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Icon of the revolution

by Patrick Wright

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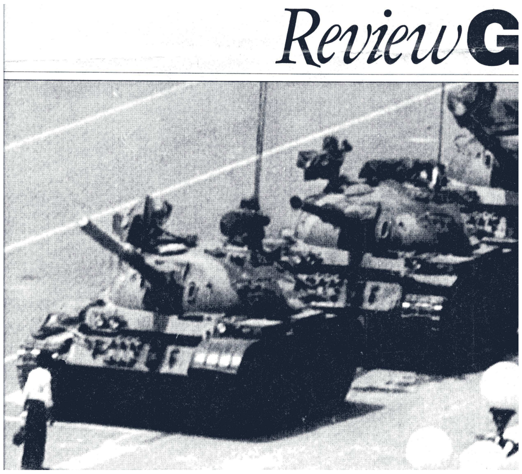
CRUSHED bicycles, bodies heaped up at a hospital, a statue of the Goddess of Democracy erected on May 30, 1989 . . . and toppled by a tank a few days later. There were many images from Beijing in 1989, but the strongest dates from just after the massacre: from 5 June, when the People’s Liberation Army were securing lines of supply into the reoccupied Tiananmen Square.

A column of tanks set off down Changan Avenue, and into the extraordinary encounter that would be captured by nervous western photographers and cameramen from the balconies of the old Beijing Hotel, and then seen, almost simultaneously, around the world.

Kate Adie reported the event that night on the BBC’s Nine O’Clock News. ‘Just after mid-day the tanks rolled out of the square. A lone young man stood in front of the first one. The tank faltered, came to a stop’. The scene then unfolded like a monstrous mechanical ballet. . The tank at the head of this supposedly unstoppable column tried to veer to the right, but the man steeped in front of it. It moved to the left, but he stepped in again, all the time shouting and gesturing for it to go away. He climbed up on to the tank,. Attempting to speak to the men inside it. Eventually the tank commander emerged to reply to the figure, by then on the ground. Later the man cycled off, returning to intercept the column further down the road.

The still photographs appeared on the front pages of western newspapers the next day. Some tried to bring this extraordinarily courageous figure as close as possible, while others stressed his vulnerability, showing him tiny and remote in the wide open space of Changan Avenue, with tanks stretching away and a burned-out bus at the side of the road. The man’s gestures vary from one shot to the next: his two bags are transferred from hand to hand; he gesticulates; he stands with arms at his side.



As Kate Adie recalls it three years later, the most striking thing about this symbolic confrontatíon was that ít *wasn’t* a single moment. The man was there for some time, persisting and engaging the tank’s crew in conversation. ‘It was an extraordinarily purposeful but mundane way of doing things . . . It seemed impromptu. There he was with his little plastic bag – such a human touch, as if he had been shopping.’ It seemed curiously non-heroic at the time: here was ‘Little Mr. Ordinary” in a drama that was all the more remarkable because ‘the Chinese people are not known for individualistic behaviour’.

Photographer Stuart Franklin, who works with the Magnum agency, had a balcony higher up than the BBC cameraman’s, which offered perhaps a better angle on these spell-binding events. Franklin remembers sharing it with the American photographer Charlie Cole, working for *Newsweek.* Most other western journalists weren’t at the Beijing Hotel because you could only get noodles there. They preferred the Sheraton, which did hamburgers. Speaking from another, remote, hotel room, this one in Quito, Ecuador, Franklin confirms that his picture has been widely used. Even then, he had multiple copies in his rucksack, emblazoned on Fruit of the Loom T-shirts. He remembered a writer from *Vanity Fair* on the balcony declaring this to be the key moment of the whole Tiananmen Square story: but Franklin himself had not seen it that way.

He still doesn’t think much of his picture, preferring far less well-known images he had taken in Tiananmen. ‘The guy isn’t even gesticulating,’ Franklin declares with the mild despair of a professional who finds one of his lesser works selected by history, and elevated above all the others. He declares the picture to be ‘a to be a bit of a reach, really,’ that is, too dependent on what people are prepared to read into it: ‘All that stuff about man against the machine . . . you can go off into desperate vagaries,’ he says, remembering the superior pictures a Magnum colleague took of civilians reasoning with tanks in Prague, 1968.

