

“The Day Not to Be Forgotten”: How I Learned What Happened in Tian’anmen Square

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I was in Beijing during the first week of June 1989, ostensibly to explore legal and policy options relating to the “one-child” policy with China’s State Family Planning Commission. As it turned out, they wanted to know how they could do a better job of enforcing their approach to population growth. That was the weekend when many hundreds of Chinese protesters, most of them university students who hoped to see China become more democratic—less corrupt—were massacred by the Chinese Northern Army in and near Beijing’s Tian’anmen Square. My reaction to the events, that of distress, a bit of fear, had antecedents in my Mormon American background.

I had grown up in Provo, Utah, unaccustomed to large-scale political protest. At Brigham Young University, I even have a vague memory that in late 1969 or early 1970, more than 20,000 signatures were gathered supporting bombing in Cambodia. By the spring of 1970, though, I was at the University of Virginia, founded by Jefferson, and attending law school. Anti-war protests in the rest of the country were reaching their apogee. Students had been killed at Kent State. At the University of Virginia there were student strikes, the ROTC classrooms were torched, the university was closed, and state troopers were on the scene, quashing student gatherings. There was much talk about canceling final exams. I think I actually fretted, initially, more about losing a year of school than about

the larger issues that were so much on the scene. I walked past the student picket lines on my way to continue studying. I now see my attitude as somewhat silly and self-centered.

For the first time, I was forced to deal with the turmoil and clatter of a vociferous, visible opposition exercising its rights. I was unprepared. I had been conditioned to something more lock-step in support of the soothing status quo, something more “conservative” of order. I saw this Constitutionally guaranteed dissent as somehow a bit unpatriotic! The distance between Provo and Charlottesville suddenly became immense, personally immeasurable. I struggled to bridge the gap, and that struggle changed the way I viewed my world, my surroundings, the institutions that dominate my life. Among other things, I came away with the deep conviction that people should not have to die for expressing their views. It makes no sense to kill the generation who must inevitably inherit leadership and governance. Yet it happened in Paris in 1968—this violence against students. It happened in my own country in 1970. And it happened in Beijing in 1989.

Though I had a sense that I was privileged to look first-hand on a political event of international importance, I also felt myself nauseated and imperiled by moments. Some of that feeling no doubt resulted from my imprudent curiosity. Yet in the face of what can truly be called a horror, I was on the receiving end of acts of kindness that reinforced my sense of a common humanity. That does not diminish the gravity of the offense against the Chinese students and others.

Now, nearly twenty years later, with the help of notes I made at the time, this is what I recall.

Saturday, June 3rd: I spent the better part of the day with some of my hosts from the State Family Planning Commission, visiting the most famous of the historical sites near Beijing—the Great Wall and the Ming Tombs. I was there to give a series of workshops on the use of law and policy in population programs. It was late afternoon. During the day, there had been much congenial discussion among us about the students in Tian’anmen Square, and my new acquaintances had naively offered to come back at 9:00 P.M. to accompany me there so I could see what was going on. How were they to know what was about to occur? Fever-pitched confrontations between the soldiers and the students had already begun with the turning back of foot troops and vehicles from the Beijing Regiment the day before. I was curious but declined. The jet lag from half a

world had crept up on me, and I went to bed. We did settle that, on Sunday afternoon, they would fetch me, and we would visit the Summer Palace. As it turned out, we never did. Had I gone we would have been in the square about the time that the troops from the Northern Army began their move to put a stop to the student protest once and for all.

Sunday, June 4, 6:00 A.M.: Despite jet-lag, I woke up early. I needed to get some exercise, work up a sweat, so I went for a run. It's always a good way to get a sense of where you are. I was staying at the Friendship Guest House in a complex constructed in 1957, principally as a residential area for foreign diplomats and missions. It is in the northwest quadrant of the city, part of the Haidian District. The Chinese People's University, some of whose students and professors were in Tian'anmen Square, stands across the way. I went to the left out of the gate; and as I turned off West Beisanhuan Road south onto Xisanhuan Road, I began to notice groups of people, ten to fifty of them, mostly men, standing at street side, dark trousers, white shirts. Some were standing in front of neighborhood bulletin boards.

The groups were talking animatedly, sometimes shouting in loud, interrupting voices. Some sort of debate was going on. My first thought was: "Is this the typical way that Beijingers spend the early hours of their Sundays before they go to church? Gathering in the streets, discussing the issues of the day? Or is this something out of the ordinary?" Every few hundred meters all the way down the street to Zizhuyuan Road, I encountered little knots of people. There I turned to the left and passed the park of the same name. Along this part of the run were fewer groups. I went left again to go up Baishiqiao Road, back north, before reaching the Beijing Zoo and the famous pandas, a little farther straight along. The day was cloudy, and Baishiqiao Road was gray-dark due to the sycamores that line either side. They break only to accommodate large buildings, like the National Archives, just above the junction at Minzu Xueyuan.

Sunday, June 4, 6:25 A.M.: A few hundred meters on, I saw two things that caught my interest: a group of twenty or so people gathered by the road and a large articulated dark-green bus traveling in my direction. The bus had makeshift Red Cross flags, red on white, flying out of the front windows on either side. The bus halted near what I took to be a bus stop before a set of buildings with an entrance gate. (It turned out to be the University for Ethnic Minorities.) It struck me as odd that no one got off, no one got on, and the bus did not move forward into the street. Com-

ing closer, I could see, in the front of the bus, a few white-coated individuals. I took them for medical students or young doctors. I wondered if they were part of the shuttle system set up to take severely disabled hunger strikers out of the square, as the Western press had reported. They looked unusually distraught, some looking at the ground, others now with comforting arms around their colleagues at the side of the road.

Then, I saw, along the tops of the seats, scattered randomly, front-to-back, ten to fifteen unoccupied stretchers. No bodies. Perhaps they were just waiting for strikers or had already taken them to hospital? But the colors were odd. Many were made of army khaki green, but two or three were white, blotched with dark red. I realized it was blood. All of what I had seen in the last half hour connected with that sight of deep red. This was not a usual Sunday morning. Something beyond a hunger strike had happened. Blood had been shed. Had it happened in Tian'anmen? Or in some mammoth traffic accident? I did not consider stopping. I was not yet part of the grief, only an observer—an out-of-place foreign observer at that.

Sunday, June 4, 6:40 A.M.: The images stayed with me for a few minutes. And the questions mounted. What had happened? Still running, I came again to the crossroads of Baishiqiao and Beishanhuan, next to the Friendship. My forty-five-minute run had completed the four sides of the city rectangle. Ahead, at the intersection, in the morning shadows, it was difficult to tell whether there was a large crowd or just the accumulated vision of white-shirted bicyclists coming down the street toward me.

The answer came soon. Flames leaped skyward from the guts of an overturned car, one of those black, official-looking older sedans that newscasts show shuttling Chinese leaders here and there. Students from the People's University stood in the street, screening each of the few vehicles that came down the road. They let some cars through, turned others back. Were the students checking out the drivers with some kind of loyalty oath? One or two cars had been overturned. Students filled both sides of the tree-lined, medianed avenue in front of the university. People were photographing the burning autos. You could see the result of the students' anger in the flames. But you could also see it in their faces. One or two faces kept reappearing around the vehicles that were being stopped. One student in a brown shirt was violently angry. He involved himself in the interrogation of all drivers, yelling and gesticulating wildly. At one point, the driver of an overturned van must have said something the students didn't

like. He began to run away but the students caught him, knocking him to the ground. Ten or twelve sets of fists raised and lowered, like sledgehammers, pummeling the man. They lifted him up, now bloodied, and dragged him through the gates, into the university. I wondered if he would survive.

A little farther on, the crowd was larger, denser, congregated around the university entrance. Faces of mourning and disbelief. Loudspeakers blared. The tone sounded harsh, rapid-fire, almost screaming. I spoke no Chinese. I edged to the back of the crowd on the other side of the street, as close to the wall as I could get, fifty or so meters from the speakers. I wanted no one behind me. I didn't want to draw attention to myself but forgot I was wearing a Union Pacific Railway engineer's cap. I might have been wearing a label: "Foreigner! American!"

Sunday, June 4, 7:10 A.M.: After a few minutes, a small, older man sidled up next to me from the left, repeatedly glancing up into my face. I tried not to acknowledge him. I was beginning to feel reluctant and scared. He tugged on my T-shirt sleeve and said something. I replied, "I don't speak Chinese." He smiled and said he *was* speaking English. He repeated: "Did you hear what happened?"

