

Revisiting the Tiananmen Square Incident: A Distorted Image from Both Sides of the Lens

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Overview

On June 4th, 1989, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) employed military force to suppress a student-led demonstration that had been gathering strength in Beijing's Tiananmen Square since April 15th, 1989. As a result, the crackdown on the Tiananmen Square Movement resonated across the world as an egregious act, with countries and humanitarian groups openly castigating the CCP's actions. In the United States in particular, a wide range of sources started to appear shortly after the event, dedicated to exposing the details of the Tiananmen Square Incident.

However, these journalistic reports, books and eyewitness accounts are all tied together by a common thread of inconsistency, presenting conflicting accounts of the military crackdown in two main areas: the number of casualties and whether the People's Liberation Army (PLA) killed students *inside* the square (as opposed to only those blocking the army's path on the main roads leading to the square).

In searching for factual answers that are not plagued by clouds of doubt, the questions ultimately arise: Does the specific number and location of deaths change anything about the event or how we should feel about it?

Why is it important to deal with controversial details and why is it, if we indeed ought to concern ourselves with details, important that we deal with *these specific issues* of number and location?

I would posit that such an investigation is important for three distinct reasons. First, accepting a casualty number that is drastically smaller than the true number is immeasurably significant to those who actually perished on that June morning and to those who still mourn for them. Not being

“ DOES THE SPECIFIC NUMBER AND LOCATION OF DEATHS CHANGE ANYTHING ABOUT THE EVENT OR HOW WE SHOULD FEEL ABOUT IT? ”

counted in the history books is ultimately equivalent to being denied an existence, thus forever eradicating her from history. Second, underreporting the death toll gives the Tiananmen Square Incident an air of uncertainty, ingraining in the historical record a sense of ambiguity. As a result, the event seems vague, its shape incomplete, and its impact lacking full gravity because of the influences of misinformation. A definite number lifts the Tiananmen Square Incident out of the category of the merely alleged, making the event concrete and providing objective evidence on which the Chinese and American public can solidify their desires for reconciliation, rooted not in contested myth but in factual information. And third, an indefinite number risks over-reporting the death toll. Professor Robert Lee of American

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Civilization at Brown University articulates that searching for a more exact number is important “because the numbers will continue to grow depending on who we listen to. The ability to grasp the exact number may prevent this.” The impact of this argument draws on geopolitical implications. If in the long-term future the United States decides to take an aggressive containment stance toward China, then the US could garner domestic support by citing an exaggerated version of the Tiananmen Square Incident to demonize the CCP.

The inherent problems of over and underreporting the casualty figures invites the academic community to attempt to settle the controversies that spread across the sources. Yet, perhaps the difficult process of searching for a more exact number and location of casualties will lead us to conclude that looking for answers in a historical framework is inevitably subject to distortions. What we will be left with, then, is a lesson of infinitely more meaning and impact than had originally been expected — that the construction of history, no matter how thorough and seemingly objective, is never black and white.

Two Sources of Unresolved Controversy

In order to reconcile the conflicting reports regarding the Tiananmen Square Incident, one must first examine where the controversy exists. The first area of controversy is the number of casualties that resulted from the incident, with sources available presenting widely conflicting pictures of the event’s casualty figures. When looking at official Chinese government reports, official CCP State Council spokesman, Yuan Mu, put the number of

deaths at twenty-three students and three hundred soldiers.¹

However, this official government report is widely contested in many prominent sources, with some suggesting that the death toll was around one thousand. In Harry Harding’s book entitled, *A Fragile Relationship*, Harding discusses the political repercussions of the Tiananmen Square Incident on Sino-American relations, focusing less on the number but more on an objective evaluation of the political impacts of the event. Nevertheless, Harding reports that “Although the casualty figures are still uncertain, the best estimates are of perhaps a thousand dead and several thousand injured.”² Other sources are more exact in their estimates, putting the total figures at roughly three thousand. For example, Scott Simmie and Bob Nixon report in their book *Tiananmen Square*, that “when contacted by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation early Sunday morning, the Red Cross said that 2,600 people had been killed that night. An inconceivable 60,000 more were reported wounded.”³ Moreover, Liu Binyan, Ruan Ming, and Xu Gang write in *Tell the World: What Happened in China and Why*, a book whose authors were all dismissed from the Party in different fashions, reported that “As the sun rose on June 4, the morning clouds were red. . . More than 3,000 people were killed in Tiananmen Square and on the streets of Beijing.”⁴ All three authors have proclaimed that they are eager to see the disintegration of “the old social structure, the old political system, the old social relations, and the old ideology.”⁵ And lastly, Nan Lin writes in *The Struggle for Tiananmen* that “On June 7, *Dragon Daily*, a pro-China Hong

¹ Kwang Hwa Company, *The Peking Massacre* (Taipei: Kwang Hwa Company, 1989), 5.

² Harry Harding, *A Fragile Relationship* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institute, 1992), 223.

³ Scott Simmie and Bob Nixon, *Tiananmen Square* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), 194.

⁴ Liu Binyan, Ruan Ming, and Xu Gang, *Tell the World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 62.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Kong newspaper that had become sympathetic to the movement, also reported 4,000 deaths.”⁶

Further prominent sources expand upon the numbers, placing total casualty figures for June 4 to June 6 at more than a few thousand deaths. For example, *A Chronicle of the Chinese Democratic Uprising*, a report by a Hong Kong publishing house critical of the CCP, stated, “It is estimated that, among the people treated in the hospitals (June 4) of Beijing, the death toll came to over 2,600. . . . The death toll on June 5 was over 5,000 and 30,000 injured. On June 6, the death toll exceeded 7,000. These figures do not include those who disappeared.”⁷ Furthermore, Gordon Thomas in his book *Chaos Under Heaven: The Shocking Story of China’s Search for Democracy*, a book that draws from personal testimonies, states that “In the months after the massacre Amnesty International and other human rights groups estimate that 10,000 had died and perhaps twice that figure had been injured in the massacre in Beijing. The figures for the rest of China were put at 20,000 killed and around 40,000 injured.”⁸ Along similar lines, Yi Mu and Mark V. Thompson report in their book, *Crisis at Tiananmen*, a book that draws on testimonials from traumatized students, that “there were reports from students who claimed that at least 6,000 people were killed and 20,000 were wounded. Some put the death toll as high as 15,000. Some students also claimed that 1,000 to 2,000 students died in Tiananmen Square alone.”⁹

