

Tiananmen Square

By Nathan Shepard

Dear Miss Walker,

Hello! I am Yang Shi, and I am a former soldier in the People's Liberation Army in China. Consequently, I participated in the Tiananmen Square Incident as a private in a reserve regiment. Although I was called to fight only once, I saw almost everything that occurred there. My goal is to tell Christian teachers in other countries about the massacre at Tiananmen, so that they would know the truth and teach it to their students. I have been thinking of telling others about Tiananmen lately, and I felt that now would be a good time to write because of the recent death of Deng Xiaoping, our communist leader here in China. You are one of the few teachers I can write. I am going to give you a complete and thorough report of the Tiananmen Square Incident so the communists cannot withhold their secret. Writing to you on this delicate subject puts me in grave danger. If any communist saw what was in this letter, he would tear it to shreds on the spot, and he would probably hunt me down and throw me in jail, or worse. Accordingly, I am torn between our government and my people because I do not want to disappoint my friends yet find it less than appealing to be punished by communist leaders. Either way I disgrace myself. However, having been forced to choose, I have sided with the Chinese people.

First, I want to recount for you the last century of events here in China. The first disturbance was in 1919, when students protested the economical and cultural backwardness of dynasty rule, which passed the power of China down through a family.

They looked to communism, with all of its grand promises and vain expectations, as a more suitable government (Hinton and Gordon, tape 1). Thus, the Chinese protesters founded the People's Republic of China in 1949, putting communists into power. Our first leader was Mao Tse Tung, who formed the Red Army with Deng Xiaoping to enforce communism. During the 1950's, Mao ruled China well and with great influence over the Chinese, and Deng became China's vice prime minister. Also during that time, Mao built Tiananmen Square in front of Tiananmen. Tiananmen is the gate of the forbidden city, the walled section of Beijing where the leaders' houses and meeting areas are located. The Chinese rarely saw their leaders because they were separated by the wall, but the Chinese supported their leaders wholeheartedly, believing everything they said about communism's freedoms and prospects. All of China mourned Mao's sudden death in 1976, and there was great dispute over who should come to power next. After two years of debating, Deng Xiaoping began his rule over the vast country of China (Faison, p A1). However Deng had many problems. Talk of reform was spreading throughout China, of the benefits of democracy, and of the promises of communism that weren't appearing to come true. Therefore, Deng began to give economic freedoms to make life easier for the Chinese. Common people could set up their own businesses, factory owners could pay workers what they wanted, and farmers could set up stands in the streets and sell their products at their own price, rather than to the government at a government-set price. China's economy went skyrocketing! Average income grew, and other countries started investing in China. The Chinese were satisfied for a while (Hinton and Gordon, tape 1).

In the years leading up to Tiananmen, China was a compromise between communism and democracy. The political freedoms had not changed, but the democratic economic freedoms were wide spread. Due to the free choice of employees given to the business owners, the percentage of unemployment went up. The government officials became corrupt; they accepted bribes from the people, who now had enough money to bribe with, and took tax money for themselves. The government, too, was taking advantage of the freedoms given to the people. Deng became afraid because there is an old Chinese proverb that says "when life is bad, the people stay orderly, but when life is good, the people rebel." Deng feared that because he exposed the people to economic freedom and they savored the taste, they would demand political freedom too and destroy his reign. He was right (Hinton and Gordon, tape 1).

My people had many reasons to complain. They wanted to be able to move up the communist ladder by showing character and responsibility, not by buying power! They did not appreciate being victimized by power-hungry individuals who had enough money gain authority, and neither did I! Members of the communist party could do practically whatever they wanted. They dined at the finest restaurants for free, took vacations for free, saw plays and performances for free, and, well, you get the idea. The thing I don't understand is that the communist leaders hardly did anything to deserve these privileges except for "being in the communist party," and they charged the bill to the Chinese. I thought communism was an equal government (Hinton and Gordon, tape 1)! My people also wanted freedom to elect their own leaders and vote for what happened in the "People's" government (Terrill, 117). At the beginning of the Tiananmen Square movement, the Chinese did not want to overthrow the government, but some changes

definitely needed to be made! The people tired of military rule; they wanted solid laws to provide their justice system, not a "pay-me-and-you're-innocent" judge. The schools were lagging behind, and it was still illegal to congregate together in big rallying areas. Yes, the Chinese were upset, and they had good reason. If only the government would cooperate, it didn't (Hinton and Gordon, tape 1).

