Book Reviews

Dazzling Revelations

Review of *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China* by Margaret Hillenbrand, Duke University Press, 2020

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Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China by Margaret Hillenbrand is a dazzling display of rigorous interdisciplinary scholarship. It mounts a compelling argument about the "photo-form" as a critical category that shifts our attention away from the duality of censorship and amnesia to explain the occlusions of the historical record in China's recent past. The photo-form refers to how photographs and other visual media are repurposed in different forms and offer potentially transgressive and transformative glimpses into the afterlives of traumatic events, commonly silenced by the party-state's systