



Curriculum Connections

Tiananmen 1989: Our Shattered Hopes

by Lun Zhang and Adrien Gombeaud

illustrated by Ameziane

Non-fiction, set in China

IDW Publishing, 2020

2020 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult / High School Literature

Grade level

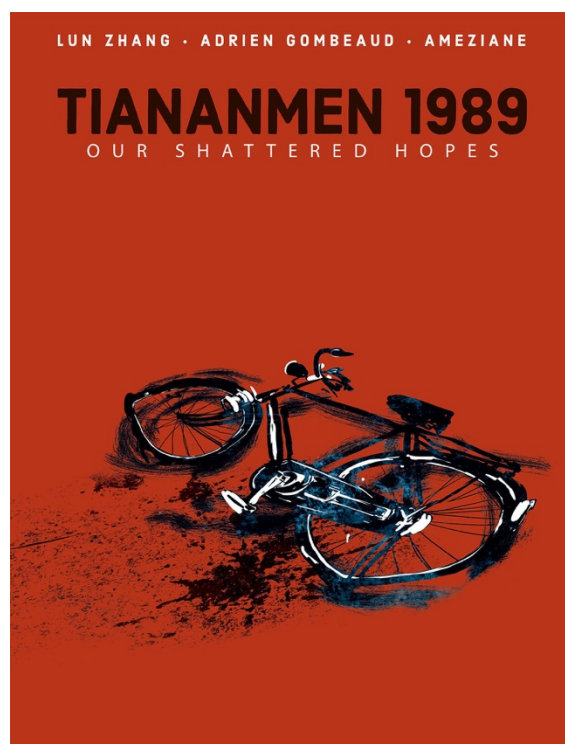
This firsthand account is appropriate for mature students in grades 11–12. Be aware that the book contains images of violence and carnage. The book could complement the study of the Tiananmen protests and crackdown in World History, AP Comparative Government, Current Affairs, or Global Studies classes.

Timelines

The events in the book are well organized, with dates for each major event, but this timeline would be useful when revisiting the events for discussion in class. Photos are included.

FrontLine PBS. "Timeline: What Led to the Tiananmen Square Massacre." June 5, 2019.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/-timeline-tiananmen-square/>



PBS, which produced the documentary *Gate of Heavenly Peace* for its *Frontline* series, also created a resource-rich website that provides a timeline listing major events in twentieth-century China from 1919 to 1988, followed by a separate list of the events of the spring of 1989. <http://www.tsquare.tv/chronology/>

Primary Source Documents

Activities with documents

Each of the documents below has a direct connection to an event in the book; I've noted the page number of the event to which each document is connected.

After reading the document, ask students to complete the following activities:

- Have the students explain what the document adds to their understanding of the event as described by Lun Zhang. Identify any questions the document raises



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about the author's description of the event. What does his firsthand account contribute to understanding the document?

- Have students locate a news account of the event related to the document from 1989. Compare the news coverage of the event with what is described in the primary source and what they learned from the book. Explain either how the news article accurately explains the event or how it misunderstood or misrepresented the event.

Democracy Wall

Lun Zhang explains that he saw the student activities in 1989 as an extension of the Democracy Wall movement in 1978–79, when people posted “big-character posters” criticizing the Cultural Revolution and calling for greater freedoms (p. 14).

Big-character posters are handwritten in large Chinese characters so that their messages can be easily read when posted in public places. The key document from that period is Wei Jingsheng's call for democracy as a fifth modernization, in addition to Deng Xiaoping's Four Modernizations: agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. Wei's writing and activities landed him in prison for fifteen years.

The document contains an introduction for context and a short excerpt from the essay with discussion questions followed by the full text of the essay.

Jingsheng, Wei. “The Fifth Modernization: Democracy.” *Asia for Educators*: Columbia University.

https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/wei_jingsheng_fifth_modernization.pdf

Seven student demands to the government

On the day of Hu Yaobang's funeral a group of student representatives presented seven demands to the government. They used the traditional gesture of “kneeling, hands raised heavenward, brandishing their letters of grievance” (p. 34). The following is from an article published on the thirtieth anniversary of June 4. The article contains the



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students' seven demands, excerpts from several additional documents, and some photographs.

