

BOOK REVIEW
Margaret Hillenbrand,
Negative Exposures:
Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China
(Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020)

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Not long after arriving in China for the first time, I was out for a meal with new Chinese friends. Towards the end of the evening, one of them, in hushed tones let me know that he ‘knew about’ 1989. The others joined in, sharing what they knew about the events in Tiananmen Square and how they knew: usually they had been told something by their parents, but in a few cases, teachers had shared some of this forbidden knowledge. We are used to hearing that sensitive events like 1989 have been censored out of existence or forgotten through a collective social amnesia, but what this rather anodyne example demonstrates is the truth at the heart of Margaret Hillenbrand’s important and impressive new book: secrecy plays an equally important role in structuring social relations in contemporary China. Censorship and enforced amnesia are rather blunt tools, and are, to a certain extent, easier for the analyst to identify and name: can something be spoken or not spoken? Can something be remembered or not remembered? Secrecy, by contrast, and particularly the public secrecy that Hillenbrand investigates, hovers in-between these two dominant discourses: it requires a certain amount of knowing, but not speaking, remembering but not sharing. It involves, as Hillenbrand’s subtitle suggests, ‘knowing what not to know’, or perhaps rather, knowing when and how to (not) know. Speaking these secrets out loud represents either a moment of defiance, or more likely, as in the example above, a hushed and private conversation between friends, speaking in codes and veiled references.

Hillenbrand argues that a focus on censorship and amnesia have resulted in secrecy alluding serious academic consideration,¹ a fact only furthered by the difficulty of studying secrets in a ‘cryptocracy’ like China. Secrecy studies remains in its infancy in

China, with only limited studies on secrecy in espionage, policing, and cinema.² Hillenbrand’s method, then, is to approach the secret through its artistic representations. This methodology is illuminating, not just because of the impossibility of tackling public secrecy head on, but because it also reminds us that even if we could, that moment of revelation is rarely as cathartic or explosive as we might expect. As Baudrillard noted long ago, the revelation of Watergate really only served to reaffirm the ruling order (quoted on p. 140); Abu Ghraib shocked, and then we moved on. In a cryptocratic society, we can’t look at secrets head on, but rather, we must look for what is seeping in around the edges, what is emerging from the shadows: these liminal spaces are where the terms of public secrecy are negotiated.

What Hillenbrand finds, in these cracks, are what she calls ‘photo-forms’: ‘image-works that meld well-known historical photographs with different material substrates’ (p. 26), essentially repurposed photographic images or imagery, well enough known to be recognizable to the audience, but with enough changed to require some intellectual decoding. These photo-forms are often short-lived and digital, and thus their audience is often limited. And yet, she argues that they can, over time, push at the edges of public secrecy, and at times force a public reckoning.

One of the key insights of the book is that public secrecy is ‘a densely collective endeavor in China’ (p.2): while censorship is a top-down application of power, public secrecy is a ‘highly agential process whose actors choose to obey the law of omerta for shifting, mindful reasons’ (p. 3). Public secrecy serves to maintain the legitimacy of the ruling

Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but is enforced by sometimes unlikely allies: the former Red Guards who would prefer not to talk about their own Cultural Revolution behaviour, or the parents who choose not to talk about 1989 with their children in an effort to protect them.

The book tackles three major events: the Nanjing Massacre, the Cultural Revolution, and the Tian'anmen Square protests, over four chapters, plus a lengthy introduction and conclusion.

The focus of Chapter 1 is the Nanjing Massacre. It feels somewhat incongruous to start a book about 'knowing what not to know' with one of the most domestically known historical events of the past century. Because of this, this chapter's functions quite differently from the chapters on the Cultural Revolution and Tian'anmen by looking at the process through which the Nanjing Massacre emerged from secrecy to become not just known, but obligatory patriotic knowledge for citizens of all ages, and the role that images played in this emergence. Hillenbrand argues that the Massacre re-emerged from the shadows initially in the 1980s, and then more fully after 1989, when it served as a sociopolitical adhesive. Just as its original shrouding was inevitably political (the Nanjing victims were essentially the 'wrong' victims for the CCP), its emergence into public light was similarly serving new political ends. Over time, Hillenbrand suggests we have come to know the Nanjing Massacre in a fundamentally lens-based way: through a relatively small canon of representative images, which are typically portrayed in recognizable ways. This has resulted in the creation of a 'logoized' image of the Nanjing Massacre, which aims to rouse and rally 'patriotic personhood, whose duty is to be animated by fury and resentment' (p. 67). And yet, as Hillenbrand brilliantly unpicks, while these images are now almost obscenely public, their absorption within the patriotic discourse has prevented any real discussion of the origins of these photos, as Japanese war 'trophies'. She argues, then, that the Nanjing Massacre, for all its unflinching visuality, remains in some senses hidden and untreated.

Chapters 2 and 3 turn to the Cultural Revolution, one of the two big secrets of contemporary China,

alongside the Tian'anmen massacre. Chapter 2 focuses on family portraits, and the ways in which the publication of Cultural Revolution-era family portraits in the 1980s and 1990s constituted a new method of vernacular revelation, a mechanism through which private information could be publicly networked. The main focus of the chapter is on the pictorial *Old Photographs*, a publication that benefitted from the 'old photograph fever' 老照片热 of the 1990s, and in particular, its 'Private Album' column, which invited ordinary citizens to send in family photographs combined with a textual description. While these did not necessarily have to do with the Cultural Revolution, they often did, and as such, represented perhaps the most public space for sharing ordinary families' Cultural Revolution experiences in the pre-Internet age.

There is a thought-provoking tension between privacy and publicity threaded throughout this chapter. The Mao era was resolutely anti-privacy, from communal dining halls to tracking women's menstrual cycles. The requirement of public disclosure provoked its opposite: a desire for secrecy, for non-disclosure, wherever possible. As Liu Xinwu, pioneer of the style of 'photo-text' in the 1980s, suggests, keeping secrets became a state of mind in the Mao years, a practice of the everyday in China, even if there was nothing particularly important to keep covert (p.91). This trained inclination towards secrecy benefitted the state in the 1980s, when it wanted to avoid public discussion of the Cultural Revolution. This public secrecy was based upon a 'constructive ambiguity' (p.98) over what exactly was off-limits, which cautioned against the sharing of public experiences, even when there was not much to share. And yet, at this time when privacy was finally becoming permissible again, authors like Liu Xinwu and the magazine *Old Photographs* represented the opposite tendency: towards voluntary public disclosure of private experiences.

Hillenbrand's descriptions of the photo-texts in *Old Photographs* are lyrical, affective, and moving: I wish there were more of them. These close readings highlight the mechanisms of the photo-text as a unified object: the photos do not just illustrate the

texts, but in many cases visualize what cannot be written, while the text too names what cannot be seen. These family portraits, and the lengths to which people had to go to realize them, also demonstrate the enduring role of family in a time that militated for the family's disunity or destruction. They highlight too, that the Cultural Revolution was not just experienced by the *zhiquing* generation, as mainstream publishing might suggest, but that it was a transgenerational experience. The impact of the Mao era on family, then, goes some way to explaining the persistent appearance of family portraits in contemporary Chinese art, and Hillenbrand investigates the role of family in the works of Song Yongping, Shao Yinong and Mu Chen, Zhuang Huan, Hai Bo and Zhao Xiaogang, amongst others.

The family photographs or 'photo-texts' in Chapter 2 were able to be published because the stories they represented were so obviously unimportant: the personal experiences of unknown or ordinary people. The topic of Chapter 3, the murder of Bian Zhongyun, the vice-principal of the Girls Middle School attached to Beijing Normal University, at the hands of Red Guards in August 1966, represents a secret at the opposite end of the social spectrum, given the school's position as the educator of the children of the top Party elite. The chapter delves, then, into two secrets: the minor secret of the murder of Bian and the careful preservation of the evidence of her murder by her husband Wang Jingyao and the major secret of the violence perpetrated by the children of China's ruling elite, and whom in many cases became top leaders themselves in the Reform Era.