And lastly, in the book entitled *Culture and Politics in China: An Anatomy of Tiananmen Square*, edited by Peter Li, Steven

Mark, and Marjorie H. Li, an eyewitness statement by student demonstration leader Wu’er Kaixi offers an even more dramatic account of the figures. Kaixi, an influential and later exiled leader states, “I cannot say at this time exactly how many people were killed. But I can tell you that the number killed on Tiananmen Square must be at least a thousand. As to the number killed total during the bloody suppression, I would estimate it without exaggeration at about 10,000. This is a conservative estimate.”¹⁰

Upon examination, there exist wide discrepancies over the number of casualties that resulted from the event. Sources place figures anywhere between one thousand to ten thousand deaths. But perhaps of even more importance, the sources disagree overwhelmingly with the CCP’s official casualty report (twenty-three students and three hundred soldiers).

The second source of conflict is whether the PLA intentionally killed students inside Tiananmen Square or whether the deaths occurred solely on the streets leading into the Square. This is a major point of contention among prominent sources. Some sources claim that the students were allowed to peacefully exit the Square on the morning of June 4 (corroborating the CCP’s account) whereas others report that the PLA shot directly at the students on the Monument in the Square, not allowing some students to exit the Square. *Tiananmen Square*, by Scott Simmie and Bob Nixon, reports the government’s official account that at 4:30 AM on June 4, the government broadcasted an announcement on loudspeaker declaring that the army had agreed to allow the students

⁶ Nan Lin, *The Struggle for Tiananmen* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 118.

⁷ Ming Pao News, *June Four: A Chronicle of the Chinese Democratic Uprising* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1989), 149.

⁸ Gordon Thomas, *Chaos Under Heaven* (New York: Carol Group, 1991), 281.

⁹ Mark V. Thompson and Yi Mu, *Crisis at Tiananmen* (San Francisco: China Books and Periodicals Inc., 1989), 97.

¹⁰ Peter Li, Steven Mark, and Marjorie H. Li, *Culture and Politics in China* (New Brunswick: Transaction Inc., 1991), 35.

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to peacefully evacuate the Square. Upon hearing this, the government claims, “the students joined hands and started to leave the Square in an orderly manner. At about 5:00 AM troops vacated the wide corridor in the southeast part of the Square to allow the students to withdraw unhindered. A few students who refused to leave were forced to leave by policemen.”¹¹

This official government account is supported by many other prominent sources. For example, Peter Li, Stephen Mark, and Marjorie H. Li in *Culture and Politics in China*, a book that claims to offer an objective report of the events that unfolded on Tiananmen Square, also report that students were allowed to evacuate the Square peacefully.¹² Additionally, a number of eyewitness accounts take the side of the government’s official report, claiming that there was no direct confrontation between CCP soldiers and the students in the Square. For instance, in the book *Children of the Dragon* by the organization Human Rights in China, an eyewitness named Lao Gui, who was on the Monument the morning of June 4, stated, “In fact, there was no conflict between the student and the troops. It was a peaceful retreat, and the students were calm. Some have said that when the students left the Square they ran like crazy, and that some were even trampled to death. But this is only a rumor. Because many students crowded together on the monument, it was a little chaotic for a moment, but then order was restored.”¹³

Nan Lin’s *The Struggle for Tiananmen*, a book that focuses on “how the authorities engaged in the process — how they acted and

reacted to internal conflicts and how they reached critical decisions regarding the ‘turmoil’ and its termination,”¹⁴ also corroborates this account, reporting that “Negotiations between students and troops produced an agreement that the encamped students would be allowed to leave. At 4:30 AM, troops announced that they would enter the Square. At around 5:00 AM, students began evacuating the Square through a southeast path left opened by the troops. By 5:30 AM, tanks and soldiers retook the entire Square.”¹⁵ Additionally, Dingxin Zhao reports in *The Power of Tiananmen*, a book that focuses on the prevalence of rumors that were spread during the student movement against the CCP, that “students started to leave (the square), dragging along with them those who refused to go. . . Yet at the very rear there were still about a hundred or so people who refused to go further. Gao Xin, one of the four hunger strikers, happened to be there. According to Gao. . . when they shouted ‘Fascist!’ the soldiers rushed forward and started to shoot. They all ran to hide. Soldiers actually shot at the sky, but one student was still wounded.”¹⁶

But, perhaps the most influential report to corroborate the official government account is the *New York Times*. On June 13, 1989, the *New York Times*’ Beijing correspondent Nicholas Kristof, basing his argument on eyewitness accounts, stated, “armored vehicles did not surround the monument - they stayed at the north end of the square - and troops did not attack students clustered around the monument.”¹⁷ Kristof stresses in his reports that the PLA did not shoot at students in the Square and that reports which

¹¹ Simmie and Nixon, 187-188.

¹² Li, Mark, and Li, 18-19.

¹³ Human Rights in China, *Children of the Dragon* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1990), 174.

¹⁴ Lin, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁶ Zhao Dingxin, *The Power of Tiananmen* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 206-207.

¹⁷ Nicholas Kristof, *New York Times*, June 13, 1989.

indicate such shootings are exaggerations. Other sources such as Harry Harding's *A Fragile Relationship* and Gordon Thomas' *Chaos Under Heaven* do not even address the issue of army killings inside the Square; they simply assume that soldiers did not directly shoot at students in the Square. Most of the above sources maintain that the killings mostly took place as soldiers were advancing to the Square, blocked by worker and Chinese citizen blockades.

