

Massacre? What Massacre?

25 Years Later: What really happened at Tiananmen Square?

by Kim Petersen / June 9th, 2014

The truth is that no government will allow a protest to go on endlessly to the extent that it begins to destabilise the country and economy.

— Wei Ling Chua, *Tiananmen Square “Massacre”?: The Power of Words vs. Silent Evidence*, 100.

Last Sunday, I was with an American gentleman in downtown Chengdu, Sichuan, and during our conversation he mentioned that his Chinese wife had never heard of the Tiananmen Square massacre. I proposed that it is because it never happened, that it is a western media campaign of disinformation, and why should the Chinese media permit the dissemination of lies. In fact, hearing about any massacre at Tiananmen Square will surprise the vast majority of Chinese people, including those who live near Beijing and who participated in the demonstrations.

What really happened at Tiananmen Square? Australian-based writer Wei Ling Chua challenges the western mass media and western government narrative in his well researched and analyzed book, *Tiananmen Square “Massacre”?: The Power of Words vs. Silent Evidence* (Amazon, 2014). Reading it is sure to give pause to anyone who swallowed the western mass media disinformation.

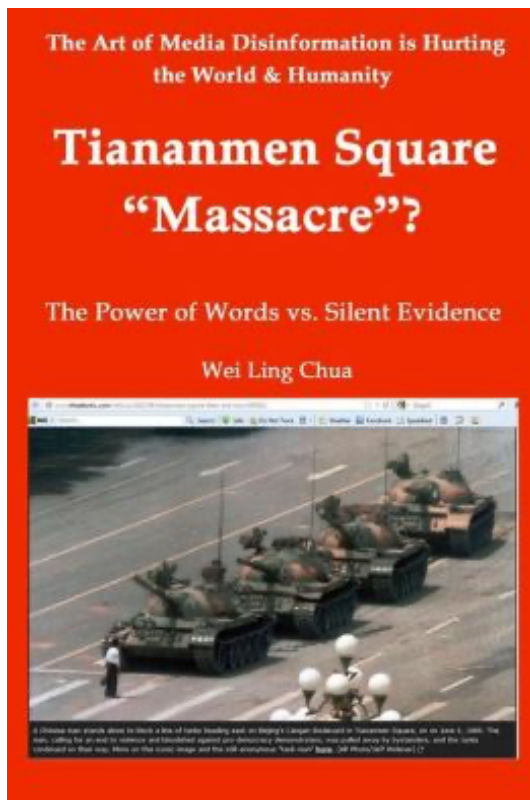
Chua reveals the western mass media disinformation and compellingly offers a narrative that aligns with the facts.

- Tiananmen Square protests were not about democracy; they were protests of poor economic conditions.
- There was no massacre at Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989.
- The protestors were not unarmed.
- It was the violent protesters that caused the mayhem and not the soldiers.
- Western journalists provided accounts replete with words, but incriminating photographic and video evidence is lacking; E.g., Chua relates how the BBC manufactured the perception of a “Massacre” in 1989 through the power of words – without any footage of a dead person.
- Viciousness of some student leaders. Said Chai Ling, one such “leader”: “Actually our wish is to see blood; that is to frustrate our government to the extreme that they will eventually butcher their citizens. I believe that only through a river of blood in the Square, will the nation then open their eyes and unite, but how could we tell our fellow students our intention?” (84)
- “[F]orces in America, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Hong Kong was still under the British control at the time) actively instigat[ed] the situation.” (89)
- There was CIA involvement in Tiananmen Square. (89-90)

Chua begins his book by putting China into a historical and cultural perspective, such as being “...the first human civilisation to overcome tribalism and become a united people in 221 BC; while most European countries could only achieve that in the last 150 to 500 years.” (i) He notes the unity despite that the “so-called ‘Han Chinese’ is actually a mixture of a dozen or more ethnic groups with their own distinctive languages, traditions and cultures, and yet happily regard themselves as ‘Han’.” (i)

He challenges the media portrayal of a brutal Chinese regime: “there are good reasons why the Communist Government in China has consistently led the world in citizen satisfaction in a number of opinion surveys, including the annual American-based PEW survey, while countries under Western democracies are persistently receiving very low ratings in citizen satisfaction in the same survey. (ii-iii)

