change. So suddenly it was game on for East Timor and Australia, which had resisted the idea of a referendum on independence fairly consistently, was suddenly in a position where it might have to change its tune overnight and the Americans were also interested in having a problem solved. So there was some pretty fancy footwork going on. In fact, the Australian prime minister suggested to Habibie that he have a referendum and that Australia would support it. But I don't think that Australia counted on the referendum result being so overwhelmingly for independence. You know, there was a sort of feeling that, oh, well, maybe the East Timorese will vote to stay with Indonesia and that would suit everyone very nicely. But of course, that didn't happen. I think the vote in the end was about 70, 80 percent, yes. I think it was 80 percent, yes. Yes, it's about as conclusive as a referendum can be. Well, it shows what unreliable intelligence can do for you if you're not listening very closely and you have your preconceived idea of what will suit you. And then the people actually decide something different. And the tragic part of the story is that the violence happened after the referendum, particularly when the Indonesians were pulling out and they left Dili as a kind of scorched earth place as punishment and many people were killed. And it may be that if the cards had been played differently with Australia as one of the key players, that violence, which was probably predictable, could have been avoided. As a result, as I recall, Australia then led the Interfet Force into East Timor to quell the violence, which was a coalition force, but it was led by Australia. I think Bill Clinton was president at the time, and I think Australia probably wanted America to lead that force. But America said, off you go, Australia, you do this. Well, yes and no. I think

Australia didn't want the Americans to lead that force because that would have just been too close for comfort for the Australian government to have those American boots on the ground solving the problem or even the UN forces. So Australia kind of put its hand up and said, we have to do this, so we will get the credit, but we weren't prepared for it really. In the event, Interfet did a good job and is well regarded now in East Timor for what Australia eventually did, but it was kind of a patch-up move late in the day, I would suggest. As I recall, the Howard government committed the force responding to a groundswell of public opinion in Australia. Well, absolutely, yeah.

That's the heart of it, the Australian people and particularly the activists who'd been so active for so long. There was just this overwhelming support for this sort of fledgling nation of East Timor and this small country and these people who'd been so helpful to Australia back in the Second War. So there were those people's memories that also kind of pushed the government into that

response. That's right. Like I said, your book is about a defence analyst who's found dead one day and the question is, is it suicide? Is it not? And he's a man who's been posted to Timor and Australian who's been posted to Timor who sort of falls in love with the place and the people. You've been a diplomat. Is this, I suppose, a risk for all diplomats that they might be captured emotionally, intellectually, spiritually by the places that they're posted to?

Yeah, look, I think divided loyalties is a risk in many areas. There's not only the question of, you know, which side am I on, but who am I? Am I an individual or am I just an agent of the state, some sort of functionary? And if those two things don't align, it can be difficult and there are pressures. I mean, in recent years in Australia, we've come to hear a phrase we didn't, you know, much here in the past, which is the word, our national interest. We've heard that phrase so much in recent years, national interest. Well, what is it actually? And is it different from the interest of people, a person from that country and their interests, good or bad?

You know, Nick, when I first met you at that university, I did political science and the very first lecture I had was about that phrase, the national interest. What does it mean? And pretty much the conclusion was it's used to cover up all kinds of things, pretty much.

That's right. So you do when it's wheeled out, you think, okay.

This guy, I know, was sent to the United States on a fellowship once and he found himself at a very high table indeed with some US senators and the seat next to him was suddenly filled by Henry Kissinger. Henry Kissinger, of course, was an ancient figure even then and this person, and I was quite a bit younger when he said, he growled at him, he said, where are you from, young man? And my friend said, Australia. And he said, just flat out, he said, Australia is a small country of little consequence and its voice will never be really heard on the international stage, which is refreshing to hear that from someone.

That's fantastic. Yeah, that was really quite amazing. And he didn't quite know what to say after that. But is Kissinger basically speaking the truth here? Is this the real underlying truth that operates behind the pleasantries of diplomatic language, Nick?