There are, however, sources that directly contradict the government's account, claiming that the PLA did indeed shoot students inside the Square. For example, Chai Ling, a proud and oftentimes power hungry leader of the student movement, reports in a secret eyewitness interview given on the Sunday after the massacre that armored personnel carriers drove in and began crushing the bamboo and canvas tents. Although the government claims that only bedding and clothing were destroyed by the tanks, Chai Ling claims that many students had stayed in their tents, harboring the belief that they would merely be led away by the army. "But they were still in their tents," she sobbed, "the tanks drove over their bodies and crushed them to meat."¹⁸ However, Chai Ling does agree with the government that a path was cleared for the students to leave the Square peacefully at the southeast corner of the Square.

Yet, while some eyewitness accounts and sources agree with the government's claim that the students exited the Monument from the southeast corner of the Square, other sources report something completely different. These sources disagree with the government's account to a greater extent than

Chai Ling does. In Timothy Brook's book entitled *Quelling the People*, purportedly written to offer an objective evaluation of the events of the Tiananmen Square Incident and whose general bias is only against the CCP government, Brook offers several eyewitness accounts which claim that the CCP did indeed kill students inside of the Square. Drawing from his interview of June 4 survivors, Timothy Brook writes, "Another (student) standing at the base of the monument recalls the moment the guns went off with disturbing clarity. 'Immediately the troops surrounding the Square began firing indiscriminately. Stray shots flew around the Square. A girl who was about three meters away from me suddenly went down with a bullet in her head.' . . . The telltale signs of repaired bullet holes I found four months later on the west and south sides of the platforms and balustrades around the base of the Monument warn that she may not have been the only casualty."¹⁹

Brook's use of eyewitness accounts contradicts the reports that there were no student deaths in the Square. Brook further comments on the use of tanks to crush students still in their tents (as reported by Chai Ling).²⁰ He writes "Many (students) had vowed to remain where they lay to the bitter end. . . A Beida student did photograph what appeared to be the corpse of a crushed demonstrator in a tent. He displayed the picture at Beida at 7:30 that morning. 'It was the most horrible photograph,' as someone at Beida who saw it told me later. 'It showed a student lying under a quilt in one of the tents on the Square. The picture was so clear. There was no doubt about it.'"²¹ Brook further reports, "One student source insists

¹⁸ Chai Ling, "I'm Chai Ling. I'm Still Alive," in Mark V. Thompson and Yi Mu, ed., *Crisis at Tiananmen* (San Francisco: China Books and Periodicals Inc., 1989), 265-269.

¹⁹ Timothy Brook, *Quelling the People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 146.

²⁰ However, as Chai Ling herself reported, many students had come out of the tents at around 9 PM the previous evening and had gathered around the monument. Therefore, even if there were students who stayed in the tents, the number would have been low.

²¹ Brook, 147.

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that some students from Qinghua University refused to leave the Monument and were shot. Another says that students at the tail end of the file coming out the Southeast were shot.”²²

But perhaps the most controversial eyewitness account to challenge the government’s side of the story was published just days after the incident in the Hong Kong newspaper called *Wenhui Pao Daily*. In the *Wenhui Pao Daily* article, someone who claimed to be a Qinghua University student that had experienced first-hand the events on June 4 reported that soldiers started to beat the students clustered around the monument on the morning of June 4. The eyewitness then recalls, “When the students from the third level had moved to the ground, the submachine guns started firing. Some soldiers shot from a kneeling position, and their bullets flew over our heads. Some shot from a lying position; their bullets hit students in the chest and head. We regrouped and tried to move back up to the higher platforms of the monument. The machine guns ceased firing, but the clubs and rods forced us back to the ground level. As soon as we were off the monument, the guns started firing again.”²³ This account has become the major controversial source for many other similar reports.

For instance, Liu Binyan, Ruan Ming, and Xu Gang write in their book entitled *Tell the World* “At 4:40 AM, just as the students were starting to retreat out of the square, a red signal flare ripped the night sky. Students found that they were surrounded by armed

soldiers wearing helmets. Some of them had already set up a line of more than a dozen machine guns, aimed at the students. Other soldiers rushed in among the students and beat them with electric cattle prods and rubber covered steel clubs. They tore their way up the base of the Monument to the People’s Heroes, and forced the students down, beating them until their heads were bleeding. As they reached the ground level, the machine guns opened fire.”²⁴

The Attempt to Uncover an Objective Truth

How then, does one resolve these inconsistencies? Many have tried to uncover the details of the Tiananmen Square Incident, but despite their efforts, the matter is still largely unsettled; a consistent statistic and version simply does not exist. With that, this paper will seek to uncover an objective version of the truth, while recognizing that such a task may be more complicated than it appears.

In order to trace the actual casualty figures, one must examine which sources are reliable and which are not. Although eyewitness accounts are plentiful, they are not suitable sources from which to draw a total casualty figure; no matter how dramatic and compelling an eyewitness account may be, it can only capture isolated events in pockets. It cannot account for the sum total that we are looking for. It is also obvious that adding up the total eyewitness accounts to come up with a total casualty figure is illogical because most witnesses did not give eyewitness accounts. And lastly, eyewitness

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²² Ibid., 148.

²³ Qinghua student, "What Happened at Tiananmen?" *Wenhui Pao Daily*, June 12, 1989.

²⁴ Liu, Ming, and Xu, 62.

accounts often contradict each other as we have seen above; some claim to have seen people die and others claim that they did not see people die. Although eyewitnesses such as Chai Ling and Wu'er Kaixi may venture guesses at the number of deaths that resulted from the Tiananmen Square Incident, their estimates are ultimately unreliable.

