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After 25 Years, China Still Silent on Tiananmen Massacre

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On June 5, 1989, a man who has come to be known only as Tank Man stepped into history. Clad in a white tailored shirt and black trousers, two plastic shopping bags in hand, he stepped out onto a broad boulevard in Beijing as a phalanx of Chinese tanks lumbered toward him. He brought the lead tank to a stop and gestured to the line of tanks stretching down the tree-lined avenue to turn around and go back.

Shots were fired. But the man persisted and, after climbing onto one of the tanks and appearing to talk to the soldiers inside, he clambered back down and was whisked away by two men who came from nowhere.

The scene of a solitary, defenseless figure standing up to a mighty army became a powerful symbol of the 1989 Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests. Today, 25 years after troops opened fire on civilians to squelch those protests, killing hundreds or possibly thousands and shutting the door on political reforms in China, the brutal military crackdown remains taboo in the communist country.

The images of Tank Man were smuggled out of China, which had been under martial law for several weeks by then. In the West, Tank Man became one of the greatest icons of the struggle for democracy and human rights in the late 20th century, but censorship inside China ensured that no one saw the image. One report says Chinese state television did broadcast Tank Man's standoff on the news, but said that it showed how restrained the army had been, not how brave an ordinary Chinese man was.



Photo: Ann Starbuck

Tank Man's standoff with the military came as the tanks were leaving the square by China's Forbidden City and trundling down the Avenue of Eternal Peace. A day earlier, those same tanks had crushed — sometimes literally, sometimes with bullets — the massive demonstration by students, workers and others who had set up shop in the square to demand an end to corruption and profiteering by politicians, and to enjoy the rights enshrined in the Chinese constitution.

No one knows what happened to many of the thousands of protesters in Tiananmen Square during what the West still refers to as a massacre. The Chinese authorities have called events that day “much ado about nothing” and

are still trying to sweep them under the carpet.

When PBS producer [Antony Thomas](#) showed the iconic Tank Man picture to a group of students at Beijing University on the 20th anniversary of the massacre, none of the students knew what the photo was.

In an [article in Slate](#), also five years ago, journalist Christopher Beam noted that there is no mention of the weeks of protests or the slaughter in Tiananmen Square in Chinese textbooks. He says that, “For the most part, the government avoids discussing the issue at all.”

“The government does acknowledge that the People’s Liberation Army intervened after seven weeks of demonstrations and that people were killed. But the official line is that, rather than crushing a peaceful protest, the military simply defended itself — and the country — against violent counterrevolutionary elements,” Beam wrote.

On the 25th anniversary of the massacre, the government is still [tight-lipped](#) about what happened in Tiananmen, a historical turning point that the younger generation [scarcely knows about](#). American actress Ann Starbuck, who was doing her junior year abroad at a university in Beijing when the protests began, thinks that’s why the rest of the world still talks about the events of June 4, 1989.

“I believe that if the Chinese government had come clean, nobody would’ve cared at this point,” Starbuck told The Washington Diplomat.



Photo: Ann Starbuck

American actress Ann Starbuck, who spent her junior year studying abroad at a Beijing university, stands in front of Tiananmen Square in 1988. Starbuck, who witnessed the pro-democracy protests in the square a year later, wrote a one-woman play about the events that will open June 2 at the Hudson Guild Theatre in Hollywood to mark the 25th anniversary of the massacre.

“If five or 10 years later, they had truth and reconciliation hearings like they had in South Africa after apartheid, if they said, ‘This is what happened, this is how many people died’ ... if they had been brave enough like the Tank Man who stepped in front of the line of fire and said what happened, would we be having this conversation? Probably not. It would be just another page in the history books,” Starbuck said.

Starbuck has written a one-woman play about Tiananmen Square that will open on June 2 at the Hudson Guild Theatre in Hollywood, Calif. She says the play is her own coming-of-age story but also evokes memories of Chinese friends who took part in the 1989 protests and much-publicized hunger strikes.

Speaking about a scene in which she plays one of the hunger strikers, Starbuck broke down.

“It’s crazy to think that I was so affected by this as an American, but I was,” she said, her voice going quiet as she apologized for her tears. “Sorry ... but I was.

“Beijing had been, up to that point, a very utopian place to me. It seemed so idyllic and the threat never seemed real,” Starbuck said. “A lot of the Chinese students I was friends with, they didn’t want to renounce communism; they were just saying, ‘We could make it better.’