I think Australia has had a voice in international affairs over the years, or if not voice about a kind of whispering in someone else's ear role. We used to think of ourselves as a middle power. That phrase has sort of gone out now, but a middle power meaning a small

country. But if you are deft in your moves, and if you are well informed, you can sort of, you know, maneuver in the background and sometimes achieve results. And I think in relation to

Asia

Pacific generally, but I'll say China in particular, Australia in the past prided itself on its informed knowledge and its ability to kind of move behind the scenes. I mean, I think there's still a dispute about who got to China first out of Henry Kissinger and Stephen Fitzgerald, who was the first Australian ambassador to Beijing. The Americans who have, you know, deep scholarship on China and many advisors pride themselves on that knowledge, and they wouldn't think a country from the other end of a very long flight could really know anything.

But in a sense, America has its preconceived version of China, which goes particularly back to the Second World War when America, quote unquote, lost China to the communists. And so all those missionaries, all those things that had gone on kind of waste of time, China was lost. And I think that has framed American perceptions of China to a large extent. Australia didn't have that.

Australia, you know, there've been Chinese in Australia forever for a start doing all sorts of things, helping Australia to develop and grow. And as well as those personal ties, deep lines of communication. So there were things that Australians were doing with China that were working quite well. And in my opinion, we handled the relationship pretty well. It's 50 right now, I think the anniversary of diplomatic relations. But for the first part of that, the first 40 years or so of that, we probably handled it pretty well.

Because we were not big noting ourselves, we kept our head down. What was Kissinger's phrase, we have no voice in international affairs, we may have not had a voice, but we had a kind of a role. And so that that's how I am in my generation grew up and was formed thinking of Australia's potential

geopolitically. We weren't a big power, we couldn't influence things directly, but we could play a constructive role. And I think that has changed that we now want to be bigger than middle power. When I've been traveled through the Pacific or through other small nations nearby,

and this is certainly true for East Timor, I think the presence of Australia, Australia's kind of there always sort of hovering in the background. And they're obliged pretty much to think about us a lot more than we think about them. Is that how it is for Australia in the minds of people in China? I'm not talking about the government itself, the Communist Party government, but the most people in China. I don't imagine we'd intrude into their thoughts very much at all, or do we, Nick? No, only when it suits. So if I can go back to the late 80s, 88, 89,

Australia introduced a short-term English language visa for China. So a Chinese person with some qualifications and a bit of cash could come to Australia for three months.

That was a radical change in Australia's kind of immigration policy to China. And thousands and thousands of people scraped together the money and came to Australia. And they did so on the basis of probably no knowledge whatsoever except some kind of mythic sense that there was this place far to the south, which was some sort of land of opportunity. El Dorado. There had been gold there once and there was gold there now. And they came and they've on the whole flourished and prospered and Australia has been the beneficiary. So I think there is a kind of base level of knowledge and goodwill towards Australia in China across the board.

How far back does your family go to China, Nick? Well, my grandfather, my father's father was born in China at a hospital in Ningbo, which is sort of southeast of Shanghai in the late 1890s, where his father was working as a missionary. My great-grandfather had been a civil engineer

in Melbourne. He got married. He got the call. He was trained. He learned Chinese. He went off to China and they had their three children there. He and his wife, they built churches, halls, and they built a hospital, which is actually still there in Linhai. Have you been there?

Yeah. So I first went there in 1986 when it was kind of traveled on a local bus for sort of days over the mountains and it was quite hard to get to. But I got there and the church hall was still there and it was just kind of recovering from the whole cultural revolution experience when all of these buildings, anything with a sort of foreign taint was trashed and the people were persecuted, basically. But I did meet one old man then who said he had worked with my great-grandfather.

I was using the same Chinese family name as he had used. He must have been astonished to see you. Well, I was astonished to see him. He was pretty, he was ancient, but it was very moving to know that there was that human link. Since then, I've been back a couple of times and it's a very flourishing part of China now. That church is doing well, has quite a large congregation. They have a kind of history of it on the wall. My grandfather has mentioned they were very friendly to me. That part of China, there are many, many, many Christians.

I mean, there are new churches going up all the time. I mean, the Communist Party is sometimes demolishing them or declaring them illegal, but they're going up.

You had a wandering childhood, Nick. What abouts did your parents take you as a kid?

Oh, we wandered all around Australia. Actually, we lived in Trafalgar in Victoria and Gippsland when my father worked for Australian paper mills. We lived in Perth and we lived in Broken Hill. I was a very young child when we lived in Broken Hill.