"No. Obviously something. What is going on?"

"They are upset about Tian'anmen Square. The soldiers went there last night and chased the students out. Between 200 and 2,000 people have been killed," he asserted. I found out later that he was quoting the figures being broadcast on the BBC. At the same time, loudspeakers in the square were announcing: "The rebellion has been suppressed." All day long, large helicopters could be seen buzzing in and out of Tian'anmen on a line from east to west. I imagined that they were carrying bodies, shuttling them out of sight.

I asked the man to translate some of the banners that hung from the windows. The two I can remember said: "Those who should have died, have not," an allusion to the Chinese leadership, and "Blood for blood," a call for retribution. He said that the first was a phrase initially used after Hu Yaobang's death in April. As I turned to go back to the hotel, the crowd up-ended another black sedan and ignited it. Street fires bracketed the crowd and the university. I began to wonder how long it would take the troops to reach the university.

Hu Yaobang was a long-time colleague of Deng Xiaopeng but had taken the position that political reforms lagged behind the economic and

that this gap should be redressed. The system was now out of balance, he had argued. Comparable political change was needed. For this heresy, according to outside observers, he had been removed from the leading triumvirate two years before, collapsed during an angry speech to the Central Committee, and died on April 15. His funeral triggered mass demonstrations in the streets in several cities, a near-revolution. Hu Yaobang was openly praised as the “the soul of China.” By early May, people were getting bolder about public demonstrations. A million people—not just students—took to the streets as part of the seventieth anniversary of the first public campaign of students and intellectuals, protesting weak diplomacy and corruption in the republic’s early days.

Sunday, June 4, early afternoon: I felt compelled to go out into the street again, a curious way to quell my own fears. I had made it only a block or two down Baishiqiao Road, when I heard the unmistakable sound of a loud diesel engine coming up the road. I ducked quickly behind some tall shrubs and waited, adrenalin making the heartbeat thump in my ears. I imagined that the tanks were finally coming up the road to the People’s University. The sycamores are so large they form a canopy, making the street into a virtual tunnel. I froze when a personnel carrier emerged from the trees’ shadows into the intersection, then relaxed. The carrier, #426 painted in white on the side, was being driven by a student. Ten or twelve others were on top, waving widely and shouting. Below them, attached to the carrier’s front, were four or five bicycles. I waited at the corner. They drove up to the university, then after fifteen minutes, turned around and came back down Baishiqiao. Two days later, I encountered its burned-out shell at Baishiqiao curbside. Had the students torched it after it ran out of diesel? Had something more sinister happened?

Down near the Ethic Minorities University, faxed copies of photographs from Hong Kong newspapers were pinned to the sycamores. They showed bodies and flattened bicycles along the streets near Tian’anmen Square, apparently mangled by tanks and personnel carriers. Seeing those pictures made it suddenly all very real, and I began to tremble, feeling completely unsettled for the first time.

I studied the notices, some of them impromptu, hand-scrawled, on the community bulletin boards in the neighborhood around the Friendship complex. I finally asked a young man who spoke English what they

said. From the lettering I could tell that one, writ large, was repeated at many sites. Its message: *The day not to be forgotten.*

That same afternoon, the English-language Beijing television station began showing selected scenes, recorded by the various security cameras around the square. In one, masses of white-shirted people came out of the sycamores' shadows along a main avenue, accosted an army truck as it stood in convoy, punctured its gas tank, and set it alight. Others showed soldiers getting out of the vehicles, taking off their army tunics and disappearing into the white-shirted crowds. It might have been a scene from Saturday when the Beijing Regiment failed—some say refused—to enter the square. Hundreds of the Beijing Regiment's vehicles, including tanks and personnel carriers, were abandoned and burned along Changan Avenue, leading into Tian'anmen Square. Perhaps this was the moment when the iconic photo of the single, white-shirted man was taken as he stopped the tank, waving a handkerchief, standing in front of it, then moving to the left or right as the tank tried to maneuver around him. Commentators said that the crowds had killed hundreds of soldiers. There were scenes of bodies and burnt-out vehicles. One, eerily, showed a charred human carcass, helmet still in place, hanging from a window strut of an incinerated bus. They said that troops from the Northern Army, brought in the following day to repress the students, moved toward the square chanting, "We love the people of Beijing!" They did the same a few days later as they withdrew. The English-speaking news reports praised the army for acting with courage and in "self-defense" to protect the people of Beijing.

