

Quickwrite

What is the most courageous thing you have done? Write a brief account of your action, explaining what you did and why, if it was difficult, and how you felt during and after the experience. Was anything accomplished by your action?



EXTENDING *the theme*

A FEATURE ARTICLE

The Unknown Rebel

Pico Iyer

Almost nobody knew his name. Nobody outside his immediate neighborhood had read his words or heard him speak. Nobody knows what happened to him even one hour after his moment in the world's living rooms. But the man who stood before a column of tanks near Tiananmen Square—June 5, 1989—may have impressed his image on the global memory more vividly, more intimately than even Sun Yat-sen¹ did. Almost certainly he was seen in his moment of self-transcendence by more people than ever laid eyes on Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein, and James Joyce combined.

The meaning of his moment—it was no more than that—was instantly decipherable in any tongue, to any age: even the billions who cannot read and those who have never heard of Mao Tse-tung² could follow what the “tank man” did. A small, unexceptional figure in slacks and white shirt, carrying what looks to be his shopping, posts himself before an approaching tank, with a line of seventeen more tanks behind it. The tank swerves right; he, to block it, moves left. The tank swerves left; he

moves right. Then this anonymous bystander clambers up onto the vehicle of war and says something to its driver, which comes down to us as: “Why are you here? My city is in chaos because of you.” One lone Everyman standing up to machinery, to force, to all the massed weight of the People's Republic—the largest nation



1. Sun Yat-sen (soon' yāt'sen'): leader of the revolution (1911–1912) that established a Chinese republic.

2. Mao Tse-tung (mou' dzu'dōōŋ'): chairman of China's Communist Party from 1949 to 1976.

in the world, comprising more than 1 billion people—while its all-powerful leaders remain, as ever, in hiding somewhere within the bowels of the Great Hall of the People.

Occasionally, unexpectedly, history consents to disguise itself as allegory, and China, which traffics in grand impersonals, has often led the world in mass-producing symbols in block capitals. The man who defied the tank was standing, as it happens, on the Avenue of Eternal Peace, just a minute away from the Gate of Heavenly Peace, which leads into the Forbidden City. Nearby Tiananmen Square—the very heart of the Middle Kingdom, where students had demonstrated in 1919; where Mao had proclaimed a “People’s Republic” in 1949 on behalf of the Chinese people who had “stood up”; and where leaders customarily inspect their People’s Liberation Army troops—is a virtual monument to People Power in the abstract. Its western edge is taken up by the Great Hall of the People. Its eastern side is dominated by the Museum of Chinese Revolution. The Mao Tse-tung mausoleum swallows up its southern face.

For seven weeks, though, in the late spring of 1989—the modern year of revolutions—the Chinese people took back the square, first a few workers and students and teachers and soldiers, then more and more, until more than 1 million had assembled there. They set up, in the heart of the ancient nation, their own world within the world, complete with a daily newspaper, a broadcasting tent, even a 30-ft. plaster-covered statue they called the “Goddess of Democracy.” Their “conference hall” was a Kentucky Fried Chicken parlor on the southwest corner of the square, and their spokesmen were 3,000 hunger strikers who spilled all over the central Monument to the People’s Heroes. The unofficals even took over, and reversed, the formal symbolism of the government’s ritual pageantry: when Mikhail Gorbachev³ came to the Great Hall of the People for a grand state banquet during the demonstrations—the first visit by a

3. **Mikhail Gorbachev** (gôr' bə-chôf'): leader of the Soviet Union's Communist Party from 1985 to 1991.

Soviet leader in 30 years—he had to steal in by the back door.

Then, in the dark early hours of June 4, the government struck back, sending tanks from all directions toward Tiananmen Square and killing hundreds of workers and students and doctors and children, many later found shot in the back. In the unnatural quiet after the massacre, with the six-lane streets eerily empty and a burned-out bus along the road, it fell to the tank man to serve as the last great defender of the peace, an Unknown Soldier in the struggle for human rights.

As soon as the man had descended from the tank, anxious onlookers pulled him to safety, and the waters of anonymity closed around him once more. Some people said he was called Wang Weilin, was 19 years old and a student; others said not even that much could be confirmed. Some said he was a factory worker's son, others that he looked like a provincial just arrived in the capital by train. When American newsmen asked Chinese leader Jiang Zemin a year later what had happened to the symbol of Chinese freedom—caught by foreign cameramen and broadcast around the world—he replied, not very ringingly, “I think never killed.”

—from *Time*, April 13, 1998

FINDING COMMON GROUND



Get together with two or three classmates to discuss the point this essay makes.

1. Summarize your Quickwrite notes, and listen to your classmates' summaries of their experiences. Compare the circumstances surrounding the courageous acts and the results of the actions.
2. Use your experiences as a basis for understanding the unknown rebel's action near Tiananmen Square. You might discuss these questions:
 - Why do you think he risked his life?
 - What point did his action make to the watching world?
 - When is a grand gesture like this worth risking a life—or do you think it never is?