

# China déjà vu all over again

For those of a certain age, the ongoing protests in Hong Kong bring back unpleasant memories of June 4, 1989.

The Tiananmen Square Massacre, as it is referred to in the United States, also started with peaceful protests. In the end, though, tanks and armed Chinese military units ended up killing between 600 and 3,000 protesters in and around the world's largest public square. And as the Chinese government has consistently censored news of that bloodbath, few Chinese citizens know what transpired then in their own capital.

Were all the soldiers armed? Were any of the protesters armed? Did the military fire on unarmed countrymen? Did "peaceful" protestors attack unarmed soldiers? Did most of the fighting indeed occur outside of Tiananmen Square? What *really* happened June 4?

Today's university students in China often ask these and other questions of Americans visiting Beijing – questions they cannot ask even of their own parents, many of whom were students then, and some even had been in the square on June 4.

That no one can even say precisely how many people were killed is testament to the major difference between 25 years ago and today. That difference is technology.

Students in and around Tiananmen Square in 1989 sent hundreds of faxes around the world, chronicling the horrors taking place around them. American editors during the lead-up to and the aftermath of the massacre were daily receiving dozens of faxes from the students, who blanketed U.S. media organizations with these communications, the only way they could let the world know of the horrors.

It quickly became standard operating procedure for a variety of U.S. editors to read these emails and weave the information

into the often limited accounts of what their own correspondents were observing in the square. Editors then routinely destroyed the faxes to prevent them from ever falling into the hands of Chinese authorities who would certainly have undoubtedly severely punished any students reporting such embarrassing information about their own nation.

Today, though, Hong Kong pro-democracy protestors are documenting first-hand on their smart phones what I taking place. These 21<sup>st</sup> century new-tech student “journalists” are not saddled with an earlier era’s news cycles and land-line telephone transmissions. Rather, the news is being instantly transmitted – both massively and, usually, anonymously – thereby safeguarding those doing the smart-phone reporting

At this writing it is unclear whether or not either the Chinese or Hong Kong government will forcefully retaliate, thus attempting to project the face-saving illusion of restored harmony. But if the army once again enters the scene, a world-wide population – one that this time includes China – will have been watching virtually first hand. One can only hope that by casting such a first-hand floodlight on the Hong Kong events, the presence of today’s new-media technology will help keep the troops and tanks at bay, thus preventing yet another bloodletting on Chinese soil.

After all, the only thing more embarrassing than having such protests is the knowledge that everyone in your own country knows – and now will forever remember – what is happening.

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