Hillenbrand's argument about the utility of secrecy comes through particularly strongly in this chapter, which shows how the work of artist-activists resulted in the exposure of the minor secret, whilst the larger secret remained safely in the shadows. From 2000, Bian's image began to circulate on the internet; it was picked up and reproduced by artists; and the story of her death was the subject of the 2006 documentary *Though I am Gone* by Hu Jie. It was revealed, therefore, not by one moment of exposure but rather by network, by the slow progression of familiarity of Bian and the story of her death, mediated via images and photo-forms. This

highlights that, particularly in a cryptocracy, revelation is a process, not an event. Coincidentally or not, the years in which this network of photo-forms began to circulate also saw mounting moves by former Red Guards from Bian's school to begin to speak publicly about the events surrounding her death, and former pupils commissioned and paid for a sculpture of Bian, which was installed in the school. In 2014, Song Binbin, famous for presenting a Red Guard armband to Chairman Mao at the August 18th 1966 rally, issued a public apology, and made a pilgrimage to her old school to bow in front of Bian's bronze statue. Hillenbrand argues that the networked revelation of the minor secret of Bian's violent death provoked a reaction from those involved at the top – which can be seen in Song Binbin (the daughter of a PLA general) and others' public acknowledgement of (limited) involvement. But to me, this chapter also demonstrated the relative security of the big secret: as Hillenbrand notes, Song Binbin's very public apology was neither an admission of guilt nor an exposure of who was guilty (p. 164). The small secret has been revealed, but until now, at least, it has sparked no wider revelation, no broader discussion of elite involvement in Red Guard violence.

Most striking is this chapter's argument that secrecy is a mode of knowledge in itself. As Hillenbrand writes 'It [secrecy] is the divisive and atomizing instrument that has processed those events into history and memory.' (p.164) We cannot but know the Cultural Revolution through secrecy, and this is why the revelation of the minor secret may have spooked the holders of the major secret, but did not seriously threaten it: secrecy is not a matter of personal choice, but rather is a 'social order in itself' (p.164). As she notes, secrecy as a mode of knowledge extends well beyond these historical questions: we might think of the huge contemporary shadow population of migrant workers, who build the megacities so central to China's modern success, but are excluded from its benefits.

In many ways, this book is the story of strange alliances, and perhaps the strangest yet is at the heart of Chapter 4, which focuses on 1989. Hillenbrand argues that knowledge of 1989 represents a generational divide, split between those born before the mid-70s and those after. For those born before,

they know what happened in 1989, and more crucially, they know what not to know, whereas those born after, genuinely do not know. The older generation, therefore, is in an alliance with the State to keep this knowledge from the younger generation, their own children. Hillenbrand argues, ‘public secrecy is, in this sense, an active wedge driven between family members, a little-noted reinstallation of the party in the space of the home just at a time when the state’s presence is supposedly in steady retreat from private life in China’ (p.182) This again draws attention to the shifting relationship between privacy and disclosure in the Reform Era, and, I suggest, might also be a sign of the falsity of the binary of public vs private in China more broadly.

The iconic image at the heart of this chapter is, of course, Tank Man, and in particular, the repurposing of the image by cartoonists online. The efforts to avoid the censors means the repurposing of Tank Man’s image strays ever further away from the original image, and yet the images remain instantly identifiable to those in the know. Most intriguingly, Hillenbrand argues that the ‘public secrecy about Tank Man and Tiananmen has effectively drawn the authorities into another zero-sum game in which the state itself is now disrupting the faux tranquillity of a hushed past.’ (p. 175). She analyses an image from Wolf Warrior 2, in which the hero mirrors the position of Tank Man, as an example of the Chinese establishment attempting to defeat Tank Man by cannibalizing him, by stealing his iconic pose and rendering it normal and knowable.

Overall, this is a brilliant book, a case study in how Chinese cultural studies can be done, and will undoubtedly be read and taught widely. Hillenbrand adeptly weaves in a wide range of theory, engaging with a remarkably wide variety of thinkers and disciplines. It is perhaps the most illuminating in her analysis of the various photo-forms, which are insightful and persuasive. So too, is her overall argument about the role of public secrecy in contemporary China, adding much needed nuance to the discourses of censorship and amnesia.

I am grateful for the opportunity to present a few questions to Margaret Hillenbrand.

1. I was struck by the way in which these collective events get represented through images of individuals. The Nanjing Massacre chapter emphasises the image of the individual about to be beheaded beneath the tree, the Cultural Revolution chapters focuses on family portraits and the individual Bian Zhongyun, while the Tian’anmen chapter focuses on Tank Man. There is a particular irony in the iconic role of Tank Man, given that the individual successfully stands up to the state (in the sense that he holds up the row of tanks), while the collective is crushed. How can we understand these collective movements or moments being reduced to single individuals? Is this because public secrets get revealed most clearly through private intimacies?
2. The concept of the ‘photo-form’ is an incredibly useful analytical category, the putting of a name to the myriad ways in which images get repurposed in ways that we all recognise. And yet, if photo-forms are meant to be well-known images that get repurposed, it seems that the family portraits from chapter 2 fit somewhat uneasily into this category, as the images were publishable precisely because they are not well-known. Can we understand these photo-texts as a kind of ‘meta photo-form’, in which the *category* of photo – Mao-era family portraits – are well-known and easily recognisable, even if the individual images are easily forgettable? It seems too that it is the category itself that has been repurposed in contemporary art, perhaps most famously in Zhao Xiaogang’s *Bloodline* series, rather than any individual image.
3. I have two linked questions about chapter 4. I wonder, first of all, if a lack of awareness of Tank Man as an image, is the same as lack of awareness of 1989 as an event: is there a danger of equating the image with the event and its memory? While I acknowledge the larger truth of the argument about the generational divide in knowledge about 1989, my own personal experience is that many young people in China are at least somewhat aware of the events of 1989, even if they don’t know about Tank Man as such. Given the book’s argument about secrecy as a mode of knowledge, what role does the private circulation of knowledge play – of

parents telling stories to their children, even if they are coded and incomplete? If, however, the argument of the generational divide is true – that those born after the mid-70s really do represent ‘passive nonknowledge’ (p.180), how can we understand these photo-forms which primarily circulate online? Presumably their main audience is young people, which suggests that enough of these young people understand the references for these cartoons to have meaning.

¹ On censorship, Hillenbrand cites media and academic sources such as Ben Bland, “China Rewrites History with New Censorship Drive: Whitewashing of Archives Part of Wider Ideological Crackdown by Xi Jinping,” *Financial Times*, September 4, 2019; Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,” *American Political Science Review* 107:2 (2013):1-18; on amnesia, Hillenbrand cites Geremie Barmé, “My Friend the Memory Hole: A Comment on Living with Deng Xiaoping’s ‘Anti-bourgeois’ Campaign,” *China Heritage Quarterly*, no. 25 (March 1987); Geremie Barmé,

“Memory Holes, Old and New.” *China Heritage* (2017); Louisa Lim, *The People’s Republic of Amnesia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Michael Dutton, *Policing Chinese Politics: A History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Michael Schoenhals, *Spying for the People: Mao’s Secret Agents, 1949-1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013); Frederic Wakeman, *Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese Secret Service* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Response

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I thank Emily Williams very warmly for engaging with my book in such depth and clarity and for her thought-provoking and generous-spirited review of it. I'm also very grateful to the PRC History Review for providing this valuable forum for the exchange of views on recent books about China's modern history. In her review, Williams asks three substantial questions about my book, which I will address in turn. The first relates to the tension between collective events and their representation via images of individuals. In particular, Williams asks if this reductive or narrowing process occurs "because public secrets get revealed most clearly through private intimacies".

Certainly, I agree with Williams that "private intimacies" – whispered conversations among family members and trusted confidantes – are the pressure points for public secrets, the zones where their seemingly solid social architecture can be rocked or destabilized. Images of individuals are essential catalysts for this kind of subsidence in part because they instantly personalize the past. They enable moments of interpellation that narrow the distance between now and then, us and them. In so doing, images of individuals can act as sparks for forms of sociality that are other to the public secret and hostile towards it. At the same time, stark photographs of individuals can also shake the structure of the public secret because they serve as reminders that a singular contrary voice can sometimes shatter the phoney peace of group think. This is the very logic of the naked emperor and the little boy who called him out – a fable which itself has something highly photogenic about it.