The most reliable method of investigation, then, is to go back to a relatively objective source: hospital records. Hospitals were giving out casualty figures to investigators on the morning of June 4 but were then quickly silenced by the CCP. Timothy Brook, author of *Quelling the People*, offers an objective and systematic examination of the figures given out by Beijing's different hospitals. In tracking the reports (some by doctors, some by students, and some by foreign journalists) taken at different times on June 4, Brook provides casualty statistics (albeit incomplete) from twelve civilian Beijing hospitals and one military hospital. The Beijing hospitals that he tracked down were Capital (40 dead), Chaoyang (not available), Children's (55 dead), Erlonglu (not available), Friendship (43 dead), Fuxing (59 dead), Number Three (95 dead), People's (4 dead), Posts and Telecommunications (28 dead), Railway General (85 dead), Second Artillery (4 dead), Xuanwu (50 dead), and an unnamed hospital (16 dead). What these figures add up to is that eleven Beijing hospitals received at least 478 dead on June 4. Brook notes that "The figure fits with what a Beijing doctor found when he contacted eleven hospitals Sunday morning; he calculated a death toll in those hospitals of over 500."²⁵

The next question then becomes, how many casualties ended up in hospitals other

than those listed in Brook's study? To help answer this question, eyewitness accounts may help. Eyewitnesses stressed that hospitals all over Beijing on Sunday "were full of wounded and dying people. Even Haidan hospital, fifteen kilometers from the Square, was full."²⁶ Various sources also report that the number of casualties was so high that hospitals had to turn people away. Brook reports that "A doctor at People's Hospital told Jasper Becker in the early hours of June 4 that over three hundred had come to his hospital that night but that 'most were so bad we sent them on elsewhere.' People's was able to handle only a third of those who showed up."²⁷ This leads one to believe that there were many more casualties that ended up in the hospitals but were not included in the eleven hospital reports.

Brook conscientiously accounts for this factor. He writes, "Not all of the 124 medical facilities listed in the 1989 city telephone directory received casualties, nor in the same numbers that those in Table 6-1 (table of eleven hospitals and death reports) did. But many did receive large numbers of dead and wounded. We can generate an estimate by using as a base figure the thirty-two hospitals in the city that ministered to the hunger strikers in May. Suppose these thirty-two handled casualties on Saturday night, and suppose that on average they handled them at the same rates as those for which we have reports/estimates. That would give figures of fourteen hundred dead and thirty-seven hundred wounded by dawn Sunday. Add to this base almost a hundred smaller facilities and clinics, as well as the many military hospitals in Beijing, and the totals could rise to twice that."²⁸

However, even this is not the extent of

²⁵ Brook, 161-162.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

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the numbers. Brook notes, "A corpse could be just as incriminating for his relatives. The family of a counter-revolutionary rebel faced political sanctions and hefty fines. As much as possible therefore, bodies were disposed of privately or taken out to the countryside for burial."²⁹ Therefore, using rudimentary but logical extrapolations can lead one to conclude that there were at least 3,000 deaths that resulted from the Tiananmen Square Incident (This figure is most likely an unknown number larger because it does not include those deaths that were covered up by families and those that were taken away off the street by the PLA before they could be counted in the hospitals). In the end, the true number seems to be somewhere far above the official figure of 300 dead and perhaps somewhere below the reports of tens of thousands dead.

The controversy over whether the PLA killed students inside of the Square is more difficult to resolve. The reason is that there are no objective sources like hospital records from which one can draw information. Instead, the controversy is rooted in conflicting eyewitness accounts. Different people in the same place at the same time give accounts that completely contradict each other. To take the side of one eyewitness's account is to deny the account of another eyewitness. The problem is that the consequence of being wrong on such an issue potentially denies that the deaths of innocent people.

Nevertheless, one student account seems to be especially reliable. In the documentary video entitled "The Gate of Heavenly Peace,"

directed by Richard Gordon and Carma Hinton, Taiwan pop star Hou Dejian gave an eyewitness account that corroborated the government's story. Hou, one of the hunger strikers who remained in the Square until the very end, claimed that he was one of the last people to leave the Square and that everyone had decided to leave relatively peacefully. Whereas other accounts claim that people in the north side of the monument refused to leave, Hou himself explicitly states that he went to the north side of the monument where the machine guns were supposedly lined up and dragged each person that was sitting in protest off the ground and pushed them to the southeast exit. In the documentary, Hou appears genuine, his demeanor sincere and

his expression moving. The traumatized Hou even states in the documentary, "if we start to exaggerate and falsify the facts, then we are no better than the government."³⁰ Hou's account is supported by a large number of foreign journalists who were in

Beijing at that time; these journalists also reported that there were no killings inside of the Square.

Conversely, the accounts that claim there was a massacre inside of the Square comes from sources that draw information from the one eyewitness account published in the Hong Kong Wenhui Pao Daily newspaper. To take a firm stance on an issue such as this one is problematic because there is no way to corroborate what one thinks is the truth. Whereas casualty figures rely on objective sources like hospitals to report accurate information, the question of a massacre inside

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²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Hou Dejian, "Blame Me if You Want!" in Richard Gordon, dir., *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, videocassette (Long Bow Group, 1995).

of the Square is subject to conflicting eyewitness reports. In the end, regardless of how compelling Hou's account is or how authoritative *New York Times* correspondent Kristof seems, one is simply left to believe for herself the side that is most instinctively compelling.

The Barriers to a Transparent Understanding

Although efforts thus far have focused on revealing a more exact number and location of deaths, it seems as if there is still no way to stand firm in our findings without reservations. When viewed through a pure veil, it seems almost absurd that the event that has had the most lasting negative impact on China's image over the past decade is still such an impenetrable mystery. The question, then, ultimately becomes, "Why is it so difficult to settle on an accepted version of what happened on June 4, 1989?" The answer, it would seem, lies in the actions taken, both intentionally and unintentionally, by both the CCP and the student eyewitnesses to distort and skew the facts of the event.