At the state funeral for Hu Yaobang at Tiananmen Square, four students broke through the security cordon. They knelt on the steps of the Great Hall of the People, asking to speak with Premier Li Peng and present him with seven demands. The premier refused to grant them an audience. Here are the seven demands:

1. Affirm Hu Yaobang's views on democracy and freedom as correct.
2. Admit that the campaigns against spiritual pollution and bourgeois liberalization had been wrong.
3. Publish information on the income of state leaders and their family members.
4. Allow privately run newspapers and stop press censorship.
5. Increase funding for education and raise intellectuals' pay.
6. End restrictions on demonstrations in Beijing.
7. Provide objective coverage of students in official media.

Cilker, Noel C. "Primary Source: Protest, Tragedy, and Hope at Tiananmen Square." June 4, 2019. <https://noelccilker.medium.com/primary-source-protest-tragedy-and-hope-at-tiananmen-square-5ef78b0280e6>

***People's Daily* editorial**

On April 26, 1989, the Party published an editorial in *The People's Daily* warning of the chaos caused by the demonstrators and describing what actions must be taken to return order to the capital. Lun Zhang states, "It was the editorial that set our movement down a path of no return" (p. 37). *The People's Daily* is the official mouthpiece of the Party. The editorial characterized the students' movement as dangerous and suggested that people with ulterior motives were "taking advantage of the students' feelings of grief for Hu Yaobang."

People's Daily. "It Is Necessary to Take a Clear-cut Stand Against Disturbances." April 26, 1989. <http://www.tsquare.tv/chronology/April26ed.html>



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Student hunger strike

A turning point in the movement was the students' decision to stage a hunger strike (Act III, p. 51). In their declaration, the students made a plea to fellow citizens to not let their suffering be in vain. The document is presented here with a short introduction for context and the full text with discussion questions.

Columbia University. "The May 13 Hunger Strike Declaration." *Asia for Educators*. May 13, 1989. https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/china/tiananmen_hunger_strike.pdf

Martial law declared

On May 19, Li Peng delivered a speech on TV announcing that martial law would be imposed starting May 20 (Act IV, p. 67).

"Li Peng Delivers Important Speech on Behalf of Party Central Committee and State Council." <http://www.tsquare.tv/chronology/MartialLaw.html>

Interview with Chai Ling

Chai Ling was the "Commander-in-Chief of Defend Tiananmen Square Headquarters" (p. 74). In this interview, she describes the situation a few days before the army arrives at Tiananmen Square. She is one of the few student leaders who succeeded in escaping from China after June 4.

Ling, Chai. "Interview at Tiananmen Square." *Asia for Educators*. Columbia University. https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1950_chailing.htm

The official government account

The presence of Western reporters and media meant that the world outside of China witnessed the events of the student protests and June 4 in real time.

Immediately afterward, the Party began a campaign of revisionism and censorship surrounding the events. In a book published by Beijing Publishing House, the Party told its version of the story in both Chinese and English. The book is richly illustrated with pictures that emphasize the squalor in Tiananmen Square during the hunger strike, the presence of "outside agitators," several episodes of violence against soldiers, and the



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"restoration of order" after the "appalling riot." The following is the Introduction to the book.

"The Truth about the Beijing Turmoil." Edited by the Editorial Board of *The Truth about the Beijing Turmoil*. Beijing Publishing House, 1990.

<http://www.tsquare.tv/themes/truthturm.html>

Tiananmen Mothers

Many of those killed the night of June 4 were never identified by the government, and their families never received official confirmation of their deaths. Following the death of her son Jiang Jielian, Ding Zilin began to seek out the parents and relatives whose loved ones did not return home after June 4. She established a group she called Tiananmen Mothers, and along with her husband Jiang Peikun, she sought to uncover the truth about those who died and especially those who never returned.

For her activism, she lost her job as a university professor and was held under house arrest during the 1995 Women's Conference in Beijing. The link below is to the Human Rights in China website, where thirty-one of the testimonies she collected can be viewed, including her own.