But the preponderance of individual images in the remembrance of collective events may also be an effect of the photographic medium itself: both because of its perennial genre preferences and also because of the role which it has come to play in mediating the past. Since its earliest days,

photography's central pictorial subject has always been the human figure, and most particularly the face-as-portrait. This bias towards the face combines with the decisively photographic turn that human remembrance has taken – the process whereby we now so routinely recollect the past via photographs of it – to create a memoryscape which is inevitably dominated by images of individuals and their faces, most especially photographs of people caught in poignant poses or postures of some kind. But as Williams rightly points out later in her review, this telescoping process can also be problematic, and I will come back to this point shortly.

The next question Williams asks relates to the category of the photo-form which I develop in the book. She wonders whether the family portraits from the Cultural Revolution era that I discuss in chapter 2 might "fit somewhat uneasily into this category, as the images were publishable precisely because they are not well-known", and she further asks "Can we understand these photo-texts as a kind of 'meta photo-form', in which the *category* of photo – Mao-era family portraits – is well-known and easily recognisable, even if the individual images are easily forgettable?" Williams also refers to the artist Zhang Xiaogang, who has returned repeatedly to family portraits of the Cultural Revolution era in his work.

This criticism is well taken, and I do anticipate it to a degree in the book, noting in the Introduction that these family portraits lack the sticky iconicity of, say, the Tank Man photograph, and that they belong rather more appropriately to the category of what Hariman and Lucaites call the "significantly salient" image.¹ In part, this salience accrues from the fact that these portraits share a highly codified visual syntax: from the stiff expression on the subjects' faces, to the formulaic positioning of their bodies in photographic space, to the conventions around colour, lighting, and studio set-up which dictated their distinctive look (and which I discuss on p.111

of my book). This syntax lends the family portrait, or *quanjiafu* 全家福, an instant recognizability at the level of genre, despite the fact that the individual images themselves remained by and large anonymous.

What I am not so sure about is whether this palpable generic identity qualifies such images for the term “meta photo-form”. Strictly speaking, a meta object should refer back to itself or to the conventions of its genre – and it strikes me that what these portraits point to is instead an abiding structure of affect. That affect was the straitened emotional tenor of family life at a time when rupture felt so imminent that the act of posing for a formal portrait took on an almost talismanic import: the gesture of togetherness which such images performed might perhaps ward off permanent separation, even as the strained expressions on the subjects’ faces suggest they feared the exact opposite. In an inversion of the occult fear that photographs could steal souls, here their medial magic just might keep the heart of the family beating.

That said, there is something deeply “meta” about the way in which the artist Zhang Xiaogang has repurposed these portraits, principally because of the way he leverages sheer pictorial quantity in his work. Zhang’s *Bloodline* series (Xueyuan: dajiating xilie 血缘：大家庭系列, 1993-) consists of some dozens of paintings, whose ambience and execution are calculatedly near-identical. What’s more, their style and subject matter stage frequent returns in Zhang’s later series *Amnesia and Memory* (Shiyi yu jiyi 失忆与记忆, 2001-), thus bulking out the sense of volume further. As a result, and precisely as a collectivity, the paintings seem to comment as much on serial repetition as a trait of the family photograph as they do on the affective texture of such images – so much so, in fact, that Zhang’s work becomes more self-referential than strictly representational. As such, his canvases seem to exemplify the notion of the “meta photo-form”.

Williams’ final pair of questions relate to the Tank Man image and the crackdown at Tian’anmen which, rightly or wrongly, it has come to emblemize. She asks firstly “if a lack of awareness of Tank Man as an image is the same as lack of awareness of 1989 as

an event: is there a danger of equating the image with the event and its memory?” She follows up this question by noting that “many young people in China are at least somewhat aware of the events of ‘89, even if they don’t know about Tank Man as such”.