A large number of sources agree that during the Chinese army's crackdown on the Square, CCP soldiers shot at ambulances trying to save the wounded. In the book, *Children of the Dragon*, by the organization Human Rights in China, a Capital Steel Mill worker recalls, "A makeshift ambulance tried to enter the square to take the wounded away, but it was stopped by several rounds of gunshots that completely destroyed its windshield. A real ambulance was also stopped. . . Off and on, the soldiers continued to shoot at the wounded."³¹ Also, an eyewitness account by American journalist

Margaret Herbst in Scott Simmie's and Bob Nixon's book, *Tiananmen Square*, reports, "I was just numb. Twenty people were lying in this corridor. I talked to ambulance drivers, and they said one of those shot in the head was a colleague who had gone to pick up the injured. Eight people were in the morgue at four thirty, and a number of them were pedicab drivers who had been shot while trying to bring wounded back."³²

Contributing to the unknown number of uncounted people, the CCP did not permit any ambulances, or people for that matter, to enter the Square on the morning of June 4, preventing not only the discovery of an accurate casualty figure but also any possibility of discovering what the soldiers had done to the students inside of the Square. Brook reports, "Two ambulances approached almost immediately but were prevented from fetching bodies. The soldiers ambushed one and set it on fire at 10:20 AM. Over the next half hour, two men who tried to drag the wounded to safety were gunned down."³³ Furthermore, Chai Ling reports in her secret eyewitness statement, "Later we learned that troops collected the bodies that had fallen to the ground while they had forced their way forward. The bodies, some still alive, were dumped onto buses or tricycles, leaving no chance for the injured people to survive."³⁴

Efforts to collect bodies in hospitals before they could be counted continued throughout the days following the crackdown. Brook continues to report, "Some corpses left in the open were collected and removed by truck. On Sunday at 11:20 AM, a foreign diplomat watched troops in the Jianguomen area load bodies onto trucks; other soldiers kept the crowd away from the

³¹ Human Rights in China, 149.

³² Simmie and Nixon, 188-189.

³³ Brook, 164-165.

³⁴ Thompson and Yi, 269.

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bodies to prevent them from being observed. Also on Sunday morning, at least one truck with Capital Iron and Steel markings carrying men in yellow hard hats was sighted on the western side of the 3rd Ring Road removing human remains and taking them westward. Sunday and Monday nights, the work of removing new corpses from public places was done by unmarked white morgue trucks that prowled the streets after dark. These trucks did not deliver their contents to civilian hospitals.”³⁵

Furthermore, various eyewitness reports including Chai Ling’s and the Qinghua student’s (published in *Wenhui Pao Daily*) allude to the burning of bodies in the Square. Brook also reports, “At 5:58 AM, almost as soon as the last students were leaving Tiananmen, a column of smoke began to rise from the Square. Another fire started at 6:40. A Beida student watching the Square from a building to the south saw the flames rise and fall as new debris was tossed on. The smoke was thick and black, suggesting that gasoline was used to soak whatever was being burned. It thickened three times between 6:45 and 7:30 AM, for about five minutes each time.”³⁶

Rumors of burnings were circulated among a wide range of sources. Brook notes that a Qinghua student perched in a tree at the south end of the Square stated that at about 6:45AM, he could see soldiers throwing plastic body bags together and covering them with a tarpaulin. He did not, however, say that they were then burned. Brook further reports that a Beida student leaflet reported that the “Army used bulldozers to shovel bodies into piles and burn them.”³⁷

However, there is controversy over whether this act of cremation occurred to the

degree that these sources suggest. Brook notes, “Because the number of people who died on the Square was limited — and many of them were removed by ambulance — the image of corpses bulldozed and burned is far-fetched. Most of the evidence of immediate cremation is circumstantial; plus there are practical reasons that incineration did not occur. A human body does not burn quickly. Incinerating a body takes several hours at high heat. . . Strong burn marks on the concrete paving stones on the Square behind the Martyrs’ Monument could also have been made as a result of burning pulped bodies. Other burn marks on the Square, however, suggest the lower heat needed to burn tents and other flammable objects, not bodies.”³⁸ Thus we are left with a sense of ambiguity. But given the logistical aspects, it seems that if the army did burn corpses, then the number would have been comparatively low.

Further controversy obfuscates one’s ability to grasp the facts. Brook states, “from two separate sources I have heard that students were executed inside the Workers’ Culture Palace. . . From several firsthand sources, we know that the Culture Palace served as a temporary detention center for people rounded up Sunday morning. . . It has been alleged that PLA soldiers not only tortured but executed by rifle butt close to two thousand people on Sunday morning. The story is attributed to the grandson of a prominent Army general, who was among the students taken into the Culture Palace but who was spared when police supervisors learned of his identity. A completely different source tells the same story, but says that the soldiers used knives to execute the detainees.”³⁹ This presents a troublesome

³⁵ Brook, 165.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 165-166.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.



account. It is difficult to imagine that soldiers could have sustained systematic executions of two thousand people by hand. Once again, CCP efforts to carry out actions behind a black veil give way to controversies that cannot be settled with certainty.

In addition to harboring these unclear allegations, the CCP took conscious and systematic actions to keep the facts from surfacing in three ways. First, the government used its Public Security Bureau to infiltrate institutions that had the ability to give out information about the Tiananmen Square Incident. Yi Mu and Mark V. Thompson write in *Crisis at Tiananmen* that “On June 4, shortly after the shooting began, the official Radio Beijing reported that ‘thousands of people’ were murdered, ‘including our colleagues at Radio Beijing.’ However, the announcer who broadcast the report was quickly removed from his anchor post and substituted by another individual who repeated the government’s account.”⁴⁰

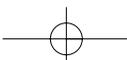
“ THE CCP TOOK CONSCIOUS AND SYSTEMATIC ACTIONS TO KEEP THE FACTS FROM SURFACING IN THREE WAYS. ”

