

The New York Times refused publication of this letter dated March 4, 2015

Re your article 'A new look at Tiananmen protests' (NYT February 25) concerning publication of Mr Xu Yong's photos of the protests, I wonder if you realise there were two very different Tiananmen protests. One by students lasted six weeks in Beijing's Tiananmen Square and was dispersed almost without casualties on the night of June 4, 1989. The other came much earlier that evening as troops tried to enter Beijing to disperse the students. After being viciously attacked and fire-bombed by anti-regime crowds, some of the soldiers began wild revenge shooting at civilians and students in the streets leading to the Square.

Unfortunately we rarely get to see the photos of what caused that wild shooting – of the badly burned soldiers and charred corpses strung up under overpasses, one of which was self-censored by the Reuters news agency. Ironically the AP photographer, Jeff Widener, who captured the iconic 'tank man' photo which has come to symbolise alleged student bravery in the face of Beijing's brute force has since explained that photo was taken the day after the Tiananmen events, that the tanks were moving out of Beijing, and the man was holding shopping bags.

We also never get to see or read Widener's account of the previous evening when he was attacked by crowds that were killing soldiers trying to escape from burning troop carriers. An Australian embassy report I have seen spoke of crowds tearing out genitals of dead soldiers.

In his Columbia Journalism Review article 'The Myth of Tiananmen and the Price of a Passive Press' Jay Williams, a journalist who was in Beijing that fateful night, notes that the 'myth' of troops with machine guns storming into the Square owed much to an anonymous article a week later in a Hongkong newspaper and heavily publicised by world media, including the New York Times.