Back at the hotel Sunday night, I tried to doze, wondering whether, now that the information counter-offensive had started, it would become, not the day to be remembered, but the day that never happened. Would it be erased from everyone's historical consciousness by an artfully orchestrated information campaign? The Chinese seemed to sense this possibility also. Those around me when I left Wednesday night, whisked out of the country by the United Nations people, kept repeating: "Please tell others what has happened here." During each of my subsequent visits to China, I was given a blue-covered publication that explained from the government's perspective what had happened.

In the papers gathered from this time, I have a copy of a rather dark poem written by Lu Xun, one of China's best twentieth-century authors,

lamenting the execution of a group of young writers in 1930. It also fits Tian'anmen in 1989:

I am growing accustomed now to these endless nights of spring,
 Fleeing with my wife and child, my hair turning gray.
 In dreams I make out a loving mother's tears
 While on the ramparts of the city the banners of the ruling war-
 lords are forever changing.
 Watching as this generation of my friends is turned into ghosts,
 Angrily I try and snatch a poem from all the swords.
 But once recited, I must bow my head, for there is no place to write
 it down.
 Moonlight reflects like water off my black robe.

How many were turned into ghosts in Tian'anmen we may never know. Most place the figure at about two thousand, the same number repeated by the little man who tugged on my sleeve in front of the Chinese People's University.

Wednesday, June 7th: During the days following that turbulent Sunday, I wandered the streets, even to the edge of Tian'anmen Square. Some citizens told me to go back, gesturing with imaginary rifles in their hands, warning me that the soldiers might shoot. I could see the tanks in nearby streets. On Wednesday, my last day, I was curious about the other large universities in the northwest of the city—Beijing University and the Language Institute. I'd heard rumors that the students had built large barricades, hoping to prevent troops from reaching the universities. At 6:00 A.M. I began what I intended as an hour's run up Haidian Road which is the extension of Baishiqiao Road. After a half hour of running, when I had not reached the universities, I turned around after crossing the railway line that leads out of Beijing North Railway Station, the line that goes toward the Great Wall and on to Mongolia. At that point, the road passes into open fields before arriving at the universities.

As I returned along the same route, crossing the rail line for the second time, I passed through a small commercial area, just about where Qinghuayuan and Lanqiying Chengfu roads intersect. Uncharacteristically, these streets had no bordering trees. I could not run, as I had been doing, in their shadows. I was in the street, alone and clearly exposed, save for a few early risers who were milling around in front of the small shops. I passed one small group at the head of an alley, and someone shouted,

"Lao wai!" twice. I had never heard anyone do that in all the time I had spent in the streets. As I moved farther away, the shout came a third time. (I learned later that it may be either a respectful, or a damning, way of addressing a foreigner.) It unsettled me, and turned to active alarm when I heard the unmistakable click, click, click of a three-speed bicycle falling in behind me, trailing me. Click, click, . . . click, click, click whenever the person was not pedaling.

I hoped that it was just coincidence that the cyclist was just traveling at my speed. I wondered—incredibly, for the first time—if I had wandered into an area I shouldn't have been in. I started varying my speed but didn't dare slow to a walk. The Friendship Hotel was still almost a half hour away. I shifted from one side of the street to another. The unknown cyclist followed religiously, just a few feet behind me. Click, click, click. Whenever we passed small groups of people, I could hear voices, from them and from the cyclist. Whoever it was drew comments from others. I imagined that they were asking why the cyclist was following the runner, a foreigner wearing a Union Pacific rail engineer's cap. Click, click, click. At one point, I slowed so much that the bicycle nearly overtook me. Using only my peripheral vision without turning my head, I caught a glimpse of an aged face and a white Chinese pith helmet. It seemed official, possibly the police. Adrenalin shot through my system. What was going to happen? When would I be stopped? How could I possibly understand what was being said to me?

I had intended to stop at the People's University, just across from the Friendship Hotel. I had heard color photographs were pasted on the walls of the interior courtyard, showing Tian'anmen Square on Sunday morning. They would be telling evidence of what had happened. Now, with someone following me, I didn't dare do that. I decided to go straight to the hotel, then wondered if I should run to another place, rather than revealing where I was staying. As I passed the university gates, I noticed that the banners were gone. Only a large single black-ribboned mourning wreath hung on the main gate. I decided to go directly to the hotel complex. Surely the cyclist would stop at the gate, respecting what essentially was a diplomatic area?

