Interview Jan Wong

A third generation Chinese-Canadian, Jan Wong was a fervent Maoist when she first went to China in 1972 but soon became disillusioned with the Cultural Revolution. In the late '80s she returned as foreign correspondent for the *Globe and Mail* and was in a room at the Beijing Hotel overlooking Tiananmen Square when the PLA was sent in on June 3-4, 1989 to drive thousands of demonstrators from the streets and square. In this interview, Wong recounts in vivid detail what she witnessed as the army closed in and the people kept pushing back, and how, on June 5th, she witnessed an unknown young man come out of the crowd and stop the tanks. This is an edited transcript of an interview conducted on Dec. 7, 2005.

… Your descriptions of Tiananmen Square [in your book *Red China Blues*] were extraordinary. … Can you give us a sense of the place and the atmosphere?

Tiananmen Square is in the heart of Beijing. It's right where the Imperial Palace is located, and it's the biggest square in the world. It takes quite a long time to walk from one side to the other. It's not human scale at all. If you can imagine a place that can hold a million people standing in one spot, that's how big Tiananmen Square is. Someone told me it could host the entire Summer Olympics and the Winter Olympics at the same time, that's how big it is.

It's not a welcoming place. It's not like Central Park, where you'd want to gather, because there is not a tree there; there's no shade. There [are] just big, tall lampposts with cameras on the top that swivel around, and if they see anything interesting, they're going to follow you. There are big loudspeakers so they can blast music or orders; very often they'll tell you what to do. There's not one single bench in the entire square. If you want to sit, you have to sit on the stones. And it's crawling with plainclothes [policemen]. … [I]f anybody ever tries to unfurl a banner, in less than a minute you'll be jumped. That's how many plainclothes police are there watching.

On the 19th of May, 1989, martial law was declared. The troops came in, and they were stopped. How did the citizens keep the army out of the city for 15 days?

I think the citizens kept it going because they were so passionate about what they were doing. Things kept happening -- martial law, a hunger strike -- that really galvanized the population. There's such a feeling in China about food because of the thousands of years of famines that they've had. And you know the Chinese traditional greeting is not "Hello," but "Have you eaten?" People always want to know if you've eaten because food is so important. So when the students went on their hunger strike, it really moved people to tears. Of course it wasn't a real hunger strike; they were sneaking snacks. They would miss a meal or two, but it was very dramatic, and so the doctors and nurses would come down, and the ambulances, and these students would be fainting. It was all political theater, I think, but the people were really revved up about it, and really, Beijing had come to a standstill. People were so interested in what was going on at the square. And that's why: It just had its own momentum.

When the army tried to come in, the people just flooded out and with their sheer numbers simply blocked the road. It's so easy in Beijing to get 2,000 people here, 10,000 there. So they stopped the army, and sometimes they talked to them; sometimes they let the air out of their tires; sometimes they cut their fuel cord; sometimes old ladies would lie down in the street and not let the army go by. …

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One of the reasons I think they did it is because, psychologically, they felt that the People's Liberation Army was not an enemy; the PLA was their friend. This is because of years of propaganda by Chairman Mao that the army is your friend. "The people love the army; the army love the people" -- that's an old slogan. Also, it had been an honorable place to send your sons and your daughters. I remember when I was a student at Beijing University [also called Peking University], my classmates were about one-third army men and some women, and they were among the most moral and kind and upright and good people in the class. They took the hardest jobs. So the people had a good feeling about the army, and I think they didn't feel in any danger to go out and stop them. They just felt the army didn't really know the story, and if the people could just explain to the soldiers. …

"The great thing about China is that history is valued so it will come out one day. People will keep records, will eventually write about this. It's not that it's disappeared forever."

… What changed then? What led up finally to the events of the night of June the 3rd?

You couldn't see it in Beijing, but behind the scenes, Deng Xiaoping was ordering every military commander in every military district in China to contribute troops. He wanted to crack down, and he wanted everyone to participate, because if everyone participated, there could be no finger-pointing afterwards.

It took two weeks to get everybody on that side. There was a lot of reluctance; the military didn't want to bring guns into the capital. This was unprecedented. Nobody had done this before. Even Mao had not dared to bring army troops into the capital.

So there was this buildup of troops on the outside, and the troops were kept incommunicado, because the problem before, when martial law was declared, the people had told the soldiers: "We're protesting against corruption. We're good people. We're not ruffians; we're not hooligans. Don't believe the government." This time the government took the precaution of not letting the people talk to the soldiers; they were kept separated until the order to come in. So in Beijing, people were really not expecting the huge number of soldiers. They were taken by surprise, and they were not expecting violence, because they had already talked to the soldiers, and there had been no problem. …

You've written a vivid description of the first use of major force at Muxidi. Tell us what happened there.