Charlie Cole remembers Beijing from another distant hotel room, in Bangkok, where he has been seeing things he never thought he’d see again after Tiananmen. As he recalls, they had spent the night before lying on the floor of Franklin’s room with gunfire around, and bullets ricocheting off the hotel walls. That mid-day, the street was empty — only a short time before, soldiers had opened fire on people crowding the Avenue. When that man appeared in front of the tank 'there was no doubt in my mind that he was going to be killed. They'd shot so many others, and I was certain he'd die.' He hoped the man would run. He held his breath while he took the last few frames. The experience was like deer-hunting — the 'buck fever' that brings on trembling just when the trigger has to be squeezed.

It was Charlie Cole's photograph that went on to win the World Press award, which he describes as 'a bit of an embarrassment', doubting that it was better than anyone else's. He reckons the event should be remembered as 'an incredible action, not an incredible picture'. He thinks this was one of the few occasions when television had the edge on still photography. Certainly, the stills probably only confirm the memory of the television footage, which actually showed the tension building. One image recedes into another, in the strange confusion of immediacy and otherness that passes as global news footage.

But how much is known about the man on the ground? Amnesty International refers to an article in the *Sunday Express*, which identified the 'Brave Chinese Student Seen by Millions on TV' as Wang Weilin, 19, a student and son of a Beijing factory worker. It reported he had been identified by friends who saw him in a line of shaven-headed dissidents paraded on state TV.

He was said to have been arrested by secret police less than two miles from Changan Avenue, and to have been charged with being a counter-revolutionary, a traitor, as political hooligan,' and also with 'attempting to subvert members of the People's Liberation Army.' The tank commander was also said to have been demoted for bringing world-wide loss of face to the PLA by halting his tanks.

And that's about the extent of it. Amnesty International knows little more, and concedes the evidence is unsubstantiated and 'very thin'. The Chinese government has since denied that Wang was executed. In June 1990, Jiang Zemin, general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, told American TV journalist Barbara Walters that Wang was never killed, but failed to say what did happen to him. Shortly afterwards, a pro-Chinese newspaper in Hong Kong denied that Wang had ever even been arrested.

There has been considerable speculation that he was shot at the time. Amnesty International points out things like that were happening on the street, sometimes without any reference to senior officers. The *Sunday Express* quoted one of Wang's friends as saying ‘We fear he has been killed. He is the one person the authorities could never bring before a People’s Court. He’s a hero. If Wang was publicly executed, he would become a martyr and there would be a world outcry.’

But whatever they did or did not do with the man, the authorities could not control the image he had given to the world. They tried to make that image over to their own cause, suggesting feebly that it exemplified the tolerance with which the PLA had set out to achieve the ‘Restoration of Order.’

The Chinese opposition has itself taken the highly-condensed image to heart. Dr Wang Hao, now training as an investment analyst in London, speaks of the new image of Chinese youth that Wang Weilin gave to the Chinese people. While Wang embodied the old virtues of self-sacrifice and civilian courage, he also offered ‘a new James Bond kind of image’, of the individual triumphing against apparently insuperable odds - an alternative to the mass-based imagery of official propaganda, which, as Dr Wang remembers from his own schooldays, favours the idea of the ‘human wave’ pouring on, regardless of machine-guns and tanks. Wang Weilin was a new kind of hero, and not an industrious cog in the machine, or a ‘rustless screw’ in the phrase applied to one of the great state heroes of the fifties.

The image has been subject to much interpretation in the West, too. The military historian John Keegan declares it a merely ‘poetic image’, a story of ‘the impersonal armed might of the army lined up against the unvanquished human spirit.’ He then breaks to say, drily, ‘You can write the words yourself.’ Some newspapers have certainly done that. Tantalised by the image of this man who is universally known and yet almost completely obscure, newspapers have felt obliged to augment the story. One report confirmed Wang’s status as a student by putting books in his bag, and there were diverse variations on the words he is said to have shouted at the tanks, from the simple ‘Go away’ of the *Sunday Express* to ‘Go back, turn around, stop killing my people’ elaborated by *Today* a week or so later.

Leaders all over the world hailed him. President Bush commended his courage, followed by senior rock stars like Neil Young. Neil Kinnock spoke for Parliament, remarking that: ‘The memory of one unarmed young man standing in front of a column of tanks ... will remain ... long after the present leadership in China and what they stand for has been forgotten.’ That claim has since been corroborated by Wim Wenders, whose new film ‘Until the End of the World’ envisions Beijing, in 1999, when the old order has visibly fallen - and glimpses the man in front of the tank, by this time a gilded monument.

