



# The Iconic Photograph and Its Political Space: The Case of Tiananmen Square, 1989

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This essay explores the process by which images from the student protest and Beijing massacre of 1989 became labeled “iconic.” Ultimately, it shows how this categorization fueled a political agenda vehemently opposed to established rule in China, a process that raises questions concerning the unexamined meaning of the words “democracy” and “freedom” in political discourse. And this discourse, arising as it did at the end of the Cold War, obviously stretched far beyond China and onto the world stage, where there were many Western political actors eager for images to appropriate.

The term “iconic” derives from the Greek word *eikōn*, originally meaning a portrait or representation with no particular religious or secular connotation. It has been suggested that secular icons “inspire some degree of awe ... mixed with dread, compassion, or aspiration—and stand for an epoch or a system of beliefs” (Goldberg 1991, 135). The notion of icons standing for a system of beliefs lies at the heart of this enquiry.

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Here I will focus on two images: the *Goddess of Democracy* (Fig. 14.1), first seen in Tiananmen Square on 30 May 1989, and the *Tank Man* (Fig. 14.2), recorded by five photographers and several film crews, most from the balconies of the Beijing Hotel on 4 June 1989. For the sake of clarity, when I am referring to an image by its title or generic name I will use italics. When I refer to a subject or object that is not a photograph, I won't.

Much has already been written on the nature of iconic photographs (e.g., Goldberg 1991; Koetzle 1996; Permuter 1998; Hariman and Lucaites 2007), including at least two Ph.D. theses (Permuter 1996; Cannon 2001). However, there is more to be said on this topic. Before 1989 iconic photographs were normally seen as unique: attributed to one photograph by one photographer. Tiananmen changed all that. The *Goddess of Democracy*, taken by an unknown photographer, has been described as iconic (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 211). All four versions of the *Tank Man* image captured from a similar vantage point have also been described, at one time or another, as iconic, inviting the question: is it the photograph that should be described as iconic or the subject—or, as in the case of the *Goddess of Democracy*, the pictured object?

I happen to be one of the photographers whose image of the tank man first gained attention. Had a hundred photographers captured the tank man in front of the Beijing Hotel would all the images be iconic? Probably. The particular qualities of each version would be subsumed under the greater meaning connoted by the fetishized subject, echoing—I think it is reasonable to say—the various versions of Christ on the Cross, the Virgin of Guadalupe, Chairman Mao wearing his forage cap, or Babe Ruth at his last game.

Further, the assumption is that iconic photographs rise to prominence on the basis of the natural excellence of visual reporting (Cannon 2001, viii). I suggest that the quality of the photograph per se is less important than the messages that such images convey. Broadly, the existing canon comprises iconic photographs whose frames of reference share links with the United States<sup>1</sup>: the wars that it has fought, the political battles it has waged (e.g., with China), the extraplanetary missions it has accomplished, and the joy, trouble, and strife experienced in its own backyard (e.g., the Kent State “massacre”).<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 14.1 *Goddess of Democracy*, 30 May 1989. Photo © Stuart Franklin 1989



Fig. 14.2 *Tank Man*, 4 June 1989. © Stuart Franklin 1989

However, it must be stated that every culture has its iconography, linked more to heritage than history (Lowenthal 1998). As David Lowenthal argues, “[W]hile it borrows from and enlivens historical study, heritage is not an enquiry into the past but a celebration of it, not an effort to know what actually happened but a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes” (ibid., xi). This essay argues that a number of iconic photographs are accelerated into prominence due less to their formal excellence as photographs than to their fit with political expediency.

Putting to one side Tiananmen Square, there are two other photographs that fall into the “heritage” category: (1) Joe Rosenthal’s photograph of the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima: *Old Glory Goes Up on Mt. Suribachi* (1945). Its political purpose was to raise the hopes of a nation struggling at war, a photograph that became “an icon of American patriotism” (Goldberg 1991, 147).<sup>3</sup> (2) Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* (1936). The photograph is an anguished portrait of Florence Thompson, a thirty-two-year-old mother cradling three infants at a pea picker’s camp

in Nipomo, California. In the photograph, which became the “canonical image of the Depression” (Goldberg 1991, 136), a class issue is “framed and subordinated in its allusion to religious imagery”—specifically, the Madonna and Child (Hariman and Lucaites 2007; Trachtenberg 1988; Wright 2000, 2008).

The scope of the essay will be as follows. In the first section, I will set out briefly the historical and political background to the Tiananmen Square protests, and subsequent massacre in Beijing. Following that, I will focus on the *Goddess of Democracy* and its impact, as an image, on the political landscape of Tiananmen Square.

Continuing, I will attend to the *Tank Man* image and consider its impact (or lack of it<sup>4</sup>) in China and abroad. I will argue that as an image it was rather slow to materialize, and when it did so it was because dramatic television footage of the incident drew commentary from the US president, thereby raising its status. I will conclude by assessing the role of the iconic image in furthering a political agenda.

What I will not include is a general overview of the iconic image. Certainly, there are a number of images that have been described as iconic and seem to have emerged rapidly because of the inherent drama of the picture itself. Nick Ut’s photograph *Children Fleeing a Napalm Strike, June 8, 1972* is such an example; another is John Paul Filo’s *Kent State—Girl Screaming over Dead Body, May 4, 1970*.<sup>5</sup> Both were shown as stills on the same day that the pictures were taken, on NBC news. They dominated the front pages of the national newspapers the following morning (Goldberg 1991; Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 173).

