

Result: Zero

Looking back at the student protests of Tiananmen Square after 20 years

—Khiang Hei

I see my photography as evolving from my personal history through historical events and across cultures. My recent photographic practice has been a process of reconsideration and re-appropriation of these past experiences, namely those related to events at Tiananmen Square twenty years ago.

June Fourth, 1989, is a date the Chinese government wants people to forget, as if it never happened, as if a million people did not converge on Tiananmen Square, as if no one died, was injured or imprisoned. In the United States, if you type “Tiananmen Square Protest” into a Google search you receive 473,000 entries. In China, you receive zero results.

I was a 20-year-old college junior on an exchange program between the State University of New York at Buffalo and the Beijing Teacher’s College. I had a four-year-old Canon F1 camera and a stipend of \$100 a month for food and film.

I first heard something was happening in Tiananmen Square right after Hu Yaobang, the respected, pro-reform former General Secretary of the Communist Party of China died on April 15, 1989. A student told me that demonstrators were making posters and banners for a memorial service in the square. I went to take pictures that April and returned over and over again until June 7, 1989, when my dormitory was empty except for one Japanese student and me. After the events of June Fourth, I was “convinced” to leave the country for my safety by the coordinator of the exchange program.

Leading up to June Fourth, 1989, there were hunger strikes and marches. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev arrived in the country for a summit with Chinese leaders on May 15th and protestors arrived with his photograph pinned to their jackets. To students, he was a symbol of reform. So many demonstrators arrived in front of the Square’s Great Hall of the People that the Chinese government was forced to bring Gorbachev through the back door avoiding the protestors. Students began camping out in the Square and refused to leave even after martial law was declared on May 20th. Tanks and soldiers arrived. It took two more weeks before the tanks rolled into the Square.

Many famous photographers were sent to Tiananmen on assignment once the protest grew large and loud enough. They were there for the main events, backed by their publications. I was there from the beginning, documenting the demonstrations when there were only paste pots and handwritten calligraphy.

VISUAL STUDIES WORKSHOP



From “Result:0, Photographs by Khiang Hei” an exhibition at Visual Studies Workshop from September 18 to October 25, 2009. Visual Studies Workshop provides an international view of contemporary and historical exhibitions. We feature media-based art that includes photography, mixed media, video, film, audio, bookworks, new media, computer art, and installations. Our endeavor is to present cross-disciplinary ideas, forms, and processes not typically supported in more mainstream museums, commercial, or academic galleries in order to provide general audiences access to under-recognized and emerging artists of today and times past.

VISUAL STUDIES WORKSHOP



This essay was written for "Result:0, Photographs by Kiang Hei" at Visual Studies Workshop September 18 to October 25, 2009. Visual Studies Workshop provides an international view of contemporary and historical exhibitions. We feature media-based art that includes photography, mixed media, video, film, audio, bookworks, new media, computer art, and installations. Our endeavor is to present cross-disciplinary ideas, forms, and processes not typically supported in more mainstream museums, commercial, or academic galleries in order to provide general audiences access to under-recognized and emerging artists of today and times past.