There can be no doubting the magnificence of Wang Weilin’s stand, but we should still be prepared to wonder about our own fascination with the image. Robbie Barnett, who helped set up ‘June 4th China Support’ to look after fleeing members of the democracy movement, cautions against relying on it too heavily. The struggle in Tiananmen Square in 1989 was indeed intensely iconographic, but the symbolic drama at its core was far more complex than is suggested by this isolated image of one individual holding out against the totalitarian state.

Ever since 1949, when Mao came to Tiananmen to declare the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Square has been the site of what critic Wu Hung has described as ‘a war of monuments.’ The communist regime has sought to remake this vast square in its own image, but the place has also been a focus of opposition as people have reinterpreted its monuments, using them to ‘refresh their memories of previous struggles and sacrifices.’ The student movement was in this tradition, and not just with its Goddess of Democracy.

Barnett wonders whether the image of Wang Weilin might not fit a little too well with a western approach to China that was challenged by events of 1989. Until then it had been customary to view the communist system as a strong and stable state that would gradually loosen as the West traded with it. This approach, developed in the US during the sixties, avoids open criticism of the regime in China, preferring to confine its criticism to individual cases of human rights abuses.

Barnett also wonders how much it reflects the way the western media handles international news. He mentions the tendency to replace specialist journalists with roving celebrity reporters, visiting firemen who scoop up action wherever they find it. TV’s appetite for spectacle and witnesses is insatiable. Some people rash enough to provide soundbites from the front line incurred lengthy jail sentences as a result. Perhaps Wang Weilin was not just the star interviewee who got away, but a man whose fate might have been sealed by the cameras that transformed him into an overwhelming symbol.

Most importantly, Barnett hopes the image of Wang Weilin won’t deflect us from asking what remains the fundamental question about the democracy movement; was it only a student movement or did it achieve a genuine integration with working people in the city and the countryside? Barnett reckons that it was the emergence of this wider support that convinced leaders the movement had to be suppressed.

The first tents to be crushed were those of the Workers’ Autonomous Federation and the first people arrested were workers, too. The real heroes were those ordinary citizens of Beijing who came out to defend the students and bore the brunt of the military response. To say this implies no denigration either of the students or of the man we are calling Wang Weilin. But what would have happened if the democracy movement had produced an image not so immediately graspable on the West’s own terms: a non-heroic image, say, or one with collective edge, or including those workers. Would the West have been able to read it as easily as the tank image? And would the West have read it that easily if the media had not sensitised the eyes to the image of reasonable man versus brutal communist tank over 30 years of Eastern European defiance?

Li Lu, who was in charge of the Students' Congress in Tiananmen Square and now lives in the United States, reckons anyway that the image of Wang in front of the tanks belongs not to the West, not even just to the student movement, but to China as a whole: 'We feel so fortunate to have that image.' In Li's eyes, Wang Weilin is not an individualistic figure in the western sense, nor a hero of superhuman proportions. Instead, he is a representative of his generation and its hopes. 'I feel so attached to this image, and I can assure you that all the people in that place share the attachment.'

But though Li is proud of Wang Weilin, he too wants to modify the way his action has been interpreted in the West. As he points out, we can conceive this image as the stand of a lone hero against the armoured communist state, but only if we overlook the heroism of the tank commander who refused to drive on, as so many had done in the massacre of the day before. Li can't be sure, but he likes to think that both men were about the same age. It is the participation of the tank commander that widens the image, making it the idealistic icon of young China as a whole.

Li Lu is interested to hear about the monument in the Wim Wenders film, but he prefers his own mind's eye to the cinema. 'I can see it now,' he says, peering into a Tiananmen Square where the Goddess of Democracy is back in place, this time made of more substantial stuff than the plaster used the first time. Behind that he sees another new statue, celebrating not just Wang Weilin but also the tank commander who wouldn't run him over. Once that adjustment has been made, Li is content to embrace that image as the primary icon of a revolution which will, he remains sure, get there in the end.

[Note: Since this article was published, it has become evident that the *Sunday Express's* story about 'Wang Weilin' was a disreputable newspaper-selling fiction. The man's identity remains unknown]

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