Is that where your earliest memory is?

I think so. Yeah, you never quite know whether you remember your first memory, but I have a really vivid memory of looking out the back of the car window and just seeing this kind of red dirt mile after mile. I suppose I wanted to escape from the car somehow into the red dirt, but we were probably moving quite fast and that was probably exciting too because my parents, I was the first child and it was only me then. They used to go out into the bush on the weekends and things and they were just, they must have been exhausted and I was probably a nuisance and they just sort of lay on the rug and just said, oh, just run, Nicky, just run into that red dirt, which I suppose I did. What did you dream of becoming? Oh, look, I always, I've always been interested in kind of stories and performance. My grandmother, on the other side, my mother's mother, she had been a ballet dancer. She'd sort of run away from Calgurli to Melbourne to go on the boards and the fortune tellers had told her that her grandson would go to Hollywood, so she was sort of hanging on to Hollywood for you, for me, for quite a long time.

Hollywood, Nick. But then when it turned out that I really can't act and I can't sing and I can't really dance, but I can kind of write a script, I suppose, or tell a story. It's not too late, Nick, it's not too late. It's definitely not too late. You chose them to become a writer. How did you then practice your skills as a writer, as a kid? Yeah, I loved writing and even in primary school, there was a thing called composition. You know, I think you got to write 100 words or 300 words on some subject or other. I remember that. I had exercised the books that were called, you know, composition written on the front. And you had the kind of grid page for your maths work, but you had a composition book, I remember. Yes. And I loved it. And you then start stitching those little compositions together and you see what you've got. And a bit later, you call it a short story. I wrote plays for my sisters and me to perform and we had a puppet theatre and we had

puppet plays and we had quite elaborate home theatric halls, you know, hosing down the boards in the living room so we could ice skate on them and weird things like that. By the time I was at university as a student, I was kind of writing short stories and my first book of short stories was published in 1980. When did you start getting interested in China? Was this from your childhood?

Were you hearing stories from your grandparents that led you to think, oh, I must go there and learn the language? Yeah, well, my great grandfather died when I was four. But I do remember him.

I have a kind of a sense of him, visual sense, like he was venerable, you know, white-haired and he had

Chinese objects in his room. So he's like a kind of specter from China for me in my life.

After he died, though, my grandfather and my grandmother used to tell stories about him a lot. They kind of revered him and he'd written stories about his time in China. And so they related them to us on these sort of endless car journeys. We seem to be going on through the country with our grandparents then. So there was a seed of China planted. But I was really not interested in China until later when I was at university at ANU in Canberra. China was quite around then. This was the 1970s. So we're just starting, Australia was just starting to have this changed relationship with China as China itself was changing. But I'd come back to Australia from Oxford where I'd been studying English literature. I had a very good friend there, an American, but his father was an Australian, a lawyer who was posted to Japan with the occupation of Japan after the war. So my friend Alex Kerr had grown up in Japan, was fluent in Japanese, but had come to Oxford to study Chinese. And he said to me, look, Nick, if you want to be a citizen of the world, you know, this is in 1978, you have to learn Chinese. It's pretty fast-sighted, isn't it? Yeah, I thought so. I thought it was good. So I did what I could. I went back to Canberra where I was teaching English literature. But I enrolled in a Chinese course at the Canberra CAE as it then was and got so hooked by the language. And we had fantastic teachers who were all kind of refugees from China one way or another. One was Kon Kirilov, a white Russian, as they were called, who had been the interpreter for Mao. At one point, Nancy Lee, this exquisitely beautiful and refined woman had grown up in Wangfuljing, the main street of Beijing, and then had married a Chinese diplomat somewhere. And they fetched up in Canberra. And Mr. Sun, poor old Mr. Sun, who had to teach the writing of the characters. And they were there with this tiny class, less than 10 people, who struggled and struggled. And they would teach us these sounds. Ma, ma, ma, ma. Ma, ma, ma, ma. And we just repeated it like infants.

Are there different explanations on that ma that make it mean different things?

Oh, yes. That was meant to be the five tones. Is it? Oh, OK. Ma, ma, ma, ma.