I will include neither a detailed account of the student protest movement nor a fresh examination of the 1989 Beijing massacre. A considerable number of authors, with better access than I could ever achieve, have probably come as close to estimating the casualty figures as is possible at this time (Brook 1992; Chang 2005; Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press 1992; Kristof and WuDunn 1994). From existing data, however, three points become clear: (1) most of those killed in Beijing during June 1989 were not slaughtered in Tiananmen Square but in other areas of the city<sup>6</sup>; (2) the total casualty figure is likely to be greater than 400 but less than 1500<sup>7</sup>; (3) it should also be noted that there were significant casualties within the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) inflicted both by civilians and, reportedly, by soldiers.<sup>8</sup>

## BACKGROUND

Between April and June 1989 the world turned its spotlight on the gradual build-up of tension in China. The focus was on a student-led protest movement in Tiananmen Square. Protests began after the death of Hu Yaobang, the purged ex-general secretary of the Communist Party (CCP), who collapsed at age 73 after a heart attack on 15 April. The CCP was simplistically divided into factions favoring either conservatism or reform (Scobell and Wortzel 2005, 56).

Hu Yaobang was a reformist and “his death was to rock China to its foundations” (Suettinger 2003, 28). On 16 April students marched from two leading Beijing universities to place a wreath at the Monument to the People’s Heroes—a 37.4 meter high obelisk in Tiananmen Square. Three days later Hu Yaobang’s portrait, painted at China’s top art school, joined the wreath (Wu 2005, 42).

Beginning with this early act of iconoclasm, disrupting the careful iconography of Tiananmen Square, still dominated by the all-seeing celestial eye of the Great Helmsman, the *détournement* began.<sup>9</sup> Part satire, part revolt, the student protest took many forms over the spring months of 1989. The students wanted Hu Yaobang’s objectives realized and his reputation restored by the Party leadership, which was perceived by the student protesters to be a corrupt gerontocracy. Hu Yaobang had wanted better treatment for intellectuals and more money for education (*ibid.*). But the Communist Party’s Central Committee was unwilling to single out for special treatment the elite 1% of the population who were able to attend university. From a policy perspective, the leadership’s views, although split, had not evolved since 1979 or 1986, when similar grievance movements unfolded, culminating in demands for a greater role for the intelligentsia (Esherick and Wasserstrom 1994, 35; He 1996, 139).

The protest in Beijing concentrated around Tiananmen Square and the Zhongnanhai, the Communist Party headquarters.<sup>10</sup> The reaction of the Chinese leadership to the protesters darkened by degrees. On 26 April a front-page editorial in the *People’s Daily*, taking its tone from Deng Xiaoping, used pejorative language to describe the protest, accusing a small group of rabble-rousers of seeking to undermine the regime. At 10 a.m. on 30 May—the very morning that the *Goddess of Democracy* statue was erected—martial law was declared, and a week later three protesters, who had traveled by train from Hunan, hurled red and black ink-filled eggs at Mao’s giant portrait (Wong 1996, 243; Wu 2005, 43).



Demonstrations were banned (Suettinger 2003, 50). The press, including the foreign media, was proscribed and prevented from using satellite uplinks in China. A very short window of time, just before the declaration of martial law, was the only moment that Chinese journalists working for the national media overtly supported the protest movement (He 1996). On 2 June troops descended on Greater Beijing where the People's Liberation Army troop strength reached more than 180,000 (Suettinger 2003, 51). After the massacre to the west of the Tiananmen Square, 10,000 troops surrounded about three thousand demonstrators who had not yet left the square (Richelson and Evans 1999).

In the final assault the PLA established control over the square more by intimidation than mass slaughter, although there were many casualties during advances in the early hours of 4 June (Gittings 2005, 243). Most of the killing had already taken place in other parts of Beijing by 4 a.m., the time the lights in the square were switched off, and the protestors, who had gathered around the Monument to the People's Heroes, took a "confused voice vote," interpreted as a decision to leave the square (*ibid.*).

Before the massacre the mood during the occupation of Tiananmen Square ranged from heady optimism to desperation. Political street theater, in situationist style, led the approach to challenging the state (Esherick and Wasserstrom 1994, 43). This took several forms, including a solemn presentation of a petition on the steps of the Great Hall of the People, to a partially observed hunger strike (Pomfret 2006; Wong 1996). The placement of the *Goddess of Democracy* statue in Tiananmen Square—"directly between two sacred symbols of the Communist regime, a giant portrait of Mao and the Monument to the People's Heroes was another powerful piece of theatre" (Esherick and Wasserstrom 1994, 38).

Concerned that scholars have ignored the stage while focusing solely on the "theatre," Linda Hershkovitz, drawing on Henri Lefebvre's writing on the production of space (Lefebvre 1974), emphasizes that

[i]n China there is one universally recognized [i]nstrument which overshadows all others in signifying both the hegemonic power of the state and the history of struggle against it, and that is Tiananmen Square, or the Gate of Heavenly Peace. Tiananmen Square is the product of over 500 years of social practice. Official functions changed after the revolutions in 1911 and 1949 [and] the orthodoxy inscribed in its monuments remain to influence its contemporary meaning. (Hershkovitz 1993, 399)

The importance of Tiananmen Square, as a site of nationalist ritual and the reinforcement of state power, cannot be overlooked. “Tiananmen [Square] is a gargantuan, the biggest square in the world. A hundred sprawling acres in all. If you put a mountain in the middle you could hold a Winter Olympics there” (Wong 1996, 226). The very size of the place is designed to inspire awe. Add to that a soundscape of terse announcements from loudspeakers affixed to lamp posts, and overlay a national pageant, such as occurs each year on National Day, 1 October, and it becomes clear how significant this unshaded concrete expanse has become as the epicenter of Chinese state nationalism.