The troops came in from the four corners of the city, but in the west end of the city when they came in, they happened to pass by an area called Muxidi. … Everybody in Beijing knows Muxidi is the apartments for the highest officials -- not the Politburo level, but pretty high, so you had Supreme Court judges living in there, and you had ministry officials living in there. … [But] the soldiers from outside of Beijing who had been brought in especially to suppress the demonstrators would not have known this. They did not know where they were.

… That Saturday night the army started coming in … the city, and so the people rushed out again. This was becoming a regular occurrence: Every time people said, "The army's coming," everybody would rush out and stop them. And they rushed out this time, except the army shot them, and so they started running down the alleyways.

People in [the Muxidi] apartment buildings could hear all this. It was summertime and the windows were open, so they heard the gunfire; they heard people screaming; and they saw the soldiers shooting at people. They would lean out their windows and scream at the soldiers and curse them and throw things. I had that feeling myself. I wanted to throw things out the window of the Beijing Hotel because you just felt anger: "Why are you doing this to the people?" …

What they did was they just raked the buildings with their gunfire, and they were shooting people. People were being killed in their own kitchens because these bullets were very lethal. … They just shot at them because they were trying to get into the city. They had been ordered to take Tiananmen, and they were going to get there no matter what it took.

Can you give us some idea of the weaponry that was used as the army came in on the 3rd and the 4th?

What was amazing was that the army used battlefield weapons … in a city of 10 million people, many of whom are on the street. You're shooting into them with weapons that are designed to pierce the armor of another enemy tank, and these are people with no weapons, wearing summer dresses. … They used tanks, and they used AK-47s, which are semiautomatic rifles, Kalashnikovs. The difference, also, is that the bullets were intended for battlefield use. … These bullets are the size of a man's thumb, and they're encased with this soft outer coating that, when it's fired, it unfurls and it twists. They're like dum dums , I guess -- they twist. So when they go through the victims, they tear up the victim inside. … And [they] can go through 10 bodies at close range. There were many, many wounded and dead that night because they kept firing into the crowds.

They used tanks, … [and] they plowed over people. If you were in their way, they would just run over you. The tanks are incredibly heavy, so heavy they leave an imprint on the asphalt. They just go over it, and there's the tank tread. That's how much they weigh. I mean, you can imagine it: When they go over a human body, they leave hamburger. That's what it looks like, just hamburger meat underneath the tank treads, and you scrape the person off the street afterwards. … It was really traumatic for the people who thought they were facing rubber bullets. They didn't know they were going to get shot at with battlefield weapons.

… Why do you think the crackdown against ordinary citizens was so severe? …

There were several reasons, … one, as Li Peng, the premier at the time, said rather stupidly to a foreign visitor: "Well, we just didn't have rubber bullets. If we had water cannon, maybe it would have been better." I think that was actually true. They didn't have anything to deal with civilian unrest because it had never happened before.

The second reason is … what they were so concerned about was losing power. They were very angry, too. Deng Xiaoping did not like these unruly students because he had been a victim of the Cultural Revolution, and his family had been victims. His son was paralyzed as a result of the Red Guards at Beijing University. So that's the history of the man in power who made the decision to use force. He wanted it suppressed. He had no sympathy at all for protests. …

Can you describe that extraordinary sequence of events on the night of the 3rd and the 4th?

The night of the 3rd was a Saturday. It was a very beautiful summer night, and thousands, tens of thousands, of people had gathered in the square, because the Goddess of Democracy statue was there. … They came with their children. People came as if they were on dates -- nice dresses, summery outfits. They also came because the government had broadcast a warning. It said, "Stay home to safeguard your lives." This was on the TV and on the radio, and that was just an invitation to come down to the square, because … people would defy the soldiers with impunity. The soldiers were their allies, so people didn't feel afraid. …

I remember going out to the outskirts that evening and suddenly seeing truckloads of soldiers and being struck by the fact that they weren't smiling. They didn't look friendly, and they were wearing boots. I called a couple of other journalists to check what was going on, and they said, "Yeah, they're coming in from all four corners of the city."