This is where I always come across, Nick. I have to say, whenever I've tried to learn tourist Chinese, they go, oh, no, that's terrible. You get the tone wrong. And so the meaning inevitably changes to something obscene with that. It doesn't work. So that's the five tones.

Well, they were so kind. They would mark our tones, our Chinese, out of 100. So if you were really good, you might get eight out of 100. And they'd give that to you out of 10. So you get 80%. You get a distinction. So when did you go to China for the first time? 1983, with a group from Canberra, CAE. What was China like in those industry? Well, it was just emerging from the Cultural Revolution. The so-called reforms and open door policy of Deng Xiaoping was happening. People were very open to outsiders at that point. Life was still hard, simple, no luxury goods available, nothing

much available. But people were keen to talk on those long train journeys through China and talk about their experiences, how they'd suffered during the Cultural Revolution and now how filled with hope they were to have a different future and to engage with the outside world and with a country like Australia. The energy was absolutely palpable of this change that was going to happen was happening. The visible signs were not much there in 1983, but it was enough for me just to say, okay, Australia and China, there's a future in this. This is what's happening now, the end of the 20th century. And I want to be part of it. I want to go back. I want to teach. I want to write. It was really quite intoxicating. So you went back there in 86. Yeah. You moved there. What did you do once you got there? I moved there to teach Australian

English Literature in the Australian Studies Centre. It's the first two that started in China, basically. I think a lot of Australians would be surprised to know that there are so many Australian Studies centres at Chinese universities right across that country. There are. There are now something like 38. So going back to your question about, do Chinese know about Australia and what they think about it, there is this quite established kind of interest. And why wouldn't there be? Because Henry Kissinger may say that Australia has no voice in international affairs, but from a Chinese perspective, Australia is there. We're here. They buy a lot from us. We buy a lot from them. There's just this historical relationship. There's a sort of trading route that goes down from China to Australia and back from Australia to all through Southeast Asia. The proceeds British colonisation. Long history. So that's one reason why there are all these Australian Studies centres in China. And I was there in the early days of that teaching and then also wanting to research and write a novel about it all. So much Australian literature is full of Australian colloquialisms. Is it hard to translate Australian colloquialisms like crikey and struth? Oh, they're a great translator. They're amazing translators who make a study of exactly that, you know. Didn't Bob Hall come across at once in a press conference? Maybe this is apocryphal where he said in China that we need to stop playing silly buggers with trade or something like that when it's translated into something terribly literal. Turned it or something, came out of something about the year of the rooster? No, I think it was stopped behaving like foolish homosexuals. I think was how it was translated at the time. It must be hard to sort of bring Australian irony into such a completely different language or not? No. Look, Chinese people themselves are full of irony and the Chinese language has got words in it, you know, make your hair stand on it. It's a great treat in life to be sworn out in Chinese, I think it is. How did you then shift into a diplomatic role while you were there? Well, because I was involved in these Australian studies centres and the Australian government at that time blessedly had this role of cultural counsellor they'd created and they wanted then people from the arts world, the world of culture, to occupy that position. And my predecessor, Carillo Gantner, was fantastic success in theatre as a man of the theatre, so they're looking for someone in a different area, literature, Australian studies. There I was, so I applied for that job and got it. So after those two years of teaching in China, I moved into the embassy as the cultural counsellor. While you were there, how did you learn to develop your language skills on the streets? Yeah, when I was first there, I mean those first two years when I was teaching, I had some spare time, I was determined to communicate with people and so yeah, I just hung out on the streets, I had a bike, I rode around, I just talked to anyone and everyone, somehow they could understand me, I could understand them, it was great. When you're going out and about on the street and you're

trying in a very forthright way to try and learn this language by pushing yourself into social interactions that you probably wouldn't normally do, did it make you more extroverted or are you kind of temporarily extroverted when you're in that mode? Well, when you're speaking another language

and you've got another name in Chinese and you're this figure, I think you do become someone else and I think I probably did. Do you lose your shyness a bit? Yeah, you do because you're just an idiot half the time, you know. There was a lot going on, we're talking 86, 87, 88, period of liberalisation, Western ideas flooding in, Chinese experimenting with new things in film, in art, in thinking and so I just threw myself into that and so then when I went to work at the embassy, you know, I thought long and hard about this too, will I be constrained, can I make the transition and I was told by a Canadian cultural diplomat, she said, Nicky, you must take this job because you will learn more about your own country doing something like this and you'll learn in any other way and that was really true.