### GODDESS OF DEMOCRACY

In the courtyard below the dormitories of China’s leading art school, where peasants once learned to copy approved portraits of Chairman Mao, a noisy new venture kept any light sleepers awake: the round-the-clock building of the *Goddess of Democracy*. Construction began on 27 May. The design was based on a renowned Soviet sculpture by Vera Mukhina: *A Worker and Collective Farm Woman*.<sup>11</sup> The “goddess” brandishes a torch in lieu of a sickle. Fifteen students built the ten-meter-high Styrofoam statue in just three days (Tsing-yuan 1992).<sup>12</sup> Unveiled to Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy”, the “Internationale” and cries of “Long Live Democracy,” a graduate student at the art school, Tsao Tsing-yuan, was asked to read this address over loud speakers:

We need a powerful cementing force to strengthen our resolve: that is the Goddess of Democracy.... You are the hope for which we thirst, we Chinese who have suffered decades of repression under the feudal autocracy!... You are the soul of the 1989 democracy Movement! You are the Chinese nation’s hope for salvation! (Tsing-yuan 1992, 145)

As dawn broke on the clear morning of 30 May the *Goddess of Democracy*, reminiscent of the *Statue of Liberty*, became “a direct challenge to the state’s monopoly over the iconography of the Square” (Hershkovitz 1993, 395). Facing the 6 × 4.6 meter portrait of Mao hanging on Tiananmen Gate, the “goddess” became both “an explicit challenge to the state’s power to define and control political space” (ibid., 410) and a challenge to the inherent sacredness of China’s national emblem<sup>13</sup> adding a sixth monument to the Square.<sup>14</sup>



The statue galvanized support for the protest movement at a time when it was flagging. To no one's surprise, "[T]he official media exploded in an orgy of condemnation" (Suettinger 2003, 57), especially when the student leadership decided to set up a Democracy University at its base (Lu 1990, 181). "Tragically", wrote Robert Suettinger, a seasoned analyst, "the symbol of students' hopes was probably the last straw for the government. Any chance of averting a violent showdown was now gone" (ibid.). A *Newsweek* correspondent concurred: "But we journalists loved the Goddess. She was the perfect symbol for China's pro-democracy protestors. She was also the movement's angel of death" (Liu 1999). Four days later the *Goddess of Democracy* was gone, demolished by an armored personnel carrier (APC) or a tank (accounts vary), just after dawn on 4 June (Lim 2014; Wong 1996), its life a little shorter than that of the average butterfly, its impact as devastating as a plague.

Democracy was neither a new nor an entirely Western-imposed idea in China.<sup>15</sup> Support, in the form of faxes and funding from Hong Kong, was of significant value throughout the protest.<sup>16</sup> As *the* grand idea of the 1989 uprising, democracy had little traction—certainly at the outset<sup>17</sup>—yet with the aid of countless Voice of America broadcasts,<sup>18</sup> media reporting, and backstage "advisers" handling the student leadership, the idea caught on. As Melinda Liu confessed, "The Goddess [of democracy] was a much more dramatic, media-friendly reminder that America inspired many of the exuberant street demonstrations that paralyzed Beijing in 1989" (Liu 1999).

In a later survey of US media coverage conducted by Harvard University, it is quite clear how the student protest quickly became a labeled "pro-democracy" uprising, as exemplified in the following two extracts:

A number of journalists, sinologists, and American government officials we interviewed criticized United States media for giving viewers and readers the false impression that protesters in Beijing desired an American-style democratic system. "I believe we tried to put a 'made in the U.S.A.' democracy stamp on it," said Jackie Judd of ABC....

Despite the wide-ranging changes that students and others demanded, all eight media organizations in our sample tended to define the entire movement by just one of its goals—generally as a "democracy" or "pro-democracy" movement. All three dailies extensively used terms like "pro-democracy," "demonstrations for democracy," "democracy campaign" and "demands for democracy." Evening news lead-ins (the spoken introductions that precede a taped segment from a correspondent) on

both CBS and ABC also identified the movement, its participants and its demands with such terms. [On ABC, the term “democracy” appeared on approximately 66 percent of all evening news broadcasts featuring China between April 18 and June 4. On CBS, it appeared on 41 percent of broadcasts that included stories on China. CNN Prime News tapes from April 17 until May 17 reveal that 68 percent of all broadcasts on China used the word “democracy,” though it should be noted that corresponding percentages for ABC and CBS were also higher for those four weeks—72 percent and 65 percent respectively.] The same was true of all but one of the news organizations in the study. The partial exception was *Time* magazine, which used this shorthand label sparingly. (Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press 1992)

The emphasis on “pro-democracy” was criticized (in hindsight) in Britain (Kynge 2009), by pro-Chinese analysts (Chua 2014), and (at the time) by the *People’s Daily* who reported that the main objective of the “small group of plotters” was to “negate the socialist system.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, reviewing recent experience in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine,<sup>20</sup> the term “democracy,” in political rhetoric used by the West, is concerned less with describing specific political systems it might support, and more with criticizing ones it vehemently opposes: those that are opposed to the West, and those that erect barriers to free trade and the pursuit of laissez-faire market practices, as I shall discuss later.

In a rare glimpse backstage into the wings of political intrigue, *New York Times* reporting duo Nicholas Kristof and Shirley WuDunn, both of whom had written enthusiastically on the “pro-democracy” movement from their first report on the uprising on 18 April 1989 to the last (Kristof 1989), allowed the curtain to lift briefly in their 1994 book *China Wakes*:

Deng Xiaoping later charged that the democracy movement was a conspiracy by a small number of counter-revolutionaries who used the students for their own purposes. In a sense, he was right. From the beginning, students like Wang Dan were advised, guided—and, yes, used—by various graduate students, professors, businessmen, and officials.... In addition these “advisers” gave tens of thousands of dollars to the students, as well as access to printing presses, cars, and meeting rooms. (Kristof and WuDunn 1994, 78)

The democracy idea, attractive as it might have been to outside supporters, failed to describe the issues that were central to the unrest: bribery, corruption (especially involving senior Party figures), *guan-dao* (“official profiteering”), poor student living conditions, and a lack of free speech or a voice for the student elite after Hu Yaobang’s death (Suettinger 2003, 16; He 1996, 139). The *Goddess of Democracy*, short-lived as it was, became a playful but ultimately dangerous intervention on the sacred playing field of China.

Following the massacre, Tiananmen Square was rapidly restored to order, and the recriminations began. Eleven days on, those accused of hurling ink-filled eggs at Mao’s portrait were given jail terms from sixteen years to life (Lim 2014). The word for “egg” sounds like “bomb” in Chinese, but this fails to account for the harshness of the sentences. In addition, a more severe militaristic form of nationalism went on display in the square: During the 1980s just three soldiers hoisted the Chinese flag at dawn on Tiananmen Square. Since 1991, two hundred million people have witnessed the revamped ceremony involving thirty-six goose-stepping flag guards (Lim 2014, 5).

