

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Tiananmen Square Massacre

By Mike Kubic
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In this article, former Newsweek correspondent Mike Kubic explores the country-wide protests against government oppression and censorship that took place in 1980-90s China, and the government-ordered massacre that subsequently occurred. As you read, take notes on the author's use of language and structure, and what it reveals about his point of view.

- [1] It is one of the most iconic images of the protest movements that took place in many parts of the globe in the last decades of the 20th century: in the middle of a street just outside Beijing's Tiananmen Square, a slender young man stands in front of a Chinese tank, barring it from moving forward. The tank driver tries to bypass the youngster, but he takes short steps in the same direction and keeps facing the gun that stares at him from atop the vehicle. ;



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A paragon of resolve and bravery, the protester embodied the determination and anger of hundreds of thousands of young Chinese students who in the spring of 1989 came to Beijing to do what their older brothers, fathers and forefathers had done repeatedly since the end of World War II: express their outrage at the country's leadership and demand a change.

What touched off the chain of 1989 events that led up to what the Chinese call "The June Fourth Incident" and the rest of the world knows as "The Tiananmen Square Massacre" was yet another desperate attempt to address China's corruption, poverty, and inept and oppressive governance, ills that have beset the country's 1.4 billion people for much of its history.

The most immediate cause of the demonstrations was the ruling regime's failure to cope with the demands for rapid economic and social changes that were increased following the death in 1976 of Chairman Mao Zedong. A towering Communist Party leader who in 1949 founded the People's Republic of China, Mao ran the country with an iron fist, but after 26 years in power he left it seething with discontent and an economic basket case.¹

- [5] His successors tried to mollify² the anger by launching in the 1980s half-hearted economic reforms and by easing some of the controls imposed by Mao. It was a fiasco: the reforms did not work and the loosened controls encouraged the opposition. The upshot was an outburst of demonstrations by Western-oriented students who blamed China's problems on the authoritarian political system and called for democracy, greater government accountability, freedom of the press, and freedom of speech.

1. A "basket case" often refers to a person or thing regarded as useless or unable to cope.
2. **Mollify (verb):** to do or say something to make someone less upset or angry

In mid-1986, their protests were reinforced by an important ally, an astrophysicist named Fang Lizhi. A tenured professor at Princeton University, Fang returned to his native country to advocate for freedom. Touring Chinese universities, he urged students to speak out about liberty, human rights, and separation of powers. "There is nothing to be afraid of," Fang told students in Shanghai, "For instance, criticizing government leaders is a symbol of democracy. I hold that we may criticize leaders..." ;

Inspired by Fang and other "people-power" movements around the world, in December 1986, students in several Chinese universities staged protests against the slow pace of reforms. But their issues were wide-ranging, and included demands for economic liberalization, democracy, and the rule of law, and they quickly spread to Shanghai, Beijing and other major cities.

In response, Deng Xiaoping, China's new top Communist, accused Lizhi of blindly worshipping Western lifestyles, capitalism, and multi-party systems, and of undermining China's socialist ideology and traditional values. Deng's attempt to sound conciliatory³ while using hard line measures only made students more unyielding.

The Crisis Escalates

Instead of giving up, thousands of university students in late April 1989 marched to Beijing's enormous Tiananmen Square and drafted a list of seven demands for the government, which included requests like the release of information on the income of state leaders and their family members, ending the ban on privately run newspapers, and stopping press censorship.

- [10] From then on, the crisis kept heating up and spinning out of control. A front-page editorial in the official People's Daily in effect denounced the demonstration as a revolt against the party and the government, an accusation the students regarded as outrageously unfair. Their answer was another massive protest rally on April 27, in which participated more than 50,000 students from all Beijing universities. They broke through police lines to the cheers of thousands of bystanders, including factory workers, and marched to Tiananmen Square.

The government tried once more to pacify the rebellion by offering to negotiate with the students, but they responded by calling for a hunger strike that aroused widespread sympathy. On May 17 and 18, about one million Beijing residents from all walks of life – including soldiers, policemen and low-ranking party officials – demonstrated in solidarity with the fasting students.

Finally convinced that the rallies were a threat to his regime, Deng and the Communist Party leadership declared martial law⁴ on May 20 and ordered the army to put down the demonstrations. The generals mobilized an estimated 30 divisions and brought to Beijing's suburbs as many as 250,000 troops. But when four days later the soldiers tried to enter the city, they ran into tens of thousands of demonstrators who surrounded their vehicles, lectured them about their grievances, and urged them to join their cause.

3. **Conciliatory** (*adjective*): intending to please or make peace with

4. "Martial law" refers to military government taking charge over ordinary law enforcement.

Blocked from moving forward, the army withdrew to its bases outside the city. Meanwhile, the students' hunger strike continued, the protest demonstrations spread to about 400 Chinese cities, and on the morning of June 3, students in Beijing disarmed⁵ some troops who were dressed in plainclothes and tried to enter the city. It was the straw that broke the camel's back, triggering the massacre. In the evening, and the next day, June 4, tanks and soldiers armed with machine guns stormed the Tiananmen Square and killed or arrested tens of thousands of protesters.