Three years back on the outskirts of Wujiang, a Canadian woman complained to me about Chinese dictatorship. I asked her if a nugatory vote under delimiting circumstances every few years in Canada constituted a democracy. Nowadays, I might buttress the lack of “democracy” in Canada by pointing to a majority government in place despite having received less than 50% of the votes, and having achieved this electoral success abetted by a [robocall scandal](#) that diverted unfriendly voters to the wrong voting centers. Chua writes, “The surprise is that the Communist Party of China (CCP or CPC) has successfully practised such a higher form of democracy and is in the process of perfecting the political process through the internal design of the party system and public administration.” (iii)



From 15 April to 4 June, 1989 protests took place in the venerable Tiananmen Square which fronts the Forbidden City of the Ming Dynasty. *Wikipedia*, in another example of the bias and lack of fastidiousness plaguing the web encyclopedia, disinforms of “a pro-democracy movement which ended on 4 June 1989 with the declaration of martial law in Beijing by the government and the shooting of several hundred or possibly thousands of civilians by soldiers.” Chua argues the protests were similar to the Occupy protests in America against classism, based on the unequal wealth allocations between the 99%-ers and the 1%-ers. (2)

As he does throughout the book, Chua uses mass media sources to undermine the mass media’s own disinformation. For instance, he quotes *Financial Post* writer James Kynge who cites Ma Jian, a Chinese writer present at the demonstrations:

The truth is that the students in the square had only the haziest understanding of western-style democracy. To the extent that the protests were directed at abuses of an existing system by an emerging elite, they were motivated more by outrage at the betrayal of socialist ideals than by aspirations for a new system. (10)

Chua contends that China’s economic success has demonstrated that it selected the right path “of a strong and competent political leadership, adherence to the principle of socialism with a mix economy which includes some elements of free market and the continuing State control of strategic industries and resources.” (3)

WikiLeaks released cables that there was no blood-spilling inside Tiananmen Square. A leaked US government document affirmed the Chinese contention that no one was killed at Tiananmen Square in 1989. (12)

BBC journalist, James Miles wrote a confession 20 years later: “There was no Tiananmen Square massacre, but there was a Beijing massacre.” (13)

Writes Chua, “years before the above 2011 WikiLeaks-leaked US government document that confirmed the Chinese side of the story, there was ongoing emerging evidence that contradicted the reports in the Western media. Such evidence included declassified Western government documents, confessions made by individual protesters and journalists, eye witness accounts and the work of some historians.” (14-15)

On 4 June 2009, Richard Roth, a CBS News correspondent in Beijing in 1989, wrote an article titled “There Was No ‘Tiananmen Square Massacre.’” (15)

While many media types have backed down from the story of a Tiananmen Square massacre, they instead point to a massacre outside the square. When someone propounds one story and then recants and offers another version, what is the verisimilitude of the second version?

Chua does not cover up that killings occurred outside Tiananmen Square, but he asks who was being killed and by who. Chua debunks the media depiction of unarmed student protestors and staunchly insists that the PRC army was extremely restrained and acted in self-defense. Chua cites *Washington Post*’s first Beijing bureau chief Jay Mathews from the *Columbia Journalism Review* (September/October 1998) titled “The Myth of Tiananmen And the Price of a Passive Press”:

some of the soldiers were forced into firing for self-defence or to protect the lives of their fellow soldiers. According to the declassified US government’s Document 15: Cable, From: US Embassy Beijing, To: Department of State, Washington DC, SITREP No. 33: June 4 Afternoon and ... (June 4, 1989) (22)

As an example of the pacifism of the PRC army, Chua writes of “the iconic stand-alone tankman who managed to stop the entire column of tanks without being beaten up or killed by authorities.” (39) However, who the tankman is and what happened to him are matters of conjecture to this day.

Chua examines corporate media photos and video evidence and analyzes for evidence of what transpired and reaches the conclusion opposite that of the corporate media and US government. Analyzing a selection

of photos in *The Atlantic*, Chua contends, “virtually all the videos and photo images of the People’s Liberation soldiers produced by the Western media show them either unarmed, or demonstrating a very high level of restraint, discipline, patience and a non-violent attitude towards protesters.” (46)

Chua concludes, “The Atlantic shows that it was the protesters who acted violently against the law enforcers – the People’s Liberation Army instead of the other way round.” (46) Chua’s conclusion might be valid, but I wonder how he deduces this. It seems a chicken and egg situation. It does, however, cast the western media assessment into ridicule.