Yet the *Goddess of Democracy* as an iconic image persists. Photographs are reproduced worldwide to coincide with each anniversary, and replica statues have been erected from Hong Kong to Vancouver. In Washington, D.C., one such statue, in pink granite, is branded the “Victims of Communism Memorial.” In the same city miniature *Goddess of Democracy* replicas are gifted by the well-funded National Endowment for Democracy for its award recipients: those who have fought against various forms of repression, socialism, or barriers to free trade in Nicaragua, Russia, China, Burma, Cuba, and Mexico.

### TANK MAN

Following the downfall of the *Goddess of Democracy* early on 4 June 1989, Tiananmen Square was cleared of civilians and debris by the PLA. However, a group of civilians, some relatives of the students, lined up to face a double row of soldiers who stood or knelt in firing positions with a column of tanks and the debris of Tiananmen Square behind them. According to a wide range of accounts, including this author’s, these civilians were shot at repeatedly, leaving at least twenty casualties.<sup>21</sup>

A BBC sound recordist at the time recalls, “From the balcony [in the Beijing Hotel] it was clear that many of the shots were aimed well over the heads of the crowd as the bullets whistled past us at our elevation, but others were intended to kill.”<sup>22</sup> As the bodies were carried away on trishaws, the standoff died down and a column of tanks broke through, moving slowly east along Chang’an Avenue (see Fig. 14.3).

Waiting for them, a few hundred meters down the road, and directly opposite the Beijing Hotel, stood a man in a white shirt and dark trousers, holding two shopping bags. Alone he blocked the path of the tanks, watched by groups of nervous bystanders, and perhaps fifty journalists, camera crews, and photographers occupying balconies on almost every floor of the Beijing Hotel. The press members were prevented from leaving the premises by the PSB (Public Security Bureau).

I was lying prone on a balcony on the sixth floor with *Newsweek* photographer Charlie Cole photographing the event around noon on that day, which I remember was 4 June (a date whose importance will



**Fig. 14.3** 4 June 1989. Tanks push through the standoff between the PLA and civilians on the morning after the massacre. Several civilians were shot and killed. Photograph © Stuart Franklin

become clear shortly).<sup>23</sup> On the balcony after the event, which lasted less than three minutes, a conversation ensued with a writer for *Vanity Fair*, T. D. Allman. Allman insisted (correctly as it turned out) on the significance of the spectacle. I recalled images from 1968 in Prague and Bratislava where protesters stood up bare-chested against Russian tanks. *Tank Man* felt very distant by comparison. The photographs I had taken, as seen through the lens, appeared to lack the impact of, for example, Josef Koudelka's images from Prague. My photographs were smuggled out of China the following day,<sup>24</sup> and the transparencies were later processed, duplicated, and distributed from Magnum's offices in Paris.<sup>25</sup>

Images and reporting of the tank man incident emerged slowly. Although pictures from the earlier standoff were published on 5 June,<sup>26</sup> I traced only one reference to a man confronting a tank that was published on that day (and therefore referring to an event on 4 June). This was in the British *Daily Mail*, attributed to their Beijing correspondent:

Standing with my husband at our apartment window high over Changan Avenue early yesterday I watched a tank speeding towards the heart of Peking. As it rumbled on, surrounded by a tangled mass of bicycles, that brave man moved out to bar its progress, a lone symbol of the people power that had gripped China. The war machine never slowed, even for a moment. Its tracks enveloped the man as it rushed onwards to complete its mission. That tank was the first of many that came rumbling down the Avenue of Eternal Tranquility and into Tiananmen Square to slaughter unarmed teenagers, that one death the beginning of an orgy of violence. (Roberts 1989)

In the report "that brave man" was either another less fortunate person defying a tank or, more likely, the same person misdescribed.<sup>27</sup>

Apart from this lone report, the first the world saw of tank man was on television on 5 June. Television coverage spurred interest in the incident. George Bush referenced it after watching CNN.<sup>28</sup> "I was very moved today," Bush intoned at a news conference on the morning of 5 June, "by the bravery of that one young individual that stood alone in front of the tanks, rolling down, rolling down the avenue there" (Permuter 1998). The television images were shot by, among others, Jonathan Shaer (CNN) and a cameraman for French Antenne 2 (now TV2), whose film was reportedly later seized.<sup>29</sup>

The CNN footage, smuggled out of China on 4 June, was first down-linked from Hong Kong's Media Centre late on 4 June or early 5 June local time.<sup>30</sup> Reportedly, other US and European networks recorded and broadcast the CNN satellite feed.<sup>31</sup> CNN's Tom Mintier narrated the story of the tank man's *ballade* from a landline in Beijing: "[T]he world witnessed a daring act by one man against insurmountable odds. Armed with only courage, standing in the middle of the street facing more than a dozen tanks bearing down on him, he refused to move. He demonstrated the will to resist beyond any words that could ever be spoken" (Permuter 1998). NBC began its report with George Bush's statement.

