

# HERO COMPLEX: THE OVERSIMPLIFICATION OF TANK MAN

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**T**he morning after the Chinese government ruthlessly suppressed pro-democracy protests at what would be known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre, a mysterious civilian, later affectionately dubbed “Tank Man” by his adoring Western audience, blocked the path of government tanks that had not hesitated to crush protests of the tyranny of China’s communist regime. The 1989 photographs of “Tank Man” exemplify the great potential of the ordinary individual. In what little viewers see of that man, every aspect seems inspiring, scintillating, and superheroic, from his nickname to his confidence in the face of intimidation to his plastic grocery bags held casually by his side like battle axes. He is shown facing the same giant military behemoths that had squashed an uprising hours prior but which now hesitate to touch this mysteriously godlike figure.

Even though it took a great amount of daring for one man to face weapons of mass destruction in a symbolic protest, and even though it is undeniable that Tank Man was strong, the true power of Tank Man’s actions lay in the shutter of the camera that captured and publicized his defiance. As Susan Sontag puts it, “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed . . . putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power” (2). Tank Man’s predominantly Western audience relates itself to a simple interpretation of the conflict, feeling exhilaration upon gleaning a triumph of staunch pro-democracy and the all-American archetype of the little man against the big man. Unbeknownst to this audience, behind Tank Man’s flaming resistance and quiet courage, his homeland still languishes in censorship such that his significance is largely forgotten in a time when he is needed most.

First stripped of his original meaning and context by the viewers of his image, Tank Man remains an example of the erosion of an event down to a motif. He is objectified as a receptacle for others' pity in a similar way that the camera objectifies the nude female body, as photographs "have been lined up for the pleasure and judgement of a . . . proprietor" (Milne 209). Both the objectifying point of view of the "male gaze" in artistic renderings of nude women, which exclude the voice of the subject, and the "Western gaze" in photojournalism take the narrative away from the subject and oversimplify their personality and history. Thus, the only way to allow for the truth behind the images to shine is through "the increased accessibility of art," where "it is often ordinary people . . . the 'subjects' who hold the power and drive the creative direction of such work" (Milne 209). According to writer Pico Iyer, the photographs of Tank Man, while outrageous, had no noticeable impact on China's totalitarian grip on its citizens. They were a passing fancy reminiscent of 'inspiration porn.' The photos portrayed a person in troubled circumstances as inspirational, while prioritizing the emotional needs of the objectifier, because they were primarily consumed by a Western audience to evoke self-satisfaction with their own relative freedom. The photos are virtually unknown to Chinese people today (Iyer). Objectification preserves the status quo. Rather than serving as a symbol of resistance for Chinese revolutionaries, Tank Man's image has only succeeded in keeping foreigners complacent in self-approbation.

This objectification, however one-sided, is fundamental to touching an audience and transforming public opinion, since the audience must sympathize with the clemency and appeal of heroic defiance it puts forth (Skidmore). A sense of martyrdom emotionally exploits the audience and manipulates the action as the audience internalizes the emotional trauma. Photographs like Tank Man idealize a difficult process of enacting change for less-privileged people, as Western viewers may perceive those living in the aftermath of the massacre.

The composition of an individual or an underdog against the world is seen time and time again in photographs that contrast man and tank, girl and soldier, protester and armed police. It evokes sympathy and puts "the underdog" on a pedestal, all while giving them a moral high ground to compensate for a physical disadvantage (Iqbal).

For example, the likeable, outnumbered heroes are seen stonily staring down awkwardly uniformed racists in a Swedish Nazi demonstration, or spreading peace for the anti-war cause of the 1960s by handing out flowers to a line of men with bayonets, as if childishly inquisitive rather than endangered by weapons (Iqbal). Journalist Patrick Witty points out that in some shots of “Tank Man,” the photographer gives a view encompassing the entire line of tanks in front of Tank Man, while the best-known photographs magnify the man himself, leaving out the desolation of the surroundings and the enormity of the tanks (Witty). Such images romanticize the struggle for freedom; they “capture us, the viewers, because, yes, they expose and ridicule authority . . . [and they] reflect our optimism as an audience,” the aforementioned optimism being a product of fantasy (Iqbal). The oppressor appears innocuous because of the weak hero’s nonchalance. This calmness causes the audience to believe the hero has a secret weapon or army waiting for the right moment to strike back (Iqbal). When single motifs are deemed by media consumers to be the figurehead of movements, the movements and their actions are perceived and responded to superficially. They stagnate social and administrative change because the fight, at least in the picture, is already in the process of being won. While the photographer controls the composition and content of the image, viewers have a say in assigning meaning and reacting to the image. The audience, with this power, labels the weak and vastly outnumbered as courageous and thus advantaged.

Since Tank Man has had little impact on matters in China, viewers look elsewhere to find his significance. His appeal was so universal that “even the billions who cannot read [or] have never heard of Mao Zedong could follow what the ‘tank man’ did” (Iyer). One consequence of Tank Man’s pervasiveness and universal appeal was that his audience made him disposable.