On April 15th, 1989, Hu Yaobang, one of China's top leaders, died at age 73. His death allowed the Chinese a mass gathering for his funeral. Funerals of top leaders were almost the only time my people could congregate and talk. On the 17th of April, police tried to rope off Tiananmen Square to keep the people from meeting for the funeral. However, some students from Beijing University, who were mourning Hu's death, pushed through, and soon Chinese filled all of the square (Spence, p 740). While the mourners were there, the conversation shifted from Hu Yaobang to freedom, politics, and democracy. The people started to think about changing the government, about reform. 1000 students from Beijing University made a petition the next day, demanding seven freedoms from the government. This small band of protesters showed the petition to various government offices. While this was going on, some of my friends in a different military division than mine said their officers ordered them to go down to control the mobs. Two days later my friends attacked a sit-in in Tiananmen Square. The protesters were furious, and in response they boycotted classes at the University until the government met their demands. Even after being attacked, the students still said they would not leave Tiananmen until the government held a dialogue with them (Feigon, Ch 7). The government completely ignored them! How could the government have been so ignorant of its youth? Some say that the government thought it had complete power so

the students were not worthy to demand reform so boldly. Others say that the government saw the students as machines for the leaders to use to make themselves rich, instead of living, breathing, people. I think that the government simply didn't care about the Chinese at all! On the 19th, the students formed a student union at Beijing University, and in the next few days the students formed a citywide alliance of student unions. To give you a perspective of the crowd's growth that week, on the 15th, there were 30,500 protesters in the Square. On the 16th, there were 150,000 protesters, and finally, on the 17th, there were over 1,000,000 Chinese people in Tiananmen. On the 22nd, during Hu Yaobang's Funeral, the mob pushed back approaching police, and the police warned the protesters of violent outcomes resulting from their demonstrations, but the students didn't listen. Five days later, 200,000 common people and 80,000 students marched for 18 hours around and through Tiananmen Square. Finally, the next day, the government promised to talk to the students. Local troops who knew about the situation didn't follow orders to control the protesters; the troops didn't want to kill their own people! Because of the lack of results in the local troops, my fellow soldiers and I were taken out to another city. There, our officials manipulated us into thinking that the students were bad, and they wouldn't give us any information about the goings on in Tiananmen. One of my friends, who was one of the protesters, later told me what happened while I was away.

On May 1st the protesters tried to elect leaders that would guide them to freedom. Almost all of the candidates were students from the nearby Beijing University because the youths were the most enthusiastic about reform, whereas the older and wiser held more conservative views. However, elections could not be held, for the crowd was too chaotic. Two weeks later, on the 13th, at 5:20 p.m., the protesters, mainly students from all over

China, went on a hunger strike in Tiananmen Square until the government would talk about reform with their leaders. The protesters were forcing the government to react in some way, because Gorbachev's visit was supposed to occur in Tiananmen Square, and thousands of hunger-strikers would not raise Gorbachev's impression of China. The next day, our government promised that it would talk to the protesters if they would just leave during Gorbachev's visit. The students refused to leave until a dialogue was held. At that point, in a desperate attempt to get the students out of Tiananmen, the government relented and held a dialogue, but the government officials at the dialogue didn't talk about reform at all; they talked about what it would take to get the protesters to leave Tiananmen! The government openly refused to meet the protesters' demands, and called it a dialogue! As the protesters were not satisfied, they refused to leave Tiananmen. I can't blame them! The government finally had to move the Gorbachev visit to the airport. By the 16th, the protesters were beginning to faint from lack of food. Ambulances constantly came back and forth from the scene at Tiananmen. Most urban workers and intellectuals fell away from the government and shifted their support to the students by the 19th, and the high government officials began to plan a crackdown the same day (the government disliked the intellectual group because they thought up new ideas; in order to keep communism in power, all citizens had to do everything the same way all the time). A few pro-democracy military regiments offered the students assistance, but they refused because they wanted to continue to protest peacefully. I think this was the mistake that caused their ultimate downfall (Feigon, Ch 8). Also, from May 20th to June 2nd there was a dramatic lull in the students' movement, so some of my intellectual friends started their own hunger strike, and the movement caught its second wind. When the intellectual

