

June 4, 1989

BEIJING – Dozens of Chinese college students. Children.

They sought me out with their faxes in May and June, 1989, to tell me what was happening in the world's largest public square. They knew of the Christian Science Monitor's unbiased international reporting. They somehow knew the identity of the Monitor's senior international news editor responsible for directing its Asia coverage from the newspaper's Boston headquarters. That was me.

At that time I had a Chinese fiancé, was taking Mandarin-language coursework at Harvard University, having regular meetings at Boston's Chinese Consulate, and having daily conversations with America's leading Sinologists.

The Tiananmen Square students knew if China's Communist Party authorities learned of their faxes and discovered their identities, they and their faxes would be forever "disappeared." I knew that too; the personal life-and-death bravery their faxes to me displayed showed how important it was to them that the Monitor, and hence the world, know of their story. It was a story of how their government was trying to silence their pro-democracy requests.

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Their faxes told of what was happening in and around the world's largest square, Tiananmen Square, a one-square-mile public open space in a nation anything but public and open. Early faxes told of thousands of young people increasingly descending on the square. Later faxes described the rifles-bearing soldiers, mostly young rural boys, coming to the square. And then there was the shooting. And the tanks. And the massacre of the nation's university children by its soldier children. By comparison, it made the 1970s Kent State University killings of four students by America's

young National Guardsmen look like kids' play.

Knowing how personally dangerous it was for the Tiananmen protesters to send me faxes, and knowing what would happen to the students were their faxes to come to light, I memorized their faxes' content before burning them. Literally. Then I made sure what they had told me became fodder for the Monitor's reporting of the atrocities in and around the square.

I did more editing and directing than usual of the Tiananmen Square story as the Monitor's husband-and-wife Beijing correspondents had left the city by June 4 so the wife might have her baby in the less-smog-polluted U.S. and the husband might be at her side. Thus the students' faxes helped me provide necessary facts and details for copy turned in by the paper's relatively inexperienced replacement in Beijing.

But as their faxes contained phone numbers, I sometimes sent return faxes asking for details before destroying their original correspondence. And I asked for numbers of protesters killed. The estimates faxed back always said "400 to 3,000" or "600 to 3,000" or "800 to 3,000." While the first numbers varied, the last figure, 3,000, was a constant in all faxes. The Monitor dutifully reported those estimates, but it was not until some years later, when I was working in Beijing, that I learned of the meaning of the number 3,000 in Mandarin. It's a metaphor similar to the figure seven in the Bible – representing a large, if not infinite number. I wish I had known that when directing the newspaper's Tiananmen coverage and editing the copy from China. By the way, 10,000 is the current estimate of children slaughtered in the square.

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Tiananmen still roils and depresses me 30 years later. And I wonder why the U.S. media have not made more of this anniversary, as the events of 1989 provided the most

newsworthy event from the Middle Kingdom since Mao's arrival in 1948. And I wonder why China's leaders today have removed all evidence the 1989 massacre ever happened. And I wonder what these leaders so fear that they have for months been photographing and monitoring and hacking anyone even alluding to the events of June 4. And I wonder if the wounds of this horrible anniversary will ever heal until the government here finally acknowledges the past, helps its people learn from its true history, and moves forward.



Photo by Peter Griffin

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And I especially wonder what happened to the Tiananmen students who risked their lives to fax me so the Monitor might tell the world what was happening. I'm haunted by my fax children.

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