

Looking at the Tank Man

A supplement to

China on the World Stage: Weighing the U.S. Response



THE CHOICES PROGRAM

Explore the Past... Shape the Future

History and Current Issues for the Classroom

WATSON INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
BROWN UNIVERSITY WWW.CHOICES.EDU

Looking at the Tank Man: The Twentieth Anniversary of Tiananmen

Objectives:

Students will: Consider the concept of censorship and analyze the merits of censorship versus freedom of information.

Learn about the protests in Beijing in 1989.

Work collaboratively to interpret an image from multiple perspectives.

Reading:

You may find it helpful to have your students read “Part 1: Transforming China” in *China on the World Stage: Weighing the U.S. Response* before beginning this activity.

In the Classroom:

1. Focus Question—Pose the following question to students: “What is censorship?” Have students think of examples of censorship in their own lives. For example, have their parents or school ever censored their internet access? What about cds with censored lyrics? Have students ever censored information from their parents or friends? Are there certain kinds of information that are often censored or groups that often do the censoring? Ask students to come up with reasons or justifications for why information is censored in the examples they came up with. Why should information sometimes be censored? What about arguments against censorship? Create a T-chart on the board and record student answers.

2. Considering Chinese History and the Tiananmen Square Protests—Ask students what they know about China in the 1980s and in particular the protests in Beijing and Tiananmen Square in 1989.

You may wish to show your students excerpts from “The Tank Man,” a FRONTLINE program that aired in April 2006. We recommend watching “1. Prologue” from approximately 2:40 to the end and “6. The Struggle to Control Information” from the beginning to approximately 5:08 (this is about fourteen minutes of video in total). If you have

additional time, you might want to show “2. Tens of Millions of Protestors” and “3. The Theater of Massacre,” which provide background and detail about the protests and the response of the Chinese government. For more information about government censorship and the role of U.S. internet companies, watch the remainder of “6. The Struggle to Control Information.” A link to the FRONTLINE video can be found at <www.choices.edu/resources/twtn_tiananmen_videos.php>

After watching the video, ask students what information was new to them and what they found surprising. Did the video have a point of view? Are there different ways to understand the “tank man”?

For additional information about the Tiananmen protests, there is a free video available from Choices’ Scholars Online library: “What caused the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and government crackdown?” answered by Xu Wenli, a founder of the China Democracy Party and senior fellow at the Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University. This video can be found at <www.choices.edu/resources/twtn_tiananmen_videos.php>.

3. Analyzing the Image—Show students the image of the tank man, which can be found at <www.choices.edu/resources/twtn_tiananman.php>. If students have not viewed the FRONTLINE video, you may wish to show them a YouTube video of the man blocking the tanks. This can be found at <www.choices.edu/resources/twtn_tiananmen_videos.php>.

Divide students into pairs. Tell them that they will be working with their partner to write two captions for this image. They should write a caption first from the perspective of a representative of the Chinese government and second from the perspective of someone from the pro-democracy movement in China. The captions should describe what is happening in the picture, along with any relevant background information, according to these

different perspectives. Although the captions will offer different interpretations of the image, each should be true and accurate. In order to achieve this, students may decide to use different descriptive words or to emphasize different parts of the image, the situation, or of Chinese society or history. Captions should be no longer than two sentences each.

Ask pairs to share their captions. How did students represent these two different perspectives? Was one caption more difficult to write than the other? Why? How might viewers understand the image differently, depending on the caption?

Note: For classes that are well-informed about the topic, you may want to do the photo exercise first and then show the video. As a variation on the lesson, you may want to add the dimension of time. For example, students could write the captions as contemporaries of the protests, or as individuals looking back after twenty years.

4. Making Connections—Tell students that this image had not been seen in China from shortly after the incident until very recently. By strictly censoring the media and the internet, the government had prevented people in China from seeing the image or getting outside information about the Tiananmen protests. Many young people had never seen the image before. But in April 2009, the government eased its internet restrictions so that it is now possible to get information about the tank man and Tiananmen. Why do students think the Chinese government blocked this information for the last twenty years? What are some arguments against blocking access to this kind of information? Look back at the T-chart from the beginning of class. Are there any similarities

between this example of censorship in China and censorship in the personal lives of students? Have students consider the effect that the censorship of this image might have had in China over the last twenty years.

For one point of view on censorship by the Chinese government, there are a number of free videos available from Choices' Scholars Online library, including:

“How does the Golden Shield Project censor internet activity?” and “What are other ways the Chinese government controls the flow of information?” answered by Xu Wenli, a founder of the China Democracy Party and senior fellow at the Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University. These videos can be found at <www.choices.edu/resources/twtn_tiananmen_videos.php>.

Extra Challenge:

Have students consider the power of an image in shaping an individual's or a society's understanding of an event. For example, imagine that in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the U.S. government censored all photographs and video of the plane crashes and of the collapsing towers. What effect might this have had at the time? Would it have affected the way people in the United States thought or felt about the event? Why or why not? Imagine that these images were censored even today. How might it affect the way that people—including those who were alive on September 11, 2001 and those who were born afterwards—understand that event?

How does this compare to the censorship of the tank man image? Can an image have more of an impact than words alone? Why or why not?