“They wanted to live with the rights written in the Chinese constitution, which is very much like the American constitution,” Starbuck added. “The Chinese have a bill of rights and it says there’s freedom of speech and freedom of assembly and the press. This is what the students were trying to get through — they just wanted to have the rights the constitution says they have.”

Because the crackdown instilled fear in many Chinese to even talk about the protests, Starbuck said she has lost contact with all of her friends in China.

“When I came back to the States [in 1989], I wrote to my best friend in China and I got a letter from her that said, ‘Please don’t write me. It’s too dangerous. I’ll write you when I can.’ And I never heard from her again,” Starbuck told us.

“It is pretty well known that every student that was involved with the protests was at one point rounded up and questioned and either jailed or sent to camps — labor camps or reeducation camps,” she said.

[Robert Daly](#), director of the [Kissinger Institute](#) on China and the United States at the Wilson Center in Washington, agrees with Starbuck that the ongoing suppression of human rights in China is the reason why the West still talks about Tiananmen.

To be sure, the nation of 1.3 billion has experienced stunning positive changes in the last quarter-century, with the average Chinese enjoying better health — in spite of horrific pollution problems in cities and food scares — more wealth following the country’s dizzying economic rise, and, somewhat incredibly, more rights than they had in 1989. Still, “Chinese who run afoul of their government have about the same degree of recourse today that they did in the early 1990s,” Daly said.



No Chinese leader in the past 25 years has “shown interest in guaranteeing that Chinese enjoy the human rights enshrined in their own constitution,” he added.

“It is the lack of progress on these fronts and Beijing’s ongoing and largely successful efforts to squelch free discussion and analysis of 1989 that account for the continued international attention to Tiananmen Square,” Daly said.

In the run-up to the infamous anniversary that China wants the world to ignore, Beijing has been shooting itself in the foot and stoking interest in Tiananmen Square by doing things like arresting human rights activists.

Scores of lawyers, activists, artists and intellectuals have been detained by the authorities as the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre draws near. Many of the arrests [reported in the Western media](#) appear to be directly linked to the massacre.

Among others who have been detained are an activist who planned a hunger strike to remember the massacre; an author who wrote an online essay that was critical of the government; and an artist who staged a performance to commemorate the crackdown. The artist was an 18-year-old soldier at the time of the 1989 protests and had been dispatched to break them up.

Last month, a well-known human rights lawyer who took part in the protests, Pu Zhiqiang, was [arrested in Beijing](#) along with four others after attending a seminar on the topic. State-run news agency Xinhua also announced that journalist [Gao Yu](#) had been arrested and charged with leaking a government document to a foreign website. A lawyer for Gao said the document could have contained details on how the government plans to forge ahead with economic reforms while keeping the lid on the spread of democracy.

The government’s attempts to keep a tight lid on Tiananmen Square also extend to the country’s burgeoning microblogs, which have exposed the very graft and greed at the top echelons of power that drew legions of students to the streets 25 years ago. Last year, for example, around the time of the anniversary, certain terms were blocked on popular Chinese search engine Sina Weibo. They included “June 4th,” “student movement,” “special day” and “take to the streets,” along with more than 100 other terms.

Starbuck said she’s saddened by the fact that “it’s still such a threatening thing to talk about Tiananmen Square in China.”

“It’s crazy. And it’s sad to me that a whole generation of Chinese people — it’s like they think, well, the country made it through that and now we all have big houses with nice things so it doesn’t matter,” Starbuck said. “That’s a reason to talk about it in my play.”

Many Chinese sources, especially those who have family in China, refused to talk to The Washington Diplomat for this story. One of them, a student in the United States, said she was too young to remember the events of June 4, 1989, and her parents, who live in China, could not risk talking.

“It’s a sensitive subject and there’s potential risk of getting tracked, if not worse,” she said, adding that even after



Photo: Ann Starbuck

In 1989, students, workers and other Chinese protesters set up shop in Tiananmen Square to demand an end to corruption and profiteering by politicians, and to enjoy the rights enshrined in the Chinese constitution.

25 years, “You can never be paranoid enough when it comes to the Chinese government.”

About the Author

Karin Zeitvogel is a freelance writer who traveled to China in 1991, on the anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre — not to report on the event but to run a race on the Great Wall. She was initially denied a visa to travel to China and thinks to this day that her application was rejected because she listed journalism as her profession. She walked out of the visa office, counted to 10 and then walked back in to fill out another application, this time saying she was a teacher. The visa was granted.

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