hunger-strike began, Deng warned that further demonstrations would lead to a crackdown, but the movement grew all the more! I think the students went a little overboard with their demonstrations and mobbings, but the government was detestable! On the morning of the 3rd, the 27th army (myself included) was ordered to attack the protesters in Tiananmen Square! We marched into Beijing, but we had to eat stale, bad-tasting food from our camp because the merchants would not sell anything to the army ordered to destroy their friends! That afternoon, we tried to march into Tiananmen, but we could not because the crowds pushed us back. That night we set up for a crackdown. Early the next morning, we attacked the protesters in the streets leading to Tiananmen! They thought that we were using rubber bullets, so they strapped on raincoats and were very brave. As we were using real lead bullets, they were slaughtered (Hinton and Gordon, tape 2)! I didn't want to have Chinese blood on my head, so I devised a plan. I continually loaded my rapid-fire Chinese pistol! I would load my gun whenever the sergeant was looking my way, and when he wasn't, I would unload. In this way, I avoided combat. After I repeated this process many times, I thought that eventually I would be caught. Therefore, I figured out from my knowledge of the situation how to get out of fighting legally. I knew that the ambulances were overrun and short-handed, so I thought that if I walked past an ambulance enough times someone would eventually ask for my help and I would not have to fight. It worked! I saw protester after protester fall, and later I saw them half-dead in the ambulance. As we moved closer and closer to Tiananmen, a messenger came with an urgent message that proclaimed that the protesters would begin leaving Tiananmen immediately. The army stopped fighting, but they followed the retreating protesters in their tanks. When we arrived at Tiananmen Square,

to my surprise, the troops began to shoot again, and the tanks actually rolled over some of the retreating protesters. I thought the troops had gone mad, but they were actually ordered to attack! Thankfully, some of the protesters arrived safely at their homes. For days afterwards, anyone who gave any hint of rebellion would be shot, legally! The government said that only 1,000 died on the streets, and none in Tiananmen Square, but the protesters said that over 10,000 were killed, both in Tiananmen and in the streets. Both numbers were rather exaggerated. From what I saw, I'd say upwards of 6,000 killed in addition to thousands wounded. Soon anyone who was thought to have participated in protesting at any time during the incident was arrested. Soldiers who were injured in Tiananmen Square were given honorary awards, but funerals for the massacred protesters were outlawed (Hinton and Gordon, tape 2)! Tiananmen Square on June 4th was one of the darkest scenes in all of China's history.

A year later, in 1990, most of the participants in the demonstrations in Tiananmen were either jailed or exiled. There were still complaints that all of China's leaders were old, but hope for major reform was lost while Deng was alive (Terrill, 116). The government became more afraid of rioting within the people, and the top government officials became stricter about enforcing the laws. The Tiananmen Square movement was over, but as a result, the government would definitely listen to the people more readily and respond more quickly. Another consequence was that the people's faith in the government was utterly destroyed. The door to reform was opened wide for China for the future because of Tiananmen.

When Deng Xiaoping died on Wednesday, February 19th, 1997, the massacre at Tiananmen that occurred under his orders was temporarily forgotten. It was said that he

was a great man because he modernized China (Landers, p 20A). However, there is a deep anger stained on my heart that I will never forget! Personally, I think economic and federal freedoms will increase over the years because Deng said that economic freedoms must be enforced for 100 years at least (McGeary, p 54). However, economic freedoms are making many Chinese rich and many poor, and that is not the communist way. Some think there is a 1 in 3 chance that China will fragment now that Deng is dead, but I don't think it is going to happen. I will tell you a secret. Local peasants have begun electing leaders through secret ballot using modern communication devices. Maybe there will be another revolution against the government (McGeary, p 53).

Some people think that the students should have protested on-campus, and that they should have secretly set up leaders and made a strong foundation before they confronted the government as they did. However, I think they would have been stopped with much less bloodshed, and without the impact that the Tiananmen Square Incident had on the Chinese and the world. Others say they should have gotten more elders involved, but I think elders would have been killed right along with the students.

Please tell other people about the real story of Tiananmen, especially Christian teachers because I am a Christian. I talked to Betty Obichee, an English teacher here in China. Perhaps you have heard of her; she led me to Christ. Show this letter to other teachers please, and teach the history of the Tiananmen Square Incident to your students too, for I cannot do it from here in Beijing. Also, please put China on your prayer list; we need God's help over here. Thank you again for reading this letter. I sincerely hope you are enjoying teaching your students, and I hope they are all doing well.

Sincerely,

Yang Shi

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