Suddenly, a photograph that had held virtually no interest the previous day, became iconic—yet only where television had broadcast the incident.<sup>32</sup> *Tank Man* became a symbol of courage and also a symbol of freedom in the face of a totalitarian state, and ultimately an icon reinforcing its neoliberal connotations, as will be discussed later. Given the impact of the television footage, it was no accident, then, that the only newspapers that featured the *Tank Man* photograph prominently on the front page on 6 June were those published in countries with widespread television coverage of the event featuring their national on-the-spot reporters: for example, in France (*Figaro* and *Libération*), Italy (*Corriere della Sera*), the United States (*New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *St Louis Post-Dispatch*), and Britain (*Daily Mirror*, *Daily Express*, *The Times*, and *Daily Telegraph*).<sup>33</sup>

It should also be noted that in those countries as many newspapers chose not to publish the *Tank Man* at all, but instead used images of the earlier standoff, described above, for the front page.<sup>34</sup> As Andrew Higgins, a reporter for the British newspaper *The Independent* based at the Beijing Hotel, commented, "I did not see tank man so did not report his effort to stop the tanks. [I] heard about him later—and he seemed far less significant than all the people getting shot."<sup>35</sup>

Outside the United States, France, Italy, and Britain the *Tank Man* image barely featured on the world's front pages during 1989. Leading national newspapers in Germany, Switzerland, Norway, Spain, and South Africa ignored it. The photographs that appeared initially were by Jeff Widener of the Associated Press and Arthur Tsang of Reuters, linked to subscription arrangements.<sup>36</sup>

Internationally, two entirely different photographs featured more prominently. On 5 June a photograph by an anonymous Chinese photographer came to light. It depicted a scene where eleven people were

crushed to death by a single army APC in the Liubukou district (Gittings 2005, 247). On 6 June, pictures appeared globally of the 4 June standoff between the PLA and civilians on Chang'an Avenue (based on a survey of twenty-five international newspapers). Both these photographs described and expressed the massacre of Chinese civilians. In China the news focused on the slaughter of soldiers, and especially Liu Guogeng, the soldier who shot four protesters and was later beaten to death and set on fire.<sup>37</sup>

During 1989 the *Tank Man* photograph became more iconic in the West, but almost unrecognizable in China. The Franklin photograph was printed double-page in *Time* magazine on 19 June. Cole's image was published in *Newsweek* at the same time (Permuter 1998, 70). Both images featured prominently in the year-end editions.<sup>38</sup> Here was a modern-day version of David and Goliath, or of Horatius saving Rome, a symbol of courage—a *super-icon*, or “the icon of the revolution” as *The Guardian* described it on 4 June 1992. *Time* magazine named the “unknown rebel” Man of the Year (Iyer 1998): a man, and an image, “like a monument in a vast public square created by television” (Gordon 1999, 82).

In one study of the Franklin image the authors considered that the *Tank Man* photograph diverted the rhetoric on Tiananmen: “As the image of the man and the tank achieved iconic status it has acquired the ability to structure collective memory, advance an ideology, and organize or direct resources for political action” (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 214). The photograph has gradually become metonymic for Tiananmen, overwriting the images that were so compelling at the time and that spoke to the massacre that had occurred. Why would this be so? Or, as one commentator has asked, “Why are Westerners so fascinated by this image? Is it because it fits so nicely with the story we expect to see—good against evil, young against old, freedom against totalitarianism?” (Gordon 1999).

Great news images emerge immediately, without delay, it has been suggested (Permuter 1998, 63). The peculiar aspect of the *Tank Man* photograph is that it didn't surface very quickly at all, at least not until the sequence was seen on television. In 1972, despite arguments over showing nudity on the front page, Nick Ut's photograph of the children running from a napalm attack made the next day's papers. *Tank Man* didn't. One answer as to why this might be so is that while the Beijing crackdown held the front pages between 4 and 6 June, the *Tank Man* photograph might have seemed less urgent than the very real and murderous behavior of soldiers shooting to kill unarmed civilians.



Another explanation is that the news agenda had moved on. In Poland, Solidarity had just won a landslide victory. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini passed away on 4 June, the same day that tank man appeared (Wakeman 1999). By 6 June the world had turned its attention, briefly, to the capsizing of the Ayatollah's shroud-wrapped body during raucous scenes at the funeral, with *The Sun* announcing remorselessly, the previous day, "I'm Glad He's Dead."<sup>39</sup>

That might explain a moment of distraction, slowing tank man's rise to celebrity status, but not the reason why the image itself remained iconic once the television footage faded from memory. Amnesia and memory have constantly resurfaced in accounts told and retold over the twenty-five years since 4 June 1989 (e.g., Lim 2014). First, there is China's own amnesia over the massacre itself, the failure to name the dead, the failure to apologize to its own people (ibid.; Béja 2010).

Second, there is amnesia in the West over the sequence of events in the Square, as writer Elizabeth Pisani (2009) noted. Third, there is disagreement over the timing of the tank man incident. The art of memory, as the story of Simonides instructs us,<sup>40</sup> begins with an understanding of place—the place where something happened, followed by image—an image of what happened in a particular place.

Despite both being fixed in this way to memory: the shooting at the corner of Tiananmen Square, then the tanks rumbling through on the morning of the 4 June, there remains confusion over the date, as I have suggested, and this has served to separate, both temporally and spatially, the tank man incident from the Beijing massacre, particularly the massacre on Chang'an Avenue. It also disconnects us from a possible rationale—*outrage*—behind tank man's actions after the killing of innocent civilians, a few minutes earlier, up the street.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps a friend or relative had just died, or been injured. These are unvoiced views of a possible motive. We now have an image of *everyman*—an anonymous, ethnically unidentifiable man, unremarkably dressed, in a space that bears no place identity, defying a row of tanks that appear ready to envelop him, but in fact (as both George Bush and the Chinese government were quick to point out) showed restraint.

Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites suggest that such iconic images serve the political agenda of liberal democracy, arguing that "[a]s the image of the man and the tank achieved iconic status it has acquired the ability to structure collective memory, advance an ideology, and organize or direct resources for political action" (2007, 214).

The authors consider that the photograph connects with “the first principle of modern liberalism,” whereby “individual autonomy is the supreme good” (ibid., 15). However, I argue that there is nothing inherently democratic about the message the image conveys, apart from the act of intervention itself. The people, other actors, are obscured from view, and the state—in the form of the army—is presented as an enemy of the people.

The *Tank Man* image developed as an icon of the Tiananmen Square uprising because of the complex messages of courage and freedom it conveyed. But what species of freedom is imagined here in this depiction of the individual against the state?