This is Conversations with Richard Feidler.

So in the embassy, Nick, did they put you to work as a translator as well?

Well, the cultural councillor tag was a kind of catchall role, so there was politics and there was trade, anything else was culture at that point, so it included a whole array of things. For example, the panda loan, which was a big event in the 1988 by Centennial was handled by the culture section, you know, and I had to go out and negotiate with the Ministry of Forestry about the terms and conditions of the panda loan and how much bamboo that would need to be grown by the good people of Victoria to keep the pandas happy while they're at the Melbourne Zoo, things like that. We had a cricket exchange. My job was to umpire that cricket match in Chinese, having got the rules of cricket translated into Chinese and found 12 Chinese who could play cricket with the Australians. The Australian cricket team? Test veterans and Chinese, I guess they were baseball players, blended together into two teams of equal ability. How did the Chinese go? Had a diplomatic draw. Well, one of them turned out to be just a genius spin bowler. He took the name of Bruce and moved to Bowerl for a while. The home of Bradford and all of that, a marvellous. In that period, you were talking about the great cultural flourishing that was going on as Chinese people were being exposed to novels from the outside world to Sigmund Freud, to movies, to arts and all these kind of things. The politics as well, could you sense that the politics was changing all around you and the political expectations were changing? Yeah, look, there were salons on weekends where people gathered democracy, salons, other kinds of ideas, salons around change. Everyone was thinking about it, economic change as well. And the crossover with the cultural sphere was quite intense. So, for example, there was one noted poet. So, these people had been sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, they'd come back to the cities, they were making up for lost time. So, he wrote this quite radical poetry, but he was also an agricultural economist and a journalist on agricultural economics. So, his job was to travel all around China and write articles about the rural economy for a newspaper in Beijing. He was very well informed about things in the back blocks. So, late in 1988, I was thinking, well, I've been in China for a few years, now maybe it's time to go back to Australia and go back to writing my novels. He said, look, Nick, you'd just stay for another 12 months and you will really see something. This place is just going to blow. And this was at a time when the general analysis of China was that it was on a steady course of economic reform, it was stable, things were just going to go forward as they were. So, I presented this at a

meeting in the Australian Embassy with my colleagues, you know, in politics and trade and they heard it, but they kind of looked at me as if I was mad or at least my informants were mad and I was kind of hanging out with the wrong people. So, that was late in 1988. By February of 1989, those poets were gathering for discussion groups and many of them had gone into exile, were coming back. There was a huge visual art exhibition in February called China Avant Garde and the sort of theme of that was China is going to make a U-turn, meaning go in a completely different direction from the sort of communist past, if you like. Nick, at the same time in Europe, in that heady year of 1989, the communist regimes that had been in place since the end of the war in Poland and Hungary and eventually Czechoslovakia and East Germany and Bulgaria, they all fell over.

Absolutely. Was that being reported in China at the time? Yes, it was. In 1988, it was being fully reported and there was huge interest in it, of course. There was a lot of discussion at that time of a third way, what would be the third way between communism and sort of full-on capitalism. And the Soviet Union was too at that time. And the Soviet Union. Yeah, the Soviet Union, there was by no means certain that communism was about to fall in the Soviet Union, even though it had in Eastern, in Central and Eastern Europe. There was still a sense that Soviet Union would have some kind of a strange hybrid system in place. And the same with China as well? That's right, yes. All sorts of think tanks were exploring all of these ideas. And then you get in April of 1989, a senior leader dies who had been kind of sympathetic to youth, listening to youth, thinking also of alternative ways to deal with some of the problem areas. He died and there was kind of mourning for him in Tiananmen Square. Mourners started to gather and they just gathered and gathered and gathered and gathered. And it just went on continuously from April through to June.