Scott Simmie and Bob Nixon write in *Tiananmen Square* that “A few hospitals which had earlier released figures were saying nothing. There were reports that some facilities had been infiltrated by agents of the Public Security Bureau. Unknown men wearing white lab coats were said to be wandering the halls of several hospitals, looking carefully — but not examining — student victims.”⁴¹ Brook writes that “Many people tramped around to the hospitals Sunday morning not to find missing relatives

but to count the casualties. People simply wanted to know, and medical staff were sometimes willing to share what they knew, often against the objections of hospital authorities and the police. A history student from Beida was apprehended by police and detained for about ten days for collecting casualty statistics from hospitals.”⁴² Brook later notes, “There was, finally, one other way to obscure the scale of human damage after it was over. That was to get rid of any sort of paper trail. This was done. Radiologists in one Beijing hospital were told to destroy all X rays they had taken that night of bullet wounds. There would be no evidence left behind.”⁴³

Second, efforts were made after the crackdown to silence those in charge or in support of the movement. The Kwang Hua Publishing Company’s book entitled *The Peking Massacre* states, “a frightening wave of arrests has already begun, ordered by Chinese Communist premier Li Peng. Mass media reports indicate that Li has ordered the arrest of 20,000 people. The atmosphere of a ‘great clean-up’ and a ‘great purge’ accordingly has plunged the people of Peking into a state of insecurity and terror.”⁴⁴ Harry Harding’s *A Fragile Relationship* also reports that, “The demonstrations in Tiananmen Square were officially depicted as a counterrevolutionary riot that resulted from an antigovernment conspiracy. Police combed the country for leaders of the protests, many of whom were seeking to flee

⁴⁰ Thompson and Yi, 97.
⁴¹ Simmie and Nixon, 194.
⁴² Brook, 151.
⁴³ Ibid., 167.
⁴⁴ Kwang Hua Co., 5-6.



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abroad. By October, at least 12, and perhaps as many as 100, demonstrators had been executed.”⁴⁵

The arbitrary nature of these arrests was epitomized in Beijing’s decision to arrest Xiao Bin, a forty two year old factory official; Xiao Bin, was sentenced to a ten-year prison term for “rumor mongering.” He had been interviewed on ABC news and had spontaneously told ABC that soldiers had killed thousands in the June 4 crackdown and that students had been run down by tanks. This type of persecution of anyone who spread a story inconsistent with the government’s account effectively silenced those whose views conflicted with the government’s. In an interview conducted on April 10th, 2003, with Ma Jia, Professor of East Asian Studies at Brown University, Ma states (translated from Mandarin to English by author), “During that time, no one would publicly say, ‘Oh yes, I don’t believe the government’s account. I think 1,000 died, not 300.’ The only time people would talk about their personal feelings about the incident would be in private. But even then people avoided talking about it for fear of what might happen to them.” Third and finally, the government implemented strict regulations to have all people “study” the nature of the Tiananmen Square movement in a manner consistent with the government’s view. In Liu Binyan’s book entitled *Tell the World*, Liu writes that “All college students and graduates were forced to ‘study’ Deng’s speech and other such documents. All those who work in government institutions and social organizations have to spend two hours each day ‘studying’ such documents, and furthermore, have to speak about what ways they have enhanced their understanding of

this ‘counterrevolutionary rebellion’ and corrected their mistaken conceptions.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, in an April 3, 2003 Interview with Brown University Political Science Professor Su Fubing, Su recalls that “students were all required to write written statements of their involvement in the movement. These reports were then all reviewed and ‘suspicious’ reports were further investigated. We all underwent reeducation in Communist and Marxist lessons and lessons on the counterrevolutionaries.” It would seem, then, that constant surveillance and punishment by the government cast a shadow of suspicion over anyone whose story conflicted with that of the government, dissuading a large number of people from coming forward with more facts and making it even more difficult to resolve the controversial areas of the Tiananmen Square Incident.

The Motives for Distortion from Both Sides of the Lens

Why did the CCP, a Party that has made such a concerted effort in becoming a sophisticated and respected regional power, feel it was necessary to hide the facts so systematically and punish/silence the demonstrators so severely? Yi Mu and Mark Thompson write in *Crisis at Tiananmen*, “As Mao Zedong explicitly put it, the Party had to have two ‘barrels’ in its hand — namely the barrel of the gun and that of the pen — if it were to establish and consolidate its political powers.”⁴⁷ In the context of political face, historical experience and the confidence that the Party could effectively contain public opinion as it had done since the 1950s, the CCP chose to squash and cover up the movement for three reasons.

First, partial CCP power remained in the

⁴⁵ Harding, 224.

⁴⁶ Liu, Ming, and Gang, 146.

⁴⁷ Thompson and Yi, 111.

hands of the first-generation revolutionaries. These old revolutionaries were those who were present during the glory stories of the CCP's triumph over the Nationalist Party during the famous Long March in 1933-1934. These were veterans who believed that they were the true founders and revolutionaries of the Communist party in China and believed themselves to be the true revolutionaries. Although Deng Xiaoping declared in 1982 that it was time for the veteran revolutionaries to retire from the front line of power and give authority to the second line, ceremonial and advisory posts in the Party and government were nonetheless created for the retiring veterans.⁴⁸ Because the first generation revolutionaries still held power and influence within the Party, their attitudes toward the Tiananmen Square protests had a big impact on the crackdown that ensued afterwards.

Nan Lin writes in *The Struggle for Tiananmen*, "The veterans saw their (protestors) demands as direct challenges to individual leaders and the foundations of leadership and authority. They concluded that these marches and demonstrations were intended to eventually to overthrow the regime and the political system. . . Once Deng became alarmed, the old veterans openly reinforced Deng in his judgment and determination. They feared that the ideology and the system they helped establish were now being challenged and on the verge of being overthrown. Seeing a genuine threat, they were not about to let the system and state they helped create vanish."⁴⁹ Thus, the efforts to suppress the ideas and legitimacy of the Tiananmen Square movement after the crackdown were driven largely by the first generation revolutionaries' fears that the way

of life they helped build was being torn down.