Five photos according to Chua show “that it was the so-called ‘peaceful’ and ‘unarmed’ protesters being violent against the soldiers instead of the other way round.” (50) I wonder how one can be so sure from a snapshot. Of course one can deduce that someone is striking a person in a photo, but whether that person is striking in anger, self-defense, vengeance, or whatever reason is difficult to state with conviction, and the possibility of an alternative explanation must be acknowledged.

Chua finds that the declaration of martial law was legitimate. Maybe so, but Chua also seems to acknowledge that the protestors had a legitimate beef: economic difficulties. In general, I share a conviction with Mark Twain who said: “I am said to be a revolutionist in my sympathies, by birth, by breeding and by principle. I am always on the side of the revolutionists, because there never was a revolution unless there were some oppressive and intolerable conditions against which to revolute.”¹ I do, however, realize that revolutions can be instigated and steered by malevolent forces, such as the spate of color revolutions seen in the 21st century.

Did the protestors have any other avenue to express their grievances? Chua points out that Chinese authorities were open to dialogue with the protestors – as early as April 1989. (94) The protestors refused and continued to occupy Tiananmen Square. It seems clear that after a few months of one group monopolizing public space to express dissent with economic conditions – not for democracy – that someone or something had to give.

There have been patches of honesty in corporate media. A *Japan Times* article wrote of the disinformation: “This effort is impressive, especially considering the overwhelming evidence that there was no Tiananmen Square massacre.” (57-58)

Chua decries the double standard in western reporting, citing the sympathetic tone struck by an *Independent* headline to a soldier’s massacre of Afghans: “Soldier accused of massacre pushed to limit by Afghan war.”

“Soldiers killed, tanks lit afire belie the western media claim of unarmed protestors. Pointedly some among the protestors had weapons, as was clear from images in western media.” Chua asks, “Aren’t all the images produced by the Western media silent evidence of reversed roles: protester mayhem and soldier restraint?” (67)

Other accounts pin blame on student sources for disinformation. Robert Marquand wrote for the *Christian Science Monitor*:

No ‘rivers of blood’ flowed on the square. No rows of students were mowed down by a sudden rush of troops, as reported in European, Hong Kong, and the US publications in the days, months and years that followed... (68)

However, Marquand contends that there was a massacre outside Tiananmen Square.

Nine years later, Jay Mathews, the *Washington Post*’s first Beijing Bureau chief, wrote a defense of his initial erroneous reporting:

It is hard to find a journalist who has not contributed to the misimpression. Rereading my own stories published after Tiananmen, I found several references to the ‘Tiananmen massacre.’ At the time, I considered this space-saving shorthand. I assumed the reader would know that I meant the massacre that occurred in Beijing after the Tiananmen demonstrations. But my fuzziness helped keep the falsehood alive. (71)

Chua is sympathetic to Chinese government censorship: “Given the amount of relentless agenda-based disinformation against the Chinese government, it is not hard to understand why China needs to counter

such disinformation with censorship to protect its own society from undue influence by the ill-intended and well-funded Western propaganda machine.” (76)

While I prefer to err on the side of freedom of expression; I do not fence-sit when it comes to the insidiousness of disinformation. I shared the unanimous declaration of participants at the Halifax International Symposium on Media and Disinformation that disinformation should constitute a crime against humanity.²

Then Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping gave a statement that Chua avers “is an accurate reflection of the situation on the ground, and the attitude of the Chinese government and soldiers towards the protesters”:

In the course of quelling this rebellion, many of our comrades were injured or even sacrificed their lives. Their weapons were also taken from them. Why was this? It also was because bad people mingled with the good, which made it difficult to take the drastic measures we should take.

Handling this matter amounted to a very severe political test for our army, and what happened shows that our PLA passed muster. If we had used tanks to roll across [bodies?], it would have created a confusion of fact and fiction across the country. (78)

According to Chua, “The Chinese media and government are in fact far more honest and accurate with their description of events, and it is therefore important for us to read and listen to the Chinese side of the story instead of relying exclusively on the Western media.” (92) That seems an eminently sensible, circumspect, and open-minded position to take – and since Chua is bilingual, he is in good standing to understand and analyze the language surrounding the event at Tiananmen Square.