The next day, as a column of army tanks approached the Tiananmen Square, they met the last resistance in the lone man whose defiance immortalized the revolt.

- [15] In the weeks that followed, Deng delivered a speech accusing the students of trying to “establish a totally Western-dependent bourgeois⁶ republic”; ordered widespread arrests of protesters and their supporters; expelled foreign journalists, and controlled the domestic coverage of the events so strictly that even now it's not known how many people were killed by army, and what happened to brave protester who was last seen being pulled by bystanders away from the tank he faced. ;

The response of the international community had a significant impact on the Chinese economy. The World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and foreign governments suspended loans to China; tourism dropped and foreign direct investment commitments were cancelled. But in the end, the protests strengthened role of the Communist Party and the state. In the crisis' aftermath, many of the freedoms introduced during the 1980s were cancelled, and government returned to a conventional hard line rule.

Although the students' demands were new, the upheaval of the 1980s reminded both Chinese and Western observers of the so-called “Cultural Revolution,” a decade-long turmoil during which hundreds of thousands of young “Red Guards” rioted in support of Mao Zedong's calls for a purge of alleged enemies of his rule. By 1976, when the fanatic period ended, the regime remained unchanged but millions of Chinese had suffered torture, imprisonment, property seizures and public humiliation, and millions of others had been forcibly moved from cities to do slave labor in the countryside.

In his book *China's Fate*, an account of the country's hectic decade of the 1980s, former New York Times' Beijing Bureau Chief Edward Gargan made a similar point. In his view, he wrote, “the wondrous demonstrations for democracy and economic change...ending in the butchery on Beijing's streets on June 4, were but the most visible and tragic manifestations of China's intellectual, social and political turmoil.”

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5. **Disarm (verb):** to take away someone's weapons

6. “Bourgeois” refers to being characteristic of the middle class, typically with reference to its perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: What does the word “paragon” most closely mean as it is used in paragraph 2? [RI.4]
 - A. A person of high morals and many achievements
 - B. A perfect example or representation of something
 - C. A masterpiece or work of art
 - D. A standard to strive for

2. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. “he takes short steps in the same direction and keeps facing the gun” (Paragraph 1)
 - B. “resolve and bravery” (Paragraph 2)
 - C. “embodied the determination and anger of hundreds of thousands of young Chinese students” (Paragraph 2)
 - D. “express their outrage at the country’s leadership and demand a change” (Paragraph 2)

3. PART A: Which TWO of the following statements reflect the central ideas of the text? [RI.2]
 - A. The Tiananmen Square “tank man” will forever represent the hopes and efforts of activists throughout the world.
 - B. Chinese youth during this time were misguided in believing they would be able to confront the brutal and oppressive Chinese government and make significant change.
 - C. The Tiananmen Square protests were in many ways inevitable, coming at a time of great social, cultural, and economic unrest.
 - D. The Tiananmen Square massacre, with the deaths and arrests of tens of thousands of protesters, inspired others across the world to stand up to Chinese oppression.
 - E. The Chinese government during this time, though successful in stopping the protesters’ efforts, used brutal tactics that increased oppression and discontent throughout the country.
 - F. The Tiananmen Square massacre was a reflection of the decades-earlier “Cultural Revolution” in that both movements were led by youth and ineffective.

4. PART B: Which TWO phrases from the text best support the answers to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. “young Chinese students ... came to Beijing to do what their older brothers, fathers and forefathers had done repeatedly since the end of World War II: express their outrage at the country’s leadership and demand a change” (Paragraph 2)
 - B. “‘The Tiananmen Square Massacre’ was yet another desperate attempt to address China’s corruption, poverty, and inept and oppressive governance, ills that have beset the country’s 1.4 billion people for much of its history (Paragraph 3)
 - C. “The next day, as a column of army tanks approached the Tiananmen Square, they met the last resistance in the lone man whose defiance immortalized the revolt” (Paragraph 14)
 - D. “The response of the international community had a significant impact on the Chinese economy. The World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and foreign governments suspended loans to China; tourism dropped and foreign direct investment commitments were cancelled” (Paragraph 16)
 - E. “in the end, the protests strengthened role of the Communist Party and the state. In the crisis’ aftermath, many of the freedoms introduced during the 1980s were cancelled, and government returned to a conventional hard line rule” (Paragraph 16)
 - F. “the upheaval of the 1980s reminded both Chinese and Western observers of the so-called ‘Cultural Revolution,’” (Paragraph 17)

5. How does the author’s use of language and structure reveal his point of view toward this historical event? Cite evidence from the text in your response. [RI.6]

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Can you think of any other instances where a country's citizens protested for change within the government or its policies? Of these instances, which concluded productively and which ended in more violent consequences?
2. Do you think the Tiananmen Square massacre could have been avoided? Why or why not?
3. If you lived under a similarly oppressive government, would you try to change the political/social status quo? If you would, how would you go about starting that change?
4. In the context of this text, why do people resist change? Why did the Chinese government and military forces fight so hard to stop the widely supported movement to enact social change in their country? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.