I decided to go down to the square, … and the people were sort of semi-hysterical by then because the rumors had started … that the soldiers were shooting. There were many stampedes throughout the square, and I was really afraid I was going to get hurt by a stampede. I wasn't afraid of getting shot -- it didn't occur to me that there was that kind of danger. I thought I would get trampled. …

So I said, "OK then, I've had enough of this; I'll go back to the hotel." Then I was struck that something's happening, because the gates to the Beijing Hotel were wired shut with coat-hanger wire. It's not that tall -- it's about 5 feet -- so I threw myself over the fence, and I realized something was going on at the steps of the hotel. They were stopping all the journalists, because many had rented rooms because it has a good view of the square. They were taking people's notebooks and tapes, so I decided to pretend I was Chinese, which is pretty easy for me, so I stuck my notebook in my back and just walked up the stairs as if I was a hotel employee coming for the nightshift.

I got in, and I saw in the lobby reporters were calling in stories to their editors, and plainclothes police were walking around with these big scissors and snipping the phone wires as they were speaking to their editors. They were so subtle. Then I went up to my room, and I really got there about the time the army arrived at the square. … [T]hen the shooting started. … You just hear this thunderous sound of gunfire, and they were coming from both sides of the square at this point.

I saw that people were hysterical. People were running to the square, and they were running from the square; people would race into the square, and bikes racing out of the square. The ambulances started to go in. All the gunfire kept going. You could see tracer bullets through the sky. … There was a battle going on, and there were all these civilians, and they were the targets.

… The people in the square were fighting them with their bare hands, really with nothing. The people in the square thought that they were using rubber bullets, because they held up their coats or a jacket to block the bullets. And of course they weren't rubber bullets; they were real.

I stood on my balcony all night, and I watched these waves of people trying to rush the square and getting pushed back, and then you saw people running in to help them. You saw the ambulances would start racing in, and there weren't enough ambulances, so you saw pedicab drivers pedaling in as fast as they could. I mean, I can't understand this kind of bravery. They just raced in, and then they'd come out with bodies. Because there weren't even enough pedicabs, people would go with their bikes, and I'd see them walking out with a body slumped over the bike seat. …

There was just continuous gunfire all night until 4:00 a.m., when the lights snapped off, and you just heard this loudspeaker telling the students to get out of the square. I was really afraid the students would get massacred, but they weren't. They gathered them, and … then they forced them to go out through a gauntlet, literally a gauntlet, where they hit them as they left. Then the students filed out through the south end past Chairman Mao's mausoleum; they turned right at Kentucky Fried Chicken; then they went back north to the Boulevard of Eternal Peace [Chang'an Boulevard]. Then just at that intersection, when they arrived at the Boulevard of Eternal Peace, some students swore at the tanks who were waiting, and the tanks turned on their motors and crushed about 10 or 11 students. This is about 6:00 a.m., so it's daylight because it's June, so everyone can see this. …

That day, of course, when the sun came up, everybody was really angry. Remember, the whole city heard it. Ten million people heard the army coming in, and they heard the sirens, and they heard all the screaming and shooting. So they gathered at the corner, and about 50 or 60 or 80 people cursed the soldiers who were now guarding the square. … You could see the commander give an order, because suddenly all the rifles would come up. There would be one row of soldiers kneeling, one row standing. It was like a shooting range. Then all the people realized that the guns were pointed at them, and they'd go running past the hotel. I felt like I was watching some terrible opera: The people [would] go running past the hotel, and then the soldiers would fire in their backs. They would fall right in front of the hotel. Maybe five or six people would be shot. And then, unlike the night before, when you could rescue them, if you tried to approach them, they would shoot. They would shoot anyone who tried to help those people, so they would just be lying in the square. … The soldiers shot everybody -- doctors, nurses, anybody, rescuers. Just everybody was being shot at. …

But the odd thing was that after a little while, like 40 minutes, an hour, people would gather their nerve again and crawl back to the corner and start screaming at the soldiers. … The commander would eventually give another signal, and the soldiers would raise their rifles again, and the people go, "Oh, my God!," and they would run away, and they'd shoot more in the backs. This went on more than half a dozen times in the day. It was to me unbelievable that I'm just watching it and counting the bodies. … I just can't believe it.

The only reason they left is it started to rain around late afternoon, a nice, gentle drizzle, and everybody went home. I thought, such a strange country -- they're not afraid of dying, but they don't want to get wet. So that was the end of that. …

You visited the hospitals on the 8th of June. What did you see?