Did you go down to Tiananmen Square to see this? Yes, I was there almost every day or through that time. And it morphed from the mourning for Hu Yaobang, this leader, to marches of students from all the different educational institutions under banners, from work units, from all sorts of different groups in society would march into Tiananmen Square, fill the square. The square is an enormous place. So by the time it was in full flight, you'd have a million people literally in the square. Many of them had come from out of provinces, so they had to sleep there, they camped there. And the square was just full day and night in a good spirit. And it was being reported in the media by the end quite freely. And of course, it was at the same time hugely embarrassing for the Chinese authorities. And at the peak of all of this, Gorbachev came on a visit. The Soviet leader. The Soviet leader. He came. And it was hugely embarrassing for them. So that was exactly this thing of, okay, the world is changing. China, you've got a million people protesting in the square and many, many more across the country. What's going to happen? There was a moment when it seemed like the Communist Party leadership wanted to talk to the student protest leaders and they showed up in their pajamas as a kind of a gesture of contempt. Was that a missed moment? Was it possible that there might have been some kind of liberalisation through that meeting with the student leaders at the time? Was there a kind of an historic moment missed because the student leaders weren't ready for it at that time yet? Well, I like to think so. I think jumping forward now, the nervousness around the events of 1989, it's been erased from history in China. It cannot be discussed in public. It's now 30 plus years. It has not been dealt with. So that anxiety suggests to me that there was another path that it could have gone down. There was a different group of people

that what happened was in a way a power play to entrench vested interests within the Communist Party and within the state. That's continued through to now where those people are the inheritors of that. Speaking to Linda Javen, she remembers there being a sense that something terrible was going to happen towards as the protests rolled on. The optimism started to turn into fear. Do you remember that point? Well, I would say there was a point where it didn't so much turn into fear as to a sense, okay, we've made our point. We've made a huge point. This was all being televised around the world by CNN for the first time ever that live television coverage on that scale was happening from China. So the whole world knew. And I think there was a sense that, okay, we've made our point. It can only get bad from here. We should go back to our campus and live to fight another day. That space had been completely opened up for negotiation. But there was a group of people partly who'd come from the provinces and were camping in the square, had nowhere else to go. So they weren't going back to their campuses. And there were some diehards.

And there was a group of people who were there when it became clear that some sort of military response was going to happen or that the square was going to be cleared. And at that point, four people who were not students, they were kind of slightly older young teachers, advisors, including one from Hong Kong, came in to negotiate with those people to say, well, just go now while

it's safe. And the army was creeping in from the outer suburbs. And they negotiated with the army to try and get those people out. And mostly they did. But then at the last minute, June the third, June the fourth, the tanks came in and the shooting started. Where were you when that happened? Well,

I wasn't there then. I had gone to Shanghai that weekend. So I was actually watching that Saturday night on television in Shanghai with all the stuff, Chinese stuff of the Shanghai Hilton.

And what do you remember thinking and feeling when you saw this take place?

Oh, it's horrifying. Really horrifying. And then just the need to get back there immediately, which I did the next morning. You had friends in the square?

Yeah, yeah. Well, a lot of friends who'd been coming and going. So you didn't really know where people were exactly. A lot of the shooting happened on the sort of outskirts of the square as the army was coming through and people were running in front of tanks or the army firing indiscriminately at buildings along the roadway. Then I got back and we drove from the airport through the streets and they're burning cars and horrifying scenes. And then those four people who'd been involved in that negotiation wanted to find somewhere safe to go. So they came to my place. Your apartment? My apartment. I knew them. They'd been there before. This had been going on

for weeks in the lead up. So that wasn't unreasonable or unexpected. So these were the four people that were known as the Ford gentlemen, I think at the time. That's who negotiated with the army to have a brief window of escape for people in before the tanks came in. What did they do once they got to your apartment? Well, they got together to work out what to do next.

They prepared a statement, a written statement to sort of send out to the media and they had to work out what they were going to do, whether to get out of Beijing, get out of China, what to do. So in the event, one of them sought asylum in the Australian Embassy, Hoda Jen, who was a famous pop singer originally from Taiwan and then from Hong Kong. And one of the others, whose name is Liao Xiaobo, was the last to leave. I'd been at work. I'd come home. It was after dark.