Just how malevolent were Chinese government intentions to the students? Chua recounts how the Chinese government sent 80 public buses to the Square so hunger strikers would not get wet on a rainy day and that workers were sent to clean the Square for the sake of the protesters’ hygiene. (98)

The students and protestors were not in solidarity on tactics. Chua asks, “in 1989, many protesters who disagreed with the radical element amongst the students left the Square, but the efforts of the radical few with foreign backing had fuelled the situation, leading to the eventual crackdown. So, who should be accountable for the inevitable? Foreign-backed radicalism or the Communist Party?” (106)

He makes a comparison, noting that Chinese authorities “began to arrest and prosecute those who were involved in looting, burning, beating and killing soldiers, which is the natural course of action to be taken by any government including the British government in the aftermath of the 2011 England unrest.” (106-107)

Writer Gregory Clark noted the behaviour of western journalists in his [“Pack Journalism can be Lethal”](#):

Instead of checking facts, the media prefer to follow what others are saying. And what others are saying is often inspired by establishment hardliners seeking to impose their agendas with the help of bogus news agencies, subsidized research outfits and hired scribblers. Beijing is a frequent victim. One example is the pack journalistic myth of a Tiananmen Square massacre of students in 1989. All one needs to do to get the true story is insert “Tiananmen” into Google and read the reports at the time from none other than the U.S. Embassy in Beijing. You will discover that the so-called massacre was in fact a mini civil war as irate Beijing citizens sought to stop initially unarmed soldiers sent to remove students who had been demonstrating freely in the square for weeks. When the soldiers finally reached the square there was no massacre. There were in fact almost no students. (108)

The author looks deeper for what underlies the protests at Tiananmen Square in the heady days of 1989: “What happened in Beijing during the Tiananmen Square incident was mainly a problem driven by the first stage of economic reform where the cost of living was driven up by resource scarcity.”

Why was China wracked by economic difficulties? History has relevance. Chua points to the middle 19th century when China, the world’s wealthiest nation with a self-sufficient economy, was attacked by Britain in the First Opium War. China “was bullied, exploited, invaded and semi-colonised by dozens of imperial powers at the time with 22 unequal treaties.” (115)

The background of China’s poverty – the 343 unequal treaties imposed upon China before 1949, and the period of trade and technological restrictions imposed by the West against communist China – were somehow totally ignored as a factor for poverty in China. It is exactly like criticising Cuba, Iran and North

Korea's human rights records using the issue of poverty without any reference to the history of Western lootings and economic sanctions.

China is still under siege by western imperialistic ambitions.³ For the West, China is a source for corporate exploitation. Chua relates, "Apple is an iconic US corporation that only allowed their Chinese factory to earn \$4 per iPhone, while retailing them for \$260 each." (120) However, the Chinese are not stupid, by allowing western corporations to initially exploit the Chinese market, China gains access to the technology and can later develop Chinese versions with much cheaper pricing. Thus, now I see many Chinese with Huawei mobile phones — stylishly appear similar to iPhones.

Many Western countries are now moving towards an age of mass poverty with a series of problems including severe income inequality, slave wages, the rising cost of living, debt, welfare cuts, unemployment, and homelessness. (122) China is heading progressively toward income redistribution, pensions, education, affordable healthcare, spending on infrastructure projects. There is no neoliberal austerity in China, and no imminent danger of it.

At times Chua could be perceived as a bit of an apologist for China. He writes, "One should not overlook another source of dissatisfaction in 1989; that is, by allowing the unproductive state enterprises to close down and be responsible for their own operating costs, many people were forced out of their comfort zone and into self-reliance. This was a necessary step in unleashing individual creativity and energy that enabled China to experience more than three decades of economic miracles since 1978." (127) It appears as if Chua is saying that SOEs stifle individual creativity. If this were true, then shouldn't all SOEs be shut down? But why shut down any SOEs? Why not simply turn SOEs over to the workers instead of closing them down? Would the workers not then be able to assert their creativity unfettered by government?

On page 127 he laments, "Managing a country with a population of more than a billion people is never an easy one." This comes across as a weak excuse. No one ever said governing was easy at any size.

In defense of sending in troops to end the Tiananmen Square demonstrations, Chua argues,

A crackdown on a radicalised protest movement may sometimes be the most humane thing a government can do to stop a country from sliding into anarchy. It is a necessary step to restore order, enhance political stability so as to continue reform for the common good of the entire society. It is too easy to demonise a good government using images of tanks and soldiers, and listen to the shallow and simplistic statements made by some radicalised protesters, or some parents of protesters who lost their lives during the unrest. (130)

Chua buttresses this by noting — among other things — over 600 million Chinese lifted out of poverty between 1981 and 2004, China's becoming the world's engine for economic growth, and poll results that indicate that the Chinese government enjoys over 80% public approval year-after-year in contrast to around 30% or below for Western governments. (131-132)

In a world where western imperialism and warring still reigns, Chua emphasizes, "It is important for one to always bear in mind the fact that China managed to achieve all the above without resorting to slavery, colonialism, wars and the exploitation of others." (133) I would quibble somewhat. The status of many workers is still so bleak that slave conditions can be argued to exist in China.⁴ Then again, China was put into the economic doldrums largely by foreign exploitation, and the dire plight of workers has roots in this malevolent history.