The freedom of expression, or the freedom, unfettered by regulation, to exploit one’s fellow citizens: both roll into an unexamined and unified pursuit of *freedom as ideology* (Harvey 2005, 36). Karl Polyani examined precisely this problem, the imbalance of freedoms, when writing on societal transformation on the road to neoliberalism. He wrote of a freedom “not only for the few”:

Freedom not as an appurtenance of privilege, tainted at the source, but as a prescriptive right extending far beyond the narrow confines of the political sphere into the intimate organization of society itself. Thus will old freedoms and civic rights be added to the fund of new freedom generated by the leisure and security that industrial society offers to all. Such a society can afford to be both just and free. (Polyani 1957, 265)

Wendy Brown (2005, 44) explores this issue further within her deliberations on democracy: “Neoliberalism shifts ‘the regulatory competence of the state onto “responsible,” “rational” individuals [with the aim of] encourag[ing] individuals to give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form.”<sup>42</sup>

It is not strange, then, to see the same *Tank Man* image, this time drawn by the cartoonist Inge Grødum, in the leading Norwegian daily, *Aftenposten* (Fig. 14.4), used to signify the struggles of students in Hong Kong against Chinese rule. Hong Kong is where the issue of freedom “not for the few” is being widely debated, as Martin Jaques (2014) recently set out:



**Fig. 14.4** *Tank Man* as cartoon. © Inge Grødum 2014. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist

Herein lies a fundamental reason for the present unrest: the growing sense of dislocation among a section of Hong Kong's population. During the 20 years or so prior to the handover, the territory enjoyed its golden era—not because of the British but because of the Chinese. In 1978 Deng Xiaoping embarked on his reform programme, and China began to grow rapidly. It was still, however, a relatively closed society. Hong Kong was the beneficiary—it became the entry point to China, and as a result attracted scores of multinational companies and banks that wanted to gain access to the Chinese market. Hong Kong got rich because of China. It also fed an attitude of hubris and arrogance. The Hong Kong Chinese came to enjoy a much higher standard of living than the mainlanders. They looked down on the latter as poor, ignorant and uncouth peasants, as greatly their inferior. They preferred—up to a point—to identify with westerners rather than mainlanders, not because of democracy (the British had never allowed them any) but primarily because of money and the status that went with it.

In Hong Kong today, as in Beijing 1989, concerns over the meaning of “democracy” and “freedom” are unraveling, issues that have more to do with creating a balance of freedoms within society, as Polyani suggested, rather than replacing one impure political system with another.

## DISCUSSION

In this essay, I have drawn attention to four concerns relating to the two iconic photographs that emerged from Tiananmen Square in 1989: the *Goddess of Democracy* and *Tank Man*.

First, unlike all pre-1989 images described as iconic, neither image is unique nor singular. I argue that, in practice, there is no distinction made between the various photographs taken of the *Goddess of Democracy* or the tank man regarding their relative iconicity. Some versions have been published more frequently, some have attracted more accolades, yet each is regarded, in commentary, as iconic. I conducted a thought experiment. I imagined that photography had been invented 2500 years ago.

I imagined the scene of the Crucifixion, and a viewing platform that the Romans might have erected allowing for filming and photography. If we could look at those pictures today (imagining the account of the Crucifixion to be true), would one or all of them be iconic? Perhaps one or two might have captured a particular moment of agony, but in essence it would have been the subject (the Crucifixion itself) that would have been iconic (as it is today in countless two- and three-dimensional representations), rather than the photograph per se.

I sense that the same applies to the Tiananmen Square photographs: the subject is supreme, the various photographs act both as testimony and symbolic reminders of the struggles that were waged for the unexamined pursuit of “democracy” and/or “freedom.” “OUR FREEDOM CANNOT DIE” screamed the front page of the British *Daily Mirror* on 6 June 1989, the words embracing a full-page image of *Tank Man* by Jeff Widener. “Photographs in the press,” argued John Taylor (echoing John Tagg), “rarely stand alone” (Tagg 1988; Taylor 1998, 19). They are always modified by text, headlines, captions, and context. Indeed, the use of banner headlines around the Tiananmen Square images served, mostly, to embed meaning, further serving to stamp rhetorical force upon the iconic status of the subject rather than on any individual photograph.

Second, there is the issue of television. The conceit that “the whole world is watching” was at first the chant of antiwar demonstrators outside the Chicago Hilton Hotel during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The presence of journalists appeared to offer both protection and opportunity. Tiananmen Square was, as one journalist put it, “a television producer’s dream” (Wong 1996, 236) and television certainly proved a valuable ally to the demonstrators (Allemang 1989, A14).

In late May, until martial law was declared, CNN was able to broadcast live from Tiananmen Square using a microwave transmitter.<sup>43</sup> Both the images of the *Goddess of Democracy* and *Tank Man* were inherently telegenic, especially the *Tank Man*, whose rise to notoriety came only as a result of television coverage. As I have argued throughout this paper, the *Tank Man* photographs, before they were seen on television, were uninteresting and difficult to understand. Television made the image, but probably more the subject, iconic.

Third, there exists with photographs, and especially iconic photographs, the concern over memory and amnesia. As Roland Barthes (1993, 91) argues, “[N]ot only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory... but it actually blocks memory.” Certain images, such as Joe Rosenthal’s (1945) photograph of the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima, *Old Glory Goes Up on Mt. Suribachi*, supplant memories of the battle, such as the deaths of one-tenth of the seventy thousand US fighting force (quite apart from the eighteen thousand-plus Japanese who died there), reducing the month-long campaign into a simplified iconic image of victory—an orchestrated “regime of truth.”

Nick Ut’s photograph *Children Fleeing a Napalm Strike, June 8, 1972* has become one of the defining iconic images of the Vietnam War. Because the napalm strike was labeled as “accidental,”<sup>44</sup> its shocking presence on the stage of the image-world is less threatening to US self-esteem than the more gruesome and damaging picture-story of the 1968 My Lai massacre,<sup>45</sup> which, over time, the napalm photograph has almost buried.

Continued reference to the *Tank Man* photograph has had the effect of obscuring the harsher realities of the Beijing massacre that the Chinese government would want us to forget: the crushing of students and bicycles, the morgues piled high with bodies, the victims of various moments of cold-blooded killing, and so forth. Isn’t the whole idea of the iconic photograph rather a redundant modernist conceit in a postmodern age?