… On June the 8th, I saw people outside the gates of the hospital, desperately trying to find relatives that had been missing, waving pictures of relatives. The hospital was not letting people in, so I had a friend who worked there, and we went into the hospital through the back entrance, where the staff goes, and I didn't

see bodies, but there was a smell, which my friend who's a doctor said, "Do you smell that?" I said, "Well, I smell something sweet." And she said, "That's death; that's what you're smelling."

Then she found a doctor who worked there, someone she knew. I said: "What happened? What did you see?" He said he'd been called in. He was a surgeon. [He] said: "I've never seen wounds like that. We didn't know what to do. We deal with industrial accidents and car accidents; we don't deal with these kind. The whole torso was torn up because the bullet has torn them apart." He said: "We don't know how to do this kind of surgery. They're just a total mess inside. … We were so afraid the soldiers would come in and kill them off and shoot them and finish off the job. We had no idea what was happening."

How many people do you think died, and can we be confident of a figure?

… I've written that 3,000 people died, … and I base that on a very early report by the Chinese Red Cross that was quickly suppressed. And then I talked to military attachés, and they did estimates based on crowd size, amount of shooting and kind of weaponry. And I don't mean just one. I mean about half a dozen of them got together and tried to figure it out. And then I got to know the figure because I contributed information, I took down time of gun fire, length of gunfire, that's what I was doing that night. I couldn't do anything else. I just sat there with my watch it was like watching the Olympics. You know, "Let me see, that was three minutes and forty seconds, gunfire in the Southwest, OK." So I supplied that and they gave me what they had, so I think about 3,000. … It's a guesstimate. I don't really know. I don't think anybody really knows.

The government said nobody was shot at Tiananmen Square, nobody died at Tiananmen Square. So then later they said 1,000, but they were mostly soldiers. Well, if they were saying that many soldiers died, then I don't think it's at all beyond the realms of imagination to say that 3,000 civilians died.

Three thousand in Beijing?

Three thousand in Beijing is my guess of how many died. … The main carnage was in Beijing. That's why I call it a massacre. …

One of the very, very important things that has missed attention in the West is the fact that this wasn't just a student uprising, it was a massive uprising which was fundamentally threatening to the regime in China. Can you give us a sense of the scale of the actual popular uprising that followed the students' demonstrations?

The students demonstration was relatively small, it involved many of the universities in Beijing, but still, that's just a tiny part of the population. They caught the imagination of the general population, who felt that what they were fighting for was worth fighting for: an end to corruption, an end to special privileges for senior officials in the Communist Party. … I think in Beijing one in 10 of the population was joining in, and that includes all the old people, all the little children. So it was massive. … In fact, it seemed to me everyone I knew was down at the square. Because it [was] like you were demonstrating in favour of motherhood and apple pie: Who could argue with anti-corruption? Everybody was for it.

You gave wonderful descriptions … in your book of all the instruments of state really marching against the government.

I remember being so surprised by the kinds of people who were demonstrating. Of course, you always expect university students to demonstrate -- that's part of their job description -- but what shocked me in China was that you had policemen demonstrating; you had bankers, Bank of China employees, demonstrating; you had journalists, and journalists in China are special. They work as propaganda workers for the government. They're not journalists as we know it. They were very brave: They wore their journalist ID badges on their shirts so you would know exactly who they were and whom they worked for. You had doctors and nurses and scientists. There were army people demonstrating; the Chinese navy was demonstrating. I thought, this is extraordinary, because who's left? It's just the top leaders who aren't out there. …

Why did the Chinese leadership feel threatened by the demonstrators at Tiananmen?

They were terrified because it had never happened before. … This was happening in a country with no history of popular protest. They had never had a spontaneous demonstration in 40 years of Communist rule. … [And] it was on a massive scale. You had millions of people demonstrating -- 1 million in the capital. Everything had ground to a halt. You couldn't travel through the city, which is a big security problem. [Soviet President Mikhail] Gorbachev had come for a visit, which was a disaster in terms of public relations, because every time he tried to go somewhere, he couldn't get there because the streets were blocked. …

This was the first Communist summit since the Sino-Soviet conflict, so for the Chinese government, [this was] a big loss of face [and] very scary. … They were aware of what was happening in the Soviet Union -- and so were the Chinese people -- that the Communist Party in the Soviet Union was more or less imploding. They were very frightened in China. …

… I want to talk to you about that young man confronting the column of tanks. You witnessed the scene, and you described it vividly. Where were you watching from, and what exactly did you see?

I was watching it from the Beijing Hotel, where we had rented a room that looked onto the north side of the square. That morning I remember my husband said to me, "You'd better get out here." I rushed out onto the balcony, and I saw this lone person standing in front of this long column of tanks. It was quite noisy because all the tank motors were on, but there was no other sound. Everybody was frozen. I wasn't the only person watching; everybody on the street was watching.

