



In Washington, D.C. recently, my friend Alan Curtis invited me to watch *Chimerica*, which was written by the British playwright Lucy Kirkwood. The play focuses on finding clues to the identity of Tank Man, the iconic and still unknown protester from Tiananmen Square, and explores the contemporary relationship between China and the West. During my three hours in the theater, my mind repeatedly returned to Tiananmen Square, where I was a participant in the 1989 democracy movement, and a witness to the ensuing massacre.

The photograph of the Tank Man on Beijing's Chang'an Avenue confronting state violence is one of the most iconic images of the 20th century. For more than two decades, people around the world have wondered what became of him. But both he and his fate remain unknown—though his name is thought to be Wang Weilin.

Twenty-six years ago, just after the massacre had taken place, the Chinese regime tried to use the photo of Tank Man as proof that the military had responded to the “thugs” with restraint. The world was not fooled. On the morning of June 4, 1989, I personally witnessed four tanks running over demonstrators at Liubukou on Chang'an Avenue. At least eleven of them were killed or injured. Among the victims was Fang Zheng, who lost his legs and now lives in San Francisco. My prison poem “The Unusual June” described what I saw at Liubukou: “Bloodying hooves of the iron beast / bodies flattened with angry eyes.”

In the famous scene caught by an American journalist, however, a column of tanks in fact showed restraint as it confronted the young man. It is possible that the soldier in the first tank acted not in accordance with military orders but out of his own moral conviction, and got punished for it. Indeed, Pico Lyer, writing for *Time* magazine, opined: “The heroes of the tank picture are two: the unknown figure who risked his life by standing in front of the juggernaut and

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the driver who rose to the moral challenge by refusing to mow down his compatriot.”

In *Chimerica*, the search for the Tank Man leads to a man named Wang Pengfei who is the brother of the tank driver, or the other tank man.

Wang Pengfei reveals that his brother was executed by the Chinese military for upholding his conscience. He tearfully cries, “My brother, the tank driver, he is also a hero!”

Although this is a creative imagining, it is not far-fetched. At that moment in Chang’an Avenue, outside the Grand Beijing Hotel, two brave young Chinese men came face to face. They both may have sacrificed their lives in ways unknown to outsiders. As I put it in “The Unusual June”: “Each one’s star lighting the other’s way to heaven.”

Heroic feats often happen in moments that go unnoticed. In June of 1989, the streets of Beijing witnessed many Chinese like Wang Weilin, standing face-to-face with soldiers. They may have been Wang Weilin, Xu Qin, Yan Heran, or Zhang Mingchun. When tanks were on the streets, some Chinese soldiers opposed the order to massacre. *Chimerica* reminds us that those who stand opposite us are not necessarily our enemies, and that common sense and conscience can prevail even under brutal circumstances.

I am convinced that no matter how difficult the road ahead, the general direction of China’s future can only be towards freedom and democracy. The dynamics of democratic movements do not exist only among dissidents. Although the Chinese communist regime has become increasingly unwilling to reform politically, some individuals within the system don’t wish to stand in the way of history.

In *Chimerica*, this unsung hero has sacrificed his life. In reality, those within the system who refuse to betray their consciences generally do not pay so high a price. They nonetheless need considerable moral courage to face the risks and pressure. Any police or military officer, and any one in the authoritarian state machinery, can be a hero if they are willing to “raise their guns an inch higher” when implementing an order of suppression. Their names may be unknown, but they will be heroes of the historical process. Just like the Tank Man.

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Part of the pain in my heart I felt when watching *Chimerica* came from one very vivid experience. On the morning of June 4, 1989, when the troops were killing people at various locations in Beijing, I saw a soldier on Chang'an Avenue in front of the Telegraph Building. He was obviously separated from the troops, and he had no helmet or gun. He looked like a teenager. The people I was with chased him out of sadness and anger. I gave him a punch, and my companion Huang Liping gave him a kick. More and more people gathered and beat him up. Knocked to the ground, the soldier screamed: "I didn't do it! I didn't shoot!" Suddenly I realized that a tragedy was taking place. By then it was impossible to stop the violence. In desperation, Huang and I left the scene without looking back. A few minutes later, I knew from the loud voices behind me that the soldier had been killed. Huang and I silently shed tears.

That young soldier was perhaps one of the tank men in the opposite camp. Like all the soldiers, he had been forced to come to Beijing to massacre protesting students and citizens. Like us, he was too powerless to prevent the tragedy from happening. Out of conscience, he had probably refused to kill and chosen instead to be a deserter. If that was the case, he was a real hero.

But within the tragic events of the day, anger and irrationality got the better of me. I saw him as my enemy and struck him. This might be the biggest sin of my life. I cannot imagine the pain he suffered when he was dying and what was on his mind at that moment.

As I wrote in "The Unusual June":

"Millions of heads / millions of steps / were involved in my life / millions of heads / millions of steps / were involved in my birth / millions of heads / like a grand explosion of planets / disappear suddenly, all at once / millions of steps / all disappear, little by little / Oh, my dearest"

"Every time / my poems cannot stop my tears / my agitated eyes and lacerated heart / all pain, not a disease / not even my compassion / I'm not an outsider."

We have been living with this wound all these years. We should keep looking for the Tank Man, for Wang Weilin. And we should keep looking for the other tank man, who halted his advance. We should look for the loved ones of the young soldier who died in the violence in which I took

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part. I look forward to the day when I find his family and share with them my guilt: I too have been mourning him all these years.

*Chimerica* is an excellent play that has been performed in Britain and America over the past two years. More performances are planned, which will bring renewed attention to both tank men. Their stories have not yet ended, nor the history of which they are a part.

**Yang Jianli, [Initiatives for China](#)**