He was there and I said, well, look, drive with me to the Australian Embassy. I have to go. You have to go. And we stopped outside the Embassy at the gate and I said, well, you can come inside the Embassy if you want to, or you can make another decision up to you. He said, no, I have to stay in China. This is my country. This is where I live, where I can operate. I will go into the network of support in Beijing. And so he got out of the car, went across the road to a friend's place. And then later that night, he'd got on a bike and driven down the road and had been picked up by an unmarked van. So he got a call from his girlfriend saying they've got him. That was awful news. What became of him? He was one of the key people on the blacklist at the time. He was imprisoned. He was interrogated. He was tortured. Eventually, he was about 18 months later, he was

released. So he was able to leave the country. But again, after leaving the country for a while, he came to Australia for about quite a long visit. He went back to China and he remained an advocate for democracy and change in China, thorn in the side of the authorities.

Years past, I was then involved with the writer's organization, International Penn.

He was the chair of a kind of international Chinese pen. So I was able to meet with him in Beijing in later years. And then he became an author of a charter for democracy, Charter 08. This is 2008. And he was then arrested again and eventually imprisoned long sentence, 11 years. And he very sadly died in prison in 2016.

In the meantime, he had won the Nobel Peace Prize. He was unable to attend the ceremony in Oslo. There was an empty chair in his name. But yes, his health had not been good. He was not treated well in prison, really. And he died. And his ashes were then scattered at sea.

So there would be no site on the Chinese mainland where people might go and pay their respects. So after that massacre, you had sort of been instrumental in harboring an enemy of the state, I suppose, or connected to enemies of the state. Did that mean you had to get out yourself? I didn't get out immediately. What it meant was there was a lot of negotiation between the Australian

embassy and the Chinese. Not so much about him, because he was gone, but about Hoda Jen, who was in the embassy. To be clear, he was hugely famous. He's kind of like the Bob Dylan of China or something like that. When he was in the cultural section, he occupied my office.

I came back to Australia for a brief period. He got to know everyone. And in the end, an arrangement was made for him to be released. He stayed in Beijing for a while, and then he found himself on a boat in the middle of the fishing boat in the middle of the Straits between China and Taiwan one night and was being sent back to Taiwan.

Meanwhile, in Australia, Prime Minister Bob Hawke was quite overcome by the footage of the massacre

and wet for the people who died in the massacre and made that extraordinary statement where he said the Chinese students currently in Australia could stay. What do you remember of that moment? I was there actually in Parliament House on that occasion, and he read out this very strongly worded statement, partly drawing on the document that those people had drafted in my flat that night.

They were calling on the forces of justice of the world to come to the help of China.

Now, that was adapted for that event in Parliament House. But I want to mention that because there was a kind of idealism about all of this that was deeply moving, but also naive in some ways. There are no forces of justice in the world, whether we like it or not. And if there were,

or if they're run by other countries, they're not going to always come to the rescue. And yet, because these very idealistic and very informed and sort of philosophically minded young Chinese have kind of been imbibing all of this sense of possibility in this way in the 80s, there was this belief that something like that might happen. It's kind of heartbreaking. Now, we see almost daily there's an earthquake, there's a refugee crisis, there's a flood, and always the victim is saying, why doesn't international help come? And you know that, well, with the best intentions, it's not going to always come. And so that was a learning moment for me. And so I want to connect that to this novel called *The Idealist*, which has that East Timor story in the background. Because we do harbour some sense that there is justice in the world we want there to be, and we kind of act accordingly. But it doesn't always happen. And that's hard. And so that's, I think, one of the things that, you know, I'm drawing a bit of a long bow here from Channelman Square in 1989 to, well, East Timor in 1998. But then that's also a long time ago now. But my kind of reflections back about idealism, you know, and how necessary it is, but how costly it also can be. It reminds me of that famous quote of Martin Luther King's, which is that the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice. Do you think there's any truth in that? Or do you think that's just a beautiful and helpful fiction? Well, in the case of this novel, I'm imagining a story. I'm retelling again and again something that happened a while ago in the hope, I guess, that somehow justice will be done, that there will be something will be revealed, which will show things in a new light. And that's probably as close to justice as we can get. Do diplomats have any business expecting the moral arc of the universe to bend towards justice, or are they better off being hard realists? Yeah, well, they're better. They're certainly better off being very well informed. And so that involves realism. It involves not just going with your sense of how things, how you would like things to be. So in other words, not being ideological too much in the frame you're putting on things. It doesn't mean you think only about the national interest, but it does mean that you have to be very attentive to things on the ground. When you got back to China, eventually, how long was that after the massacre? And what was different in the Beijing that you returned to? Well, yeah, and I went back pretty soon after, and it was another city, and this is late in 89, 90. Streets were empty, people weren't going out, things really were very tamped down, and people were nervous. They're nervous about contacting other people. I was nervous about contacting people. There was a kind of undertone of anger, rage, outrage, that was quite powerful when you tapped into it. And going back to the events of 89 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of those Eastern European and Soviet states, Romania, the Ceausescus, were killed at the end of that year. And that was just one moment when people in Beijing started celebrating. Winter, the city was frozen over, and they started smashing bottles on the ice to celebrate this downfall of dictators in another country. Yes, the Ceausescus were executed in a square, and there was footage of them lying dead on the ground. I remember seeing that in the news at the time, and had to be released to prove to the people of Romania that these monsters were dead. So that resonated in China. Roger Woodward came to play, the great Australian pianist came to play. Tell me about it. That was fantastic. One of the things that Australia did that other like-minded countries didn't so much do was to decide to maintain people-to-people relations with China, even when there were some other programs were suspended. And so the cultural program just continued on. And one of the items in the cultural program was a visit by Roger Woodward,