Due to its ease of interpretation, Tank Man’s likeness was eventually reduced to memes for the purposes of analogizing other conflicts (Watts). This is especially so in online spaces in China, where Tank Man’s image is only legally exposed through lighthearted cartoons depicting entirely unrelated events. A survey conducted on Tank Man’s historical impact states that only fifteen out of one-hundred modern-day Chinese university students can somewhat identify

a photograph of Tank Man as derivative of Chinese authoritarianism, suggesting that nothing important was done in the wake of the Tank Man hysteria to improve the circumstances of people like him (Fisher). The same exact composition is recklessly applied to other conflicts, like in the memes Watts discusses, stripping the Tiananmen Square conflict down to something without its own unique historical context. The co-opting of Tank Man's message as a universal symbol can answer for his widespread popularity. The events of Tiananmen Square take a back seat to what the media deemed most important in making sense of and milking outrage from Tank Man.

The canonized image and utter dwarfing of Tank Man by his nemeses obscure the moral violations of Tiananmen Square. Historian Daniel Boorstin argues that in the past, "when a great man appeared . . . people looked for God's purpose in him"; but due to the cult of personality encouraged by Tank Man's monopolization of the story of Chinese authoritarianism, in this case, "we look for his press agent," the message his photographer espouses (qtd. in Iyer). In an attempt to make the conflict easier to digest, the media took to portraying Tank Man as a vastly outnumbered hero of democracy calmly protecting his dignity as if he were a forgiving saint, blessed with protection from higher forces in his battle with the big, bad, military. This portrayal diminished the horrors of the massacre that occurred beforehand in Tiananmen Square and the subsequent legacy of suppression and fear, which would have deemed Tank Man truly inconsequential in comparison if not for society's worship of celebrity (Witty).

Despite his superhero persona, Tank Man lies by omission; he does not open his mouth and tell of the makeshift hideouts students and scholars built to stay vigilant of threats to their safety, livelihoods, and cause. He does not mention the desperate months-long hunger strikes, the foreign journalists who were slaughtered when caught with damning information on the government, nor the endless surveillance of civilians in the days and decades following (Witty). It is impossible to convey through this one image of man and tank that many government generals supported the pro-democracy rebellion while some protesters resorted to violent means to get their way (Iyer). As a weary critic of Tank Man's reception states, the driver of

the leading tank, another victim of government force, was as much a participant in this rebellion as Tank Man himself was, though not as sympathetic given the fact that he was hidden beneath a lethal metal beast (Iyer). Man and machine were united under the banner of rebellion; the tanks and their operators were Tank Man's comrades rather than his enemies. There were likely just two sides in the Tiananmen Square conflict as the image of Tank Man suggests, but the photographs that captured and epitomized Tank Man as the face of the student demonstrations only put on display that which was agreeable rather than the uncomfortable, complex, or distressing aspects of Tiananmen Square. It is clear from the photographic watering down of Tiananmen Square that those who documented Tank Man valued the eventual viewers of the photographs, not the event's downtrodden protestors. Tank Man's gutsy defiance was powerless compared to the domineering camera lens. He would become one addition to the universal narrative of the metaphorical mouse and the lion: a juxtaposition that drew viewer sympathy and outrage while obscuring the line between oppressors and oppressed, as well as overwhelming the defeat and destruction that pro-democracy protesters had faced at Tiananmen Square.

While "a photograph is only equal to its creator's understanding of its potential impact," out-of-context photography meant to elicit a response is best enjoyed by viewers with a knowledge of an image's background; without context, the image becomes a sole representation of a conflict in the collective eye (Skidmore). Journalism has an obligation to its audience to tell a complete story and to give a voice to the downtrodden. At its least ethical, however, it demonizes and detaches some groups while diminishing the need for change in other circumstances—using an image.

To further prevent other 'Tank Men' from having their stories co-opted, the audience shoulders the burden of interpreting the subject matter as flawed, vulnerable, and in dire need of support rather than glamorizing the events depicted. The public has a responsibility to educate itself beyond a simple, sentimental understanding, and the press has an obligation to capture and clarify a photograph using voices beyond its own voyeuristic lens. Due to the prying eye of the camera and its simplification of Tank Man's struggle, telling the story of

Tiananmen Square was only accessible in one way: as a tool to convey a message which would be understood by almost anyone at the expense of wholeness. The art form by which Tank Man was publicized—journalism—is closed off to many oppressed populations who could have told their stories but have instead been exploited for bringing out feelings of grandiose self-congratulations in a privileged viewer base. The advent of social media, its 280-character captions, and the ubiquitous ‘share’ button expanded this same appropriation to more recent protests like those of the Black Lives Matter movement against police brutality and the environmentalist and land-related protests at the Dakota Access Pipeline. However, those Tank Men can finally fully articulate and voice their stories and their need for change. They are now in control of the camera lens themselves and have discovered a medium for self-expression beyond the flatness of an appropriated visual icon.

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