The young man -- I think he was young. I couldn't see his face, but I think he was young because of the way he moved. He was very fluid; he didn't move like an older person, so I'm guessing he was maybe in his 20s. He tried to step in front of the tank. … The tank turned to go around him; the tank did not try to just run him over. I thought, wow! So the tank is turning, and then the young man jumps in front of the tank, and then the tank turns the other way, and the young man jumps down this side. And I thought, what's going on?

They did this a couple of times, and then the tank turned off its motor. … And then it seemed to me that all the tanks turned off their motors. It was really quiet; there was just no noise. Then the young man climbed up onto the tank and seemed to be talking to the person inside the tank. … I'm going, "What are they talking about?" They have a conversation, and then after a while the young man jumps down, and the tank turns on the motor, and the young man blocks him again, and I think, "He's just going to get crushed!" And I started to cry because I had seen so much shooting and so many people dying that I was sure this man would get crushed. So, I remember thinking, I can't cry, because I can't see; I want to watch this. But I'm getting really upset, because I think he's going to die.

But he didn't. He climbed down, and then I think it was two people from the sidelines ran to him and grabbed him -- not in a harsh way, almost in a protective way. I always felt that those two people were just bystanders who wanted to rescue him. Then he seemed to melt into the crowd. Then the tanks after a moment just started up the engines again, and then they kept going down the Boulevard of Eternal Peace. That was the end. It was amazing. …

Who do you think the people [were] who pulled him away? Because that's crucial to the question of whether he survived or not. Do you think it was concerned citizens, or do you think it was the PSB, the Public Security Bureau?

… I think that the people who took the tank man away -- I call him the tank man -- were concerned people. I've thought about this, and given the timing, I don't think the security forces had kicked in that fast. … I think that was still too early. That's one reason is the timing. The second reason is the body language. If you've ever seen security people manhandle a Chinese citizen, they're really brutal. … They twist your arm; they make you bend over; they punch you a few times; they kick you. … To me, I think he was helped to the side of the road. He wasn't being arrested.

That raises the intriguing possibility that he's still alive. Do you think there's any likelihood of that?

I think that he is. … I think the chances are pretty good … that he's in China, because if he had left -- and many people have left China -- he might have felt free to talk. The fact that we have not heard from him since that amazing incident tells

me he's still alive; he's still there. He has not been caught, and he's certainly not telling anybody that he's the man.

… I told you about the journalist [Alfred Lee] who admitted to me that he'd invented the name Wang Wei Lin [as the name of the Tank Man]. You were never convinced, were you, that that was his real name. Why were you suspicious of it?

When soon after June 4th, 1989, a foreign journalist published a story saying that the Tank Man was Wang Wei Lin, I didn't believe it because, you know, it's great to have a scoop, but if no one can follow it, if no one can match it, then it doesn't exist. … None of the resident correspondents in Beijing -- many of whom are fluent in Chinese and have many sources, many connections, all kinds of information -- no one could match it. … I also took into account that the journalist who reported the story was not a resident foreign correspondent in Beijing. …

…We passed out copies of that famous picture to undergraduates at Beijing University -- the hub where the first activism started -- and these undergraduates were genuinely mystified. One of them said, "I don't know; maybe it's a parade or something," and another one said very politely, "May I ask if this is a piece of your artwork?" How has the regime succeeded in wiping out recent history?

It is stunning that university students at Beida [Beijing University] would not know this picture. … On the other hand, China has so many secrets, and people understand that it's dangerous to share information. I went back to Beijing University, where I had studied, to talk to my old teachers, … and we didn't talk about Tiananmen either at first. Of course I wanted to talk about Tiananmen, so I sort of waited, and then eventually I slid in sideways to the subject, but that's the only reason they talked about it. It's not something that people would readily talk about, because you just get into trouble. There is no upside to talking about it at this point.

… I don't know what it tells you about a country when you could have such a cataclysmic event as Tiananmen Square, and then suddenly you lop off the reality for all the people coming after. … But the great thing about China is that history is valued, so that it will come out one day. People will keep records; people will eventually write about this.

It's not that it's disappeared forever. In Chinese history, each dynasty has secrets that it suppresses, and then it's up to the next dynasty to write the true history of the previous dynasty. Each dynasty writes its own propaganda; the next dynasty writes the true history. So I assume this will happen in China, too. …

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