These are very pertinent questions. On the one hand, the Tank Man image is an object lesson in how icons condense complex narratives into crude myths: there is so much about June 4th which that image can never hope or pretend to capture. And by the same token, there is plenty of memory about the protests which has nothing to do with Tank Man, from the activism of the Tian’anmen Mothers to the limited awareness amongst young people to which Williams refers, and which was likely transmitted via the telling of stories within families. In other words, the image is always both more and less than the event. And it may also be true that the Tank Man image – precisely because of its rampant iconicity, and the censorship which that attracts – may serve as a shield behind which other forms of knowledge about the protests can circulate in less trackable ways. Yet perhaps the core peril of public secrecy is the absurdist condition of disjuncture and distortion which it drags into being, and which ultimately makes fools of one and all. This point was illustrated by the furore earlier this year over blogger Li Jiaqi, who presented a cake shaped like a tank on his livestream the day before the PRC’s most sensitive political anniversary. His broadcast was halted midway and Li himself disappeared from view for several weeks, while the censors wiped all mention of him online. Born in 1992, Li quite probably had no idea that his cake gag would bomb – tank – so badly. But the rumpus led many young people to hunt for intelligence online about tanks and Tank Men using VPNs – thus demonstrating both that icons can at once stall and stimulate the process of remembrance, and that while the image was never co-terminous with the event, it can no longer be disaggregated from it either. Indeed, both the blogger’s *faux-pas* and the state’s heavy-handed reaction – over an item of baked goods – invoke the dark comedy of the public secret, the poisonous absurdity of punishing people for not knowing something that they were very deliberately never taught. Unlike the little boy in the fable, who boldly speaks out and brings the house down, Li Jiaqi simply misspeaks but suffers the humourless wrath of the emperor nonetheless.

In a sense, this then leads to Williams' second question about Tank Man and Tian'anmen, which relates to the generational divide which separates those with memories of 1989 and the later born. Here, Williams asks "If ... the argument of the generational divide is true ... how can we understand these photo-forms which primarily circulate online? Presumably their main audience is young people, which suggests that enough of these young people understand the references for these cartoons to have meaning". I do not pretend to have expertise in the precise demographics of social media usage in China; but I would dispute the idea that the principal audiences for online remediations of Tank Man are young people. When I interviewed Baodiucuo, the main cartoonist I discuss in my book, he stated quite emphatically that knowledge about June 4th remained limited among younger generations, and he further indicated that his core fanbase was a tight community of people with memories of the protests, many of whom worked in the IT industry and were skilled at leaping over the Firewall – meaning that they could continue to access his work even after he migrated from Weibo to Twitter. Some members of this middle-aged memory community, he said, even connected offline specifically to share Firewall-dodging techniques with one another, thus consolidating their bonds.

Williams' question also touches on a core aspect of the photo-form as a visual artefact: namely, its natural rapport with the digital domain. Indeed, it seems to me that the most viable future for this kind of subversive aesthetic category surely lies online, despite ever more stringent censorship. This point was shown in the early days of the pandemic. In the relay sprint to outrun the internet militia, posts about the public secret of COVID cover-ups became increasingly visual, even artistic, in their messaging. Netizens in China know full well, of course, that plain text content can be scoured for keywords in the swiftest of keystrokes, so they now incline increasingly towards image or image-text compounds to transmit taboo information. Cartoons are quite useful for this, as we saw a while back with the Winnie the Pooh meme which satirized Xi

Jinping's grab for eternal power via his abolition of fixed presidential terms. Like Pooh, China's leader has greedily clasped the honeypot. But well-known photographs work better still, and they thrive in the plastically malleable milieu of the digital. Thus it was no surprise that inventive remediations of one of the final photos taken of Dr. Li Wenliang circulated on Weibo and WeChat in the spring of 2020. In one cartoon, by the satirist Kuang Biao, Dr Li's face mask morphs into neat rows of barbed wire, in a sharp swipe at the dual purpose – both protective device and political muzzle – that face coverings serve in contemporary China. Kuang Biao, like Badiucuo, does not belong to China's younger generations. But it will surely have to be the nation's digital natives who keep the torch of forbidden memory burning.



Kuang Biao 广彪: "Dr Wenliang" 文亮医生, 2020

¹ Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public*

Culture, and Liberal Democracy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 7.