Every culture clings onto its collective history, but any attempt at generalization seems elusive. Perhaps why so few Chinese students recalled the tank man is because their minds were filled with harsher stuff: or perhaps people learn to forget: “Memory is a dangerous thing,” Louisa Lim (2014, 105) remarked, “in a country that was built to function on national amnesia”.

Memories of atrocities are also cultivated and selected by different interest groups and state actors. Few recall the South Korean Kwangu massacre in 1980 where several hundred student “pro-democracy”

protesters died after soldiers fired repeatedly into the crowd.<sup>46</sup> South Korea wasn't a political target for the West, where the massacre was given relatively little airtime: South Korea's trade barriers had already fallen.

Fourth, and finally, we have seen that iconic images are powerful and effective rhetorical devices. Barthes, in writing on the rhetoric of the image (1980, 275), considered language to be "a kind of vice which holds the connoted meanings from proliferating and limits the projective power of the image." By connecting the Tiananmen Square images discussed in the essay to linguistic formulae, meaning is kept in its vice. The messages told through the accompanying text become subservient to the images themselves. Yet the terms "democracy" and "freedom" remain largely unexamined.

In the eighteenth century, democracy was thought to be inapplicable to the large-scale nation-state. "It was appropriate for city-states and small republics" (Fishkin 1991, 14).<sup>47</sup> Subsequently, representative democracy has struggled to keep itself from becoming an oxymoron. At the same time globalization has undermined democracy's ability to enfranchise, in any meaningful way, a given society.<sup>48</sup>

Materially, democracy can be viewed as a form of intervention, curbing the free rein of oligarchic states, where democracy's critical function is as "the wrench of equality jammed (objectively and subjectively) into the gears of domination, it's what keeps politics from simply turning into law enforcement" (Rancière 2012, 2014, 79). And it is probably in this mode of operation that China's protesting students found themselves engaged when setting out to build the *Goddess of Democracy*.

Yet it is a very different kind of democracy message, or species of freedom, that the two iconic Tiananmen Square images seem to convey: both appear to be rooting to undermine, radically, the political autonomy of the Chinese state. All of which might explain China's despair and official amnesia on the matter.

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## NOTES

1. An exception being the iconic images linked to the personality cults of Chairman Mao and Che Guevara discussed by Vicki Goldberg as locally specific in Chapter 6, “Icons,” of her 1991 book *The Power of Photography*.
2. Four students died at Kent State University while protesting against the Vietnam War in 1968.
3. Before 1989 it may have been the most widely reproduced photograph in history (Goldberg 1991). As Joe Rosenthal said in 1955, “It has been done in oils, watercolours, pastels, chalk and matchsticks.... It has been sculpted in ice and in a hamburger.” Cited in Goldberg (1991, 143). In 1990 it was re-created as an advertisement for h.i.s. jeans (ibid.).
4. The journalist Louisa Lim recently showed the *Tank Man* photograph to 100 Beijing university students. Only fifteen recognized the picture (Lim 2014, 86). In China the image has been wilfully airbrushed from history.
5. For a detailed commentary on both of these photographs as icons, I suggest seeing Chapter 9 about the television era in Goldberg (1991), or see Hariman and Lucaites (2007).
6. As has been widely reported, the bulk of the killing occurred in other parts of Beijing. Muxidi, an area about three miles west of Tiananmen Square is “where most of the deaths occurred” (Nathan et al. 2002).
7. Based on estimates by Brook (1992) and qualified by Chang (2005) and a survey by a group of Western military attachés (Joan Shorestein Barone Center on the Press 1992).
8. There is evidence that the 27th Group Army (led by Yang Shangkun, the son-in-law of the Chinese president) in a rush to reach the square, inflicted casualties on members of the 38th Group Army (He 1996, 139; Brook 1992, 187). Such reports remain unconfirmed. Further evidence suggests that it was the 38th Group Army who were reticent about their role in quelling the uprising; see [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/03/world/asia/tiananmen-square-25-years-later-details-emerge-of-armys-chaos.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/03/world/asia/tiananmen-square-25-years-later-details-emerge-of-armys-chaos.html?_r=0).
9. The term *détournement* derives in substance from the situationist political happenings led by Guy Debord during the student uprising in Paris in 1968 (see Debord 1983). It should also be noted that the protest movement began before Hu Yaobang’s death (Scobell and Wortzel 2005, 70).
10. It should be noted that protests and reprisals occurred all over China at this time, from Shanghai across to Chengdu. The Beijing massacre was probably the most ferocious.
11. Photographs of the sculpture appeared on Soviet postage stamps and were included in the Soviet Calendar 1917–1947, a compilation of Soviet



- propaganda published to mark the revolution's fortieth anniversary. The sculpture was originally placed atop the Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 Paris World Fair. The head of the farm worker was the principal inspiration for the face and head of the Goddess (Han Minzhu 1990).
12. Wu Hung and the journalist John Gittings reported that the *Goddess of Democracy* was seven meters high (Wu 1991; Gittings 1989).
  13. Tiananmen Square appears on all government seals and other official materials: "The gate became an emblem, its image replicated in isolation on banknotes and coins, on the front page of all government documents, and in the nation's insignia" (Hung 1991, 88).
  14. "The war of monuments in the square began in 1949 when Mao ascended Tiananmen [the gate] and declared the founding of the People's Republic of China" (Wu 2005, 18). The date 18 August 1966 marked the moment the new enlarged portrait of Mao first hung on the fifteenth-century Gate of Heavenly Peace, signaling the full force of the Cultural Revolution (Goldberg 1991, 153).
  15. For example in 1978/1979 a "Democracy Wall" protest movement evolved where news and ideas, often in the form of big-character posters (*dazibao*), were posted in Xicheng District, Beijing.
  16. John Gittings, personal communication, 2014.
  17. Bai Meng, a member of the student core leadership recalled that "few of us thought about democracy when we first started... I didn't see any collective awareness at that time" (He 1996).
  18. Bai Meng: "from April 15–27th the VOA [Voice of America] was our primary source of information. The term 'pro-democracy' obviously gave many of us a clue as to what this movement would be. My own idea of a democracy movement was made clearer and reinforced by the VOAs coverage" (He 1996, 140). "VOA began to broadcast in China in 1944. The mission was to counteract communism" (ibid., 77).
  19. See *South China Morning Post*, 4 June 1989, 25.
  20. For more on the promotion and funding of pro-democracy movements in Ukraine to gain political leverage, see Mearsheimer (2014).
  21. See, for example, Andrew Higgins (1989), Catherine Sampson (1989), Jan Wong (1996), and *South China Morning Post* (5 June 1989, 1 and 3). In this unattributed account thirty people were reported to have died. Confirmed in Document 32 declassified SITREP from the US Embassy's chronology: "4th June 10.25-12.10 -four separate incidents of indiscriminate fire on crowds in front of Beijing Hotel. At least 56 civilian casualties" (NSA Archive, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB16/docs/doc32.pdf>).
  22. Fred Scott, email to author, 25 October 2014.