Second, the revolutionary veterans' own experiences with protests also painted the Tiananmen Movement as a deadly force that needed to be crushed. They arrested and silenced eyewitnesses because the CCP leaders understood the implications of revolutionary movements. Nan Lin continues to write, "Many of these veterans were students during the 1920s through the 1940s when they were underground Communists agitating against the Nationalist government. They were proud of the fact that their agitation and leadership in student marches and demonstrations significantly contributed to the eventual downfall of the Nationalist government and the coming to power of the Communist Party."⁵⁰ In the end, past experiences compelled the CCP to suppress the facts and demonize a threatening challenging party.

Third and finally, the new leaders, or second-generation leaders, played a significant role in the silencing of the Tiananmen Movement ideas and leaders as well. Not only did these leaders share the veteran revolutionaries' perception that the student movement threatened the stability of the Party, but they also lived through the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s and equated the Tiananmen Movement to it. In an interview with Brown University visiting lecturer Huang Zhao Yu on March 20th, 2003, Huang commented on the state of social conditions during the movement. Huang, an intellectual in China who supports the actions of the CCP in its decision to use force to clear the Square recalls (translated from Mandarin to English by author) that "the situation was out of control. People were

⁴⁸ Such veterans, according to Nan Lin in *The Struggle for Tiananmen*, were Chen Yu, Wang Zheng, Peng Zheng, Li Xiannian, and Bo Yibo.

⁴⁹ Lin, 135-136.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 139.

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noisy and out of hand. It looked like it was impossible to solve. People were riding motorcycles through the crowds cheering. There were two groups of people: the rational and the crazy. Those who were crazy greatly outnumbered those who were rational. Outside of the Square people were robbing stores. Street vendors were taking advantage of the situation by raising their prices very high. The rational people were becoming greatly influenced by the crazy emotional people. Taxis were not charging people anymore to show their support for the movement. All transportation shut down. People could not get to work. People were concerned about international affairs (referring to Gorbachev's visit)."

The link between Huang's views and that of the leaders of the CCP is explained by his peers. In an interview with Su Fubing on April 3, 2003, Su states, "Huang's comments are shaped by his position in China. Currently, he is working for the Modern/Contemporary International Relations Research Institute in Beijing, China. This is a think tank for the Communist Party and State Council. One of the most secretive organizations in the Chinese system, the Research Institute goes through serious security checks. Political correctness is definitely an issue among its workers." Therefore, one can take Huang's views as more or less the views of the CCP towards the movement. Thus, Huang's description of the social turmoil in Beijing indicates how the Tiananmen Square movement likely triggered flashbacks of the Cultural Revolution in the minds of the second-generation leaders who experienced first hand the horrors of the 1970s chaos.

However, while the CCP had powerful motives to muddle the facts after the crackdown, it should be noted that part of the distortion of facts is due to the political motives of the student protestors and nature

of the student movement. There are three factors that contribute to the exaggeration of both the casualty figures and the brutality of the PLA under the CCP. The first factor is a rational exaggeration of the facts. It is conceivable that, in the face of traumatizing events, victims of abuse would want to fully convey the immorality of the acts to third parties through dramatization or exaggeration. Such rational exaggeration would also help build support for the movement and its ideals by emphasizing the brutality of the party that opposes said ideals. These exaggerations spread through a specific avenue of communication: rumors.

In the interview with Su Fubing, Su states, "Inherently, it was difficult to determine the truth during the movement. While in Tianjin, I heard news of the protest movement on loudspeakers. We didn't know where the news was coming from but it was always biased toward the movement. This is understandable because people needed to amplify the news as well as pass it on. This is an inherent dynamic to mass organization because there is a lack of organization. I do not know any one that was killed nor do my friends know anyone that was killed. Rumors were the most powerful weapon for the movement. There were no checks on the information getting through. It was chaotic news." Su's stance on rumors as a powerful mode of communication is supported by Dingxin Zhao in his book *The Power of Tiananmen*. Zhao argues, "Now that the public was concerned about and sympathetic to the movement and dissatisfied with the news in the official media, the public turned to other communication channels. Much of the news in these channels turned out to be unfounded rumors and deliberate fabrications. Yet because the public was unhappy about the situation and distrustful of the government, rumors that could create an image of an unreasonable government tended to be

believed and passed on regardless of their truth value.”⁵¹ Zhao continues, “Active participants in a social movement usually believe what they are fighting for. Therefore, the fabrication of rumors may not be considered as immoral in itself so long as the participants believe that this will increase the chances of obtaining the collective goods for which they are fighting.”⁵²

The second factor is a subconscious or unintentional distortion of the figures and location of deaths. This can be attributed to genuine uncertainty on the part of eyewitnesses. When eyewitnesses were asked to estimate how many deaths resulted from the crackdown, they were being given an utterly impossible task. Even if an eyewitness sees first hand a brutal act carried out by the PLA, what he/she is seeing is only an isolated event. She cannot possibly put together a number that accounts for the entire incident. But, having just witnessed a traumatizing event, she would be more likely, due to the dramatic nature of his or her experience, to overestimate rather than underestimate. These genuine estimations are subsequently passed on as first hand sources for other second hand sources to cite. Dingxin Zhao reports that many exaggerated rumors were floating around immediately after the crackdown. Such rumors included, “Over twenty thousand civilians died in the massacre.”⁵³ Thus, the distortion of the facts may also be partially attributed to unintentional exaggerations arising from genuine uncertainty.

And third, a distortion of the event’s nuances may be due to the biases that Western

sources have toward the Tiananmen Square Incident. Specifically, certain scholarly sources seem to avoid giving full weight to the CCP’s limited options in dealing with the student movement, ultimately skewing the tone and nuances of the event against the CCP. While the limited options in no way absolve the CCP of culpability, they do reveal an interesting dynamic which puts into perspective the manner in which the CCP acted, a perspective consistently overlooked in a large number of the sources.