"A collection of 31 first-person accounts by survivors of the June Fourth crackdown and family members of those killed. These accounts were collected by the Tiananmen Mothers and issued by HRIC [Human Rights in China] in Chinese and English translation in 1999 to commemorate the victims on the 10th anniversary of the crackdown. Together, these accounts provide a picture of what happened on the night of June 3–4, 1989, and the days that followed, and are enduring testimonies supporting the demands of survivors and the families of the victims for truth, accountability, and compensation."

Testimony of Ding Zilin, founder of Tiananmen Mothers

"After the June Fourth Massacre, Jiang Jielian was the only casualty of high-school age whose death was acknowledged in internal bulletins by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authorities. Now it is known, however, that there were at least nine high-school



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students killed in the massacre. On September 11, 1989, on the hundredth day after his murder, we took his ashes home and put them where his bed had been before his death. On the front of the box where the ashes are kept, his father carved the following inscription for our beloved son:

In these short 17 years
You lived like a real man
Your humanitarian nobility and integrity
Will be kept in the undying memory of history.
Your forever loving Father and Mother."

<https://www.hrichina.org/en/testimonies-survivors-and-families-victims-june-fourth-crackdown>

Activities Using Images

Images have a tremendous power to shape our understanding or misunderstanding of events.

"Tank Man"

Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies publishes the award-winning *Choices* curriculum units. The following activity uses the iconic image of the "Tank Man," a photograph taken by Associated Press journalist Jeff Widener. The activity focuses on the topic of censorship vs. the freedom of information.

Watson Institute for International Studies. "Looking at the Tank Man: The Twentieth Anniversary of Tiananmen." A Supplement to "China on the World Stage: Weighing the U.S. Response." Brown University Choices Program. <https://www.choices.edu/teaching-news-lesson/looking-tank-man-20th-anniversary-tiananmen/>

Getting beyond "Tank Man"

There's no argument that "Tank Man" is the most iconic image to emerge from the Tiananmen protests, but an international corps of journalists documented the



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movement—from the early tribute gatherings for Hu Yaobang through the dawn of June 4, when the extent of the military action became clear. Many of their images vividly capture the spirit of the protesters and the tragedy of the crackdown.

Have students choose an image depicting any episode from the book and make an argument as to why the image they have chosen is important to understanding the events Lun Zhang and the other protesters experienced. Students can do a Google search using *Tiananmen Square protest photos* or check out one of the following sites to find a range of pictures.

Jeff Widener's photographs

Almond, Kyle. "The Story Behind the Iconic 'Tank Man' Photo." *CNN*. June 5, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2019/05/world/tiananmen-square-tank-man-cnnphotos/>

A selection of rare black and white photos

NPR staff. "30 Years after the Tiananmen Protests, 'The Fight is Still Going On.'" *NPR*. May 31, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2019/05/31/727846940/30-years-after-tiananmen-protests-the-fight-is-still-going-on-for-china>

Sherin, Kelly. "32 Photos Show the Hope and Despair of Tiananmen Square." *Esquire*, June 4, 2021. <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/g36621881/tiananmen-square-massacre-photos/>

Looking Back: Reflecting on June 4

"Journalism is the first rough draft of history."

—attributed to Philip L. Graham, president of the *Washington Post*

"The living should really shut their mouths and listen to the graves speak."

—Liu Xiaobo



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Those who experienced the events of 1989 and survived continue to reflect on what happened with a combination of sorrow, survivor's guilt, and resolve. Some still second-guess decisions they made, especially some of the leaders. Below are reflections by student leader Wang Dan, Nobel Peace Prize-winning democracy activist Liu Xiaobo, and a series of video interviews with participants and witnesses (from the documentary *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*).

Students then and now

Read the op-ed by Wang Dan and the article by Sharon LaFraniere. Compare Wang's view of young Chinese with LaFraniere's reporting. Ask the students to explain why they think there is a difference between Wang's view of them and what LaFraniere reports on what they say about themselves.

Wang Dan. "What I Learned Leading the Tiananmen Protests." *New York Times*. June 1, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/01/opinion/sunday/tiananmen-protests-china-wang-dan.html?searchResultPosition=7>.

