



TIANANMEN DIARY

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM STOFFER

Jim Stoffer, a nationally acclaimed freelance photographer from Astoria, visited Beijing and Shanghai, China, in May 1989 to photograph the mass demonstrations of the Democracy Movement. The following are excerpts from a diary he kept while there.

May 14, 1989, Beijing, China

Tiananmen Square: a hundred thousand students assembled, flags, banners, megaphones, and lots of hot sunshine. Here and there police and army members, in their familiar green uniforms keeping their thoughts cool, and their hands to themselves.

Somehow I can't escape it — I'm more than an observer. My fleet of Leicas and a hundred rolls of film in my backpack reminds me that I'm here to see and feel — talk and photograph.

I was there twenty years ago — somehow it's all interconnected. The United States was promulgating its war in Viet Nam, just 1800 kms to the south of Tiananmen Square. The massive moratorium marches held in American cities to protest our own government's pathological ambitions. I was there protesting on the streets, images fresh in my mind of burning napalm dripping off screaming, burning children. I was there face-to-face with police who didn't always keep their cool — billy clubs drawn and plexiglass shields in place to protect their gleaming white helmets.

Today, the third day of the hunger strike, my Leicas started to do their thing. My mind kept returning to thoughts of where the P. R. C. (People's Republic of China) has come from and where it is headed. The late Mao Ze Dong lying in glass just a hundred meters away on the south end of Tiananmen Square in his all white mausoleum. Thoughts of what China has done since his death to become part of the world, letting us in and sending its people abroad. Putting aside its xenophobic tradition to let the future in. And now Tiananmen, the huge square which Mao created to give communism a place to "join with the people" was now being taken over by students asking their government for

more freedom of speech and press and the other inherent freedoms a democracy offers. Freedom.

Here I was with my cameras, proud to see and be a part of this heartfelt call for freedom. I was here to create proof that a wonderful moment was alive.

May 16, 1989, Beijing, China

Today I moved from the Nan Hua Hotel, several kilometers south of Tiananmen Square, up to the Beijing Hotel, which is located very near the Square. It took me several tries to find a taxi willing to make the trip past Tiananmen Square. The price was also double what it had been just two days ago for the same ride. But as we got close to the Square my taxi became bogged down in the crush of protestors. After several minutes with no forward progress, my driver turned and smiled, which I knew meant he'd taken me as far as he could — we were stuck. It could take all day and we still wouldn't get through. I decided to walk, much to my driver's relief.

This is the fourth day of the hunger strike. Each day the Square has become more and more crowded as demonstrators come to support the striking students.

After abandoning my taxi the two kilometer walk to the Beijing Hotel was slow. Wave after wave of protest groups worked their way toward Tiananmen Square as I walked against them. But getting to the new hotel proved to be well worth the trouble. My room faced Tiananmen Square and Chang'an Avenue, the main street on the north end of the Square. The seventeenth floor room was complete with a balcony, giving a vantage point from which to observe all of the activities.

Clapping and chanting litanies for freedom, the protestor's voices echoed from one end of the Square to the other. All against the background wail of ambulance sirens.

Traffic is at a near standstill in front of the hotel. The demonstrators have fanned out to

include several important retail streets. With smaller groups of protestors marching or taking up positions to deliver speeches, collect money or distribute underground newspapers. Often to the applause of onlookers who form lines to watch. All of this has the sprawling Beijing Hotel cut off from most normal traffic. Although some taxis are venturing out, most people are opting to walk or stay put and watch from their balconies.

Along Chang'an Avenue brightly colored banners have been hung out for the grand motorcade honoring Mikhail Gorbachev and welcoming him to the city. This is the first visit a Soviet premier has paid to the P. R. C. in thirty years. Gorbachev was to make a speech to the Chinese people last night from the steps of the Great Hall of The People. But after much speculation and rumoring we found out that the talk had been relocated to the airport, thirty kilometers from the Square.

The center-piece of the current phase of demonstrations are three thousand hunger strikers holding vigil at the monument to Chinese Heroes of the Revolution in the heart of Tiananmen Square.

23:15 Hours

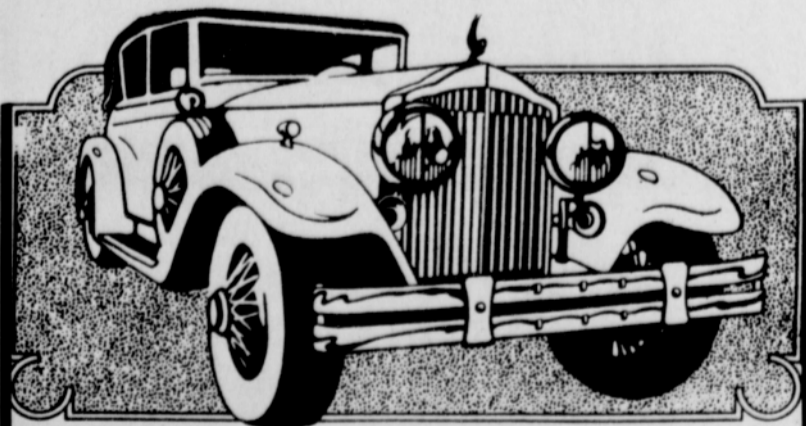
It's late, the demonstrations continue.

Chang'an Avenue, from the hotel well beyond Tiananmen Square in the other direction is still closed to traffic. Swarms of people make passage all but impossible. Ambulances are getting by because students keep a lane open expressly for them. The ambulances are needed to move the hunger strikers, who are now in their fourth day and are beginning to pass out from dehydration.

The students have several demands that they want the government to address. The students want a more open and democratic society and they demand that the government pay more attention to education. The students are also demanding that they have a right to choose their own representative. The students also want the government to acknowledge that these are peaceful demonstrations and are a legitimate form of expression and not a disorderly riot as the government is asserting.

They also want some assurance that the government will not retaliate at some point in the future, perhaps when the world is not so keenly focused on the events here.

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