First, the CCP was not equipped to deal with protest demonstrations; China had a police force and a military, but neither was trained to deal with displacing large masses of people out of a location the masses were

not willing to leave. The police were not trained to deal with this type of protest movement so it was unlikely for them to be called in. The People’s Liberation Army was trained only to use guns and perhaps tear gas, and was not equipped with the

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tools necessary to deal with protests (e.g. water canons, rubber bullets, etc.). During the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, the United States depended largely on such tools as water canons to force large groups to disperse from a location, but China did not have this type of weaponry or training during the months of the Tiananmen Square Incident. The CCP viewed its choices as binary in terms of having the army either use real guns and force their way into the Square or refrain from using guns and remain on the periphery, unable to enter the city.

Second, the CCP leadership and PLA were caught by surprise when the people

⁵¹ Zhao, 326.

⁵² Ibid., 328.

⁵³ Ibid., 319.

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blocking the entryways into the Square began attacking the PLA on the days before and after June 4. Original government statements claim that the majority of deaths that resulted from the incident were PLA soldiers at the hands of violent demonstrators. The fact that even some soldiers died introduces an interesting dynamic. Traditionally, the PLA was thought of as the People's Army, an army that performed civil service acts such as the building of dams and providing flood disaster relief. The fact that the demonstrators began to attack the soldiers must have come as a very big shock to the army. According to Professor Robert Lee, not even during the Cultural Revolution was the PLA viewed with such disdain as they were during the Tiananmen Square Incident. This new condition forced the CCP to alter its decisions in dealing with the movement, causing them to be more aggressive in light of the unexpected conflict. This argument is highlighted by the fact that the CCP probably had no specific plan to deal with massive resistance. Professor Robert Lee suggests that the CCP may have originally planned to use the army merely as a political presence to symbolically compel the students to leave the Square. It thought that the mere presence of the PLA would be enough because of the PLA's reputation as keepers of the peace. When the student demonstrators began to act out against the PLA, this most likely had a very big impact on the army commanders. The incorrect assumptions that the PLA would be met peacefully by the demonstrators forced the PLA to react spontaneously, resulting in a more aggressive approach than what was originally intended.

Although these conditions in no way excuse the CCP of its actions, they help to offer both sides of the story. These conditions,

however, are rarely the focal points in major sources covering the Tiananmen Square Incident. Whereas the CCP blurred the truth by consciously hiding the facts, eyewitnesses and various scholarly sources critical of the CCP employ a less extreme form of bias, exaggerating the details and skirting away from topics which may very well draw unexpected empathy towards or reluctant understanding of the CCP's actions.

Conclusion: Challenging a Distorted Picture

In light of the inconsistencies and distortions on both sides, it seems as if the CCP is winning the "war on numbers and location" in Mainland China. Most Chinese generally believe that the CCP's official figures and accounts are more truthful than the Western sources that contradict the CCP's account. This was not always the case. Immediately after the crackdown, Chinese students believed that the death tolls were in the thousands.⁵⁴ Only after the movement's defeat and the CCP's crackdown on dissenters did the views change. In the interviews conducted with Brown University professors Su Fubing and Huang Zhao Yu (from Mainland China), both remarked separately that they did not think the death toll was any higher than 300 people. Su Fubing stated that he believed most soldiers simply fired into the sky. Huang Zhao Yu stated that because he did not personally see anyone die, and because he did not see soldiers armed, he believed the government's figures. Professor Ma Jia and Lingzhen Wang of the East Asian Studies Department both declined to venture a guess at the numbers because they said they simply did not know. But, all professors seemed to express doubt in their earlier speculations as young adults and

⁵⁴ Brook, 168-169.

felt that their initial guesses immediately after the event were wishful thinking. They say that they, having all participated in the event, were a bit foolish and did not realize the enormity of their actions.

Brook quotes a Chinese student in Beijing as stating, “you have to believe the government’s statistic. The Chinese government never lies when it states facts. What it tries to do is hide the facts. But when it says that something happened, then it happened. You have to believe it’ . . . People recognize that they do not have the evidence to verify the death count they feel is right. Private estimates become subject more and more to doubt. This doubt, combined with the deep-seated conviction among Chinese that the government never lies about facts but only misrepresents them, has induced many to err on the side of caution and accept hundreds over thousands. Even the international press has bowed to the shift in the decimal point: the dead are conventionally referred to now as numbering in the hundreds, not the thousands.”⁵⁵

In the past year, through a student organization at Stanford University called the Forum for American/Chinese Exchange at Stanford, I have become close friends with a small group of intelligent Chinese students from Universities in Beijing and Shanghai. On one occasion, my conversation with one such friend regarding the question of US foreign policy towards Taiwan turned to the subject of the Tiananmen Square Incident. The more I spoke about what I thought I knew (at the time), the more my friend became both immensely confused but uncontrollably anxious to hear more. “In

China,” he said, “we are not told anything about this, except that we should not talk about it. I don’t learn about it in the schools. Even my parents and grandparents. . . they experienced it. . . even they will not talk to anyone about it.” In ignorantly assuming that any report which contradicted that of the CCP’s had a good chance of being accurate, I confidently “taught” my friend all the things he did not know because of CCP efforts to hide the facts. However, as I look back now on the days when we sat in the Stanford Oval, trying to reconcile our conflicting versions of events, I have come to the realization that what I myself claimed to know against the backdrop of supposed legitimate sources was as subject to historical distortion as that which my Chinese friend claimed to know against the backdrop of suppressed information.

In the end, we, as scholars in search of truth, must internalize the lesson that the construction of history will always be skewed by vested players. When formulating an image of a country such as China, one must realize that its history is never black and white. What ends up in interviews, books and eyewitness accounts is often subject to acts of distortion from both sides, acts that ultimately bias the interpretation of historical events in the eyes of wholly different people from vastly different parts of the world. Moving forward, therefore, requires that each of us recognize the distortions and where they exist, that each of us proceed to study, internalize and convey with the understanding that the objective truth we seek may very well be the one that is hidden layers beneath what is readily apparent.

⁵⁵ Brook, 169.