the pianist. And he played on university campuses, as well as in concert halls. And there was one occasion when he played in a hall in the university zone of Beijing, where many of the students who had marched and the staff were living. And he did a performance of Chopin, which was his thing, is his thing. And he gave a performance of the revolutionary polonaise, and it was electric. The crowd, they were on their feet. They were applauding. They recognised it as a kind of revolutionary anthem that was in sympathy with them, or they were in sympathy with it. And Roger Woodward, with his experience of Poland, Chopin's country, this is a polonaise. This is another country that's been through this transformation. But with a happy ending. With a happy ending. And it was great. I try to be careful when, not just to say China is this and China does this and China does that, when one really ought to say the Chinese Communist Party has resolved to do this, and the Chinese Communist Party has resolved to do that. If you wanted to see the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, it's been in power since 1949. If you wanted to see that as like one of the dynasties of Chinese history, would you see that as being like typical in some ways of part of this great continuum of one dynasty after another, there's the Ming and the Qing and then the CCP dynasty? Or is it more of a weird aberration in Chinese history? I've been interested lately in the change from the Ming to the Qing. The Ming dynasty was there for hundreds of years and in the late 17th century, the Manchus came in from the northwest on their horses and they got across the Great Wall and they took over China and they imposed control with incredible violence. You know, there were extraordinary massacres happening and then it settled down and people sort of made peace with it and they were there for what, 200 plus years and then they too crumbled. So I think that just in position of power by raw power to establish a dynasty gives it a pretty strong basis for survival. So in that sense, I think yes, the CCP is analogous to earlier dynasties. And what I say also is that this is the China we have. This is China now. This is this China run in this way by this government. It's not for us to say that's not China or that should be different. I mean, it's for people in China to say that and we can help if we want to. The only complication, it's a big one, is Taiwan because Taiwan is not that story of the CCP dynasty. It's a whole other way of being Chinese in the world. I've been there. It's not the same as being in mainland China at all. And it in some ways goes back to the Ming. The last kind of Ming claimants went across to Taiwan at the end of the 17th century and there's been a different history there since. However, the CCP and its narrative regards reclaiming Taiwan and Hong Kong, of course, too, for the motherland as this mission, which is in fact a kind of historical straightjack at almost, you could say, but they're kind of in it. And that's difficult. So if it's a dynasty, it could be a dynasty that survives for 200 years, but in order to survive, they will have to probably make some adjustments. For all those years, a necessarily more gregarious Nick Joseph was going to China being in China, hanging out with artists for a place full of expectation and excitement. Do you miss that old Nick? I can recover him if I get together with Chinese friends in Australia around a bottle of Maotai or something. He can be brought back. Nick, it's been really wonderful to hear this story. I did not know. It's such a pleasure to speak with you, Nick. And thank you so much. Thanks, Richard. You've been listening to a podcast of Conversations with Sarah Kanoski.

[Transcript] Conversations / Dynasties and dynamism

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