

"Be the change you wish to see in the world."

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A Moment That Changed The World



Photograph by Stuart Franklin Magnum

The Power of One

In early June 1989, Chinese dissidents demonstrated against the Communist government in protests across Beijing demanding democratic freedoms. What had begun in April as a hunger strike of more than 3,000 Chinese students quickly grew to mass demonstrations by millions of Chinese citizens over the course of several weeks. The world watched as Tiananmen Square became the center of one of the most massive protests in human history, and one of the most violent crackdowns ever witnessed. Unknown thousands were killed, tens of thousands injured, as the collective might of the biggest army in the world hammered down on unarmed protesters. Demonstrators were fired upon, beaten, and even crushed under the massive treads of Chinese tanks.

On the morning of June 5th, the world witnessed the most remarkable act of courage imaginable. As a line of Chinese Type 59 tanks made their inexorable approach down the Changan Avenue (“Avenue of Eternal Peace”), a lone, man ran out into the middle of the wide boulevard in front of the lead tank and stood in its path. He was not armed, made no sound nor demonstration, and did not move except to remain in front of the tank as it tried to bypass him.

The tank finally halted and the man climbed atop it, knocked on the trap door, and then spoke for brief minutes with the driver inside, reportedly saying, “Why are you here? You have caused nothing but misery.” Anxious onlookers then came and helped the man down, hurrying him back into the crowds watching from the side of the street, no doubt hoping to prevent his capture by the authorities.

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This incredible moment was caught on camera and video by journalists watching from a great distance, who were themselves targets of the Chinese regime in an attempt to prevent the unauthorized story of Tiananmen Square from being told. The iconic images that were captured spread across the globe and the watching eyes of the world were fixated on the Chinese government in a way that it had never before experienced. The protests were violently quashed, and the Communists remained in power in that country despite the fall in that same year of Communist governments across Russia and Eastern Europe.

No one knows who the man was. Some speculate that he remains alive and in hiding in China, or exiled somewhere outside of his home country. Some reports are that he was executed weeks or months afterward, or was one of the thousands killed during the government oppression of the protests in the days that followed. Most believe that the man was killed or executed; eyewitness reporter Charlie Cole believes that “Tank Man” was probably executed after being taken from the tank by secret police (not sympathetic demonstrators), since the Chinese government could not ever produce him to hush the outcry from many countries..

The simple act of protest by Tank Man, as he came to be known, is one of the most singularly incredible demonstrations of the power of the individual against the seeming omnipotence of the state. It reminds us that that which is most important to us as human beings is worth sacrificing everything for, even our own lives. And that even against the seemingly unstoppable force of a militarized state, the simplest, most profound act of courage can strike a blow for the cause of freedom.

“When the people fear their government, there is tyranny; when the government fears the people, there is liberty.”

— Thomas Jefferson

Mandatory Reading & Other Resources

Links

Frontline: Tank Man – the official documentary website

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tankman/>

Tiananmen Spring Timeline – a timeline of events leading up to, and immediately following the Tiananmen Square protests

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tankman/cron/>

The U.S. Tiananmen Papers – documents from the National Security Archive detailing the U.S. Government's perception of the crisis during the 1989 uprisings

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB47/>

Witnessing Tiananmen: Clearing the square – BBC retrospective about the events of the uprisings, including eyewitness accounts

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3775907.stm>

Amnesty International – BBC report from the day of June 4th, 1989, when the crackdown on protesters began

http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/4/newsid_2496000/2496277.stm

Tiananmen Story – memoirs of journalist Graham Earnshaw, a reporter covering the Tiananmen Square riots

<http://www.earnshaw.com/memoirs/content.cfm?ID=16>

Books

The Tiananmen Papers: The Chinese Leadership's Decision to Use Force Against Their Own People-In Their Own Words

Zhang Liang

Almost a Revolution: The Story of a Chinese Student's Journey from Boyhood to Leadership in Tiananmen Square

Tong Shen

"Tell the World": What Happened in China and Why

Liu Binyan