23. There is still controversy over the date of this event. I made my position on the date clear in Kristen Lubben's (2011) *Magnum Contacts Sheets* while writing on Tiananmen Square. Of about eleven eyewitnesses and fellow travelers who were in Beijing on that day, nine agree that the image was taken on 4 June (listed here with their affiliations in June 1989): Andrew Higgins, *The Independent*; Guy Dinmore, Reuters Beijing Bureau Chief; Arthur Tsang, Reuters; Catherine Sampson, *Times* (London); Brian Robbins, CNN; Jonathan Shaer, CNN; Fred Scott, BBC; Eric Thirer, BBC; and Charlie Cole, *Newsweek*. Chinese academic Wu Hung also confirms the date of 4 June (2005, 14), as does Mike Chinoy's 2014 film *On Assignment: China*.
24. The rolls of film were packed into a small box of tea and taken to Paris by a French student.
25. Magnum Photos was founded in 1947 and today has offices in Paris, London, New York, and Tokyo.
26. For example, see *New Straits Times* (Singapore) 5 June 1989, 3. The same paper reported on page 1 that ten tanks and sixteen APCs left Tiananmen Square to travel east along Chang'an Avenue, 3 km toward the embassy district and then returned.
27. At a press conference on 4 June 1990 student leader Chai Ling claimed she knew of a young woman who, on the evening of 3 June, stood in front of a tank and was crushed to death (Permuter 1998, 62).
28. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/mediaplay.php?id=17103&admin=41>. Presidential News Conference on 5 June 1989. The word "democracy" in relation to China is mentioned countless times, for example, "People are heroic when it comes to their commitment to democratic change."
29. Charles Cole, email to author, 18 October 2014.
30. Jonathan Shaer, email to author, October 2014.
31. Jonathan Shaer, the CNN cameraman who filmed the tank man sequence, claims to be alone in recording with a video camera on a tripod, and therefore to have footage of high quality. Shaer claims that the other US networks were monitoring the satellite feeds, dialed in the correct frequency, and recorded the sequence. There is no encryption. Generally ownership is respected (Shaer, personal communication to author, 2014).
32. Reuters photographer Arthur Tsang filed an image of tank man climbing onto the tank on 4 June, but it garnered little interest from his superiors (Tsang, personal communication via Charlie Cole, 2014). At the same time CNN transmitted two still images from the video footage from Beijing, but they were not broadcast (*ibid.*).
33. It should also be noted that in at least four British national newspapers the *Tank Man* photograph did not run at all during June 1989: *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Sun*, and the *Evening Standard*.

34. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *El País*, and *The Independent* were some of the national newspapers who chose to run the stand-off between the PLA and civilians rather than the tank man on their front pages on 6 June 1989.
35. Andrew Higgins, email to the author, 15 October 2014.
36. Wire services uniquely at that time had subscription arrangements with newspapers that allowed them to use any image that was transmitted without additional cost. Images from photo agencies carry a licensing fee that few newspapers are willing to pay.
37. See *South China Morning Post*, 4 June 1989, 23: CCTV reported on soldiers being attacked. See also Wong (1996, 246).
38. Franklin's picture appeared as the first image in *Time* magazine's "Year in Pictures." "Though distant and grainy, this photograph of a Chinese man standing down a tyrannical regime is the most extraordinary image of the year. It is flesh against steel, mortality against the onrush of terror, the very real stuff of courage" (Strobe Talbott of *Time* magazine, quoted in Permuter [1998, 71]).
39. *The Sun*, 5 June 1989, 7.
40. Simonides was a poet and guest speaker at a banquet held by a nobleman of Thessaly. The poet left the hall briefly. Returning, he found the ceiling collapsed; all the guests had perished. Reportedly, Simonides helped identify the bodies by remembering where the guests were seated. For a fuller explanation, see Yates (1966, 17).
41. I am grateful to Charlie Cole for raising this point.
42. Brown references Thomas Lemke's transcription of Michel Foucault: see Lemke, "'The Birth of Bio-Politics': Michel Foucault's Lecture at the Collège de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality," *Economy and Society* 30, no. 2 (May 2001): 190–207. Quotation found on page 202.
43. You can view Mike Chinoy's "Assignment China" (2014) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ho8vAFICeFQ>.
44. See *New York Times*, 8 June 1972, and Hariman and Lucaites (2007).
45. The massacre at My Lai occurred on 16 March 1968 and involved the cold-blooded killing of between 347 and 504 elderly men, women, and children in South Vietnam. It has been referred to as the "most shocking incident of the Vietnam War." Cited in Greiner (2009).
46. The official figure is that two hundred died, but the calculation is that the figure is much higher. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/752055.stm>.
47. Rousseau thought conditions favorable in Geneva, which had a population of twenty-two thousand; a similar view is shared by Montesquieu (Fishkin 1991, 14).
48. See Held (1999).

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