Asks Chua, "What do 'freedom', 'democracy' and 'human rights' mean to people who cannot even find jobs, put food on the table, send their children to school, and provide a decent place for their family to rest and learn?" (134)

Chua cites a report by Gallup World titled "Chinese Struggling Less Than Americans to Afford Basics" (12 October 2011) that, in fact, Chinese people may already be better off than Americans. (135)

With such results China poses a grave threat to neoliberal capitalism. It would be easy to discount "socialism with Chinese characteristics" as Orwellian for "capitalism." However, China is an example of most boats rising. For instance, one commonly comes across homeless people in capitalist-inspired Hong Kong, but I seldom am confronted by homelessness in China.

Writes Chua, “As a socialist country with a communist ideology, the policy makers in China formulated a housing policy to look after the needs of all people. For the rich who can afford, the government allows the market to dictate the house price. However, for those who need help, the government will find ways to look after them.” (138) Contrariwise, Chua writes that helping the homeless has even been criminalized in the US. (185-187)

Most brilliantly, Chua puts the Tiananmen Square protests in a comparative context with protests in the western world, in particular with the recent Occupy protests.

Chua writes that the West controls protests with weaponry, a compliant media, and “brutal force.”

Police brutality, says Chua, is “a commonly used tactic in the West to upset the life of protesters, drain their energy and time, so as to demoralise them and hinder their ability to balance their work life, family life, and their enthusiasm to protest against their government’s corruption, corporate greed, income inequality, unemployment and rising cost of living.” (198)

The evidence of police brutality is ubiquitous. Evidence, says Chua, is readily accessible on the internet. This I can vouch for; I feel completely safe and at ease in the presence of police in China, something I would not say I feel in Canada.⁵

Chua asks:

I often wonder: if so-called “dissidents” across the world (including China), did not receive funding from the US government, and had to work like the average person to earn a living like the protesters in the US, would they still be so active inside their own country to promote hatred against their own government on behalf of the US government? (198) (emphasis in book)

Chua confidently declares ‘the 1989 Tiananmen protesters enjoyed a far higher level of freedom, democracy, and human rights than the 2011 Wall Street protesters in the US.’ Among the reasons are:

- Freedom of protesters

“For almost seven full weeks, including two weeks after martial law was declared protesters were allowed in Tiananmen Square. Whereas, the Occupy Wall Street protesters found themselves victims of police crackdowns and mass arrests early on.”

- The rule of law

“In 1989, the Tiananmen protesters were allowed to violate martial law for two weeks, and resist the legal authority of the Chinese government to plead for their co-operations to leave the Square over the entire seven weeks of mayhem. However, during the 2011 Occupy protests, it was the US government that abused its laws to arrest, jail, beat, pepper spray, taser and make hell to the lives of the protesters by the creative use of laws.”

- The barricade strategy

“During the 1989 Tiananmen incident, it was the protesters who set up barricades against the authorities; whilst during the 2011 Occupy protests, it was the US government who set up barricades against protesters. A simply walk across a police line would mean being arrested in the name of the law.”

- Brutality by authorities

“Despite harassment and hostility from the protesters, there are absolutely no images of any kind that explicitly show the soldiers being violent against protesters. On the contrary, the overwhelming amount of images produced by the Western media actually tell the story of violence against soldiers by the so-called ‘unarmed’ and ‘peaceful’ protesters.” (212-213)

- Media freedom

Chua contends that the China State-controlled media was very open in reporting dissent and the details of Chinese leaders dialogues with student representatives. He contrasts this with the antagonism of the US corporate media towards the Occupy movement. (217)

Chua has pulled together the western media threads, the disinformation, the recantations, and the biases in a campaign to demonize China – a fast-rising challenger to the hegemony of western capitalism. It is a must-read book for people wanting a perspective outside the controlled negative western media portrayal. After

reading *Tiananmen Square “Massacre”?: The Power of Words vs. Silent Evidence*, the second book in the The Art of Media Disinformation is Hurting the World and Humanity series by Chua — I immediately knew I had to read the first book in the series.