Wang Dan was one of the student leaders who fled Beijing but was arrested and sentenced to four years in prison. After his release, he continued his calls for government reform and was once again arrested and sentenced to eleven years in prison. He was released due to health problems and lives in the United States. This op-ed was published to acknowledge the thirtieth anniversary of June 4.

"Young people in China today, nearly all of whom grow up in one-child families, are more pragmatic than we were in the 1980s. And despite the government's brainwashing, they know how to use technology and obtain information from the outside. They understand more about the West than we did. Unlike students of my generation who held false hopes for the party, members of today's younger generation are more cynical and realistic. Once opportunities arise, they'll rise up as we did 30 years ago."



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LaFraniere, Sharon. "Tiananmen Now Seems Distant to China's Students." *New York Times*. May 21, 2009.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/22/world/asia/22tiananmen.html?pagewanted=1>

"And if a student today proposed a pro-democracy protest?"

"People would think he was insane," said one Peking University history major in a recent interview. "You know where the line is drawn. You can think, maybe talk, about the events of 1989. You just cannot do something that will have any public influence. Everybody knows that."

"Most students also appear to accept it. For 20 years, China's government has made it abundantly clear that students and professors should stick to the books and stay out of the streets. Students today describe 1989 as almost a historical blip, a moment too extreme and traumatic ever to repeat."

Memory and resolve

Liu Xiaobo was a pro-democracy activist who served prison terms for his actions during the Tiananmen protests and, later, for participating in the writing of Charter 08, a manifesto calling for democratic reform. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010 but was in prison and prevented from attending the ceremony.

He wrote a series of poems commemorating the Tiananmen Massacre entitled *June Fourth Elegies: Poems*.

"June Fourth in My Body" by Liu Xiaobo (2009)

<https://www.cnn.com/2014/06/03/asia/gallery/liu-xiaobo-poem/index.html>

Here is a short excerpt:

The day
seems more and more distant



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and yet for me it
remains a needle inside my body...

This needle
that has stayed for so long round the heart's periphery
is determined to plunge inside
and bring an end to all guilt
but then just before acting
it hesitates
not daring to move forward

Nobel Peace Prize lecture by Liu Xiaobo in which he makes his case for democracy.
<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2010/xiaobo/lecture/>

***Gate of Heavenly Peace* (PBS)**

For six years following the events of June 4, a team of international scholars worked with filmmakers to create the documentary *Gate of Heavenly Peace*, which aired as part of the *Frontline* series. The documentary includes footage from 1989 along with interviews from participants collected over the six years that followed. The film is one of the richest records of this chapter in Chinese history because it contains both video recorded at the time and interviews in which participants reflect on how they viewed these events later.

Home page: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gate/>

Key excerpts from the film: <http://www.tsquare.tv/film/gateExcerpts.php>

Chai Ling hoping that Chinese government will kill the Tiananmen students:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_ESikIA1A

Additional Resources and Reading

Liu, Binyan. *"Tell the World": What Happened in China and Why,* translated by Henry L. Epstein. New York: Pantheon Books, 1989.



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Brook, Timothy. *Quelling the People: The Military Suppression of the Beijing Democracy Movement*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Salisbury, Harrison E. *Tiananmen Diary: Thirteen Days in June*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1989.

Shen, Tong, and Marianne Yen. *Almost a Revolution*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990.

Turnley, David and Peter. *Beijing Spring*. Stewart Tabori & Chang, 1989.

Human Rights in China website

“Human Rights in China (HRIC) is a Chinese non-governmental organization (NGO) founded in March 1989 by overseas Chinese students and scientists. We actively engage in [case and policy advocacy](#), [media and press work](#), and [capacity building](#). Through our original publications and extensive translation work, HRIC provides bridges and uncensored platforms for diverse Chinese voices. Our activities promote fundamental rights and freedoms and provide solidarity for rights defenders and their families by supporting citizens’ efforts to effectively communicate, as well as organize and participate in rights defense activities.”

<https://www.hrichina.org/en/june-fourth-overview>

Author: Cindy McNulty, NCTA consultant and retired high school history teacher
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