As I rounded the corner, I crossed to the other side of Beisanhuan Road, then turned onto a side road, going the wrong way. I thought I would lose the cyclist there. I had yet to see any Beijinger riding the wrong way down a one-way street, but the cyclist continued just behind

me. I seemed to be pulling the cycle along. I was caught between the relief of being near the hotel and the anxiety of being stopped at the last second. A few meters from the gate, I stopped. The cyclist, caught a bit off guard, rolled beyond me, then stopped. He was one of those quintessentially aged, wizened Chinese gentlemen with a wispy gray beard. Some of the long hairs grew out of moles. He wore a white pith helmet, a clean, white scarf, probably silk, around his neck, gray trousers, a black silk tunic, and white linen gloves. He must have been in his seventies, maybe older.

As he got off the bike and turned to face me, it toppled over; but without paying attention to it, he stepped toward me and embraced me. He was tiny, the top of his head reaching only to my mid-chest. As he hugged me, his helmet nearly fell off. I patted him on the back and shook his hand, repeating again and again one of the few Chinese phrases I had learned: “Shur shay” (thank you). Together, we righted the bicycle. He said something, but I will never know what it was. I took his hand in both of mine and shook it one more time. Then he pedaled back up the street. What he had done was escort me all the way down Haidian Road, watching out for me. That half hour of compassion for a stranger stands in contrast to the violence of Tian’anmen Square.

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The China of today is not the China of 1989. China is moving toward being the dominant world power. The children of the four-toed blue dragon are rising. In many ways, Americans are dependent on China for many of our creature comforts. China’s economic engine is roaring, but political arrangements still lag. China’s leaders are acutely aware of how they are regarded. During this Olympic year, much is being done to polish the country’s image. Yet even as I write, Tibetans led by saffron-robed Buddhist monks are protesting in Lhasa. Chinese troops patrol the streets, and China has just announced that its one-child policy will stay in place for another generation.

It has taken almost twenty years for me to write about my experience in China, keeping at last the wishes of my colleagues there. As I reconstructed those days, the images rose with their own power, resulting in this memoriam poem to the students at Tian’anmen Square on June 3–4, 1989:

Arc Flashes in Beijing

This night the harsh lights in the square
stay longer than the hapless students.
In the darkness, they wander arm
in arm into the arcing flashes,
muzzles striking reddened evil,
cobras spitting and blinding
out their uncorrupted lives.

Seen from afar, the silence of heat lightning
ricochets around the midnight horizon,
as it does from behind the dry mountains
on summer nights before the arrival of storms in
high valleys of Utah. There, the bolts once
thrown threaten to burn everything on the ground.
The same is happening in the darkened streets
of Beijing. The sightless cobra is lashing
out at children of the blue four-toed dragon,
attempting to weld sprung steel back into place.

Were this all just about a weld, the metal
would snap in response to the hot hit,
fuse hard to itself, cold. But it is not.

The yellow buzz would repeat again and again.
The iron would sing on its way to yielding into one.
The white-hot weld, molten and aglow for a second,
would make sure the blue fit gave no resistance.

The instrument's twisting reptile cord would coil
and dance, then stiffen and jump as the hot, hissing
charge rushed through the line seeking the cold steel.
It would want it liquid, if only for a moment,
to freeze one oriental metal to another. Fix it firmly.
This is more about shredding and ripping apart.
The students welded in their own unity at the arm
lie mangled by tank tracks, torn by the steel that
runs ahead of the tracer arcs wiggling from rifle barrels.

Bicycles twisted soft on the pavement.
Bodies twisted hard in the lanes and doorways.

Through the night, as I lie in my bed,
flashes of light enter the room,
as in a dream, bouncing capriciously
off the blue-hued wall. The storm of troop work
rages through the night outside the walls.
In the morning metal forms lie dead,
stiffened on the walk, stung over and over by
the unyielding vipers in Tian'anmen Square.

What were strips of soft humanity the night
before now together have become hard,
lifeless sticks burned and bruised by
the menace of Li Peng's strikes.

They are melded together in death,
with only a red priming to hide
their hideous wounds and stain their stretchers.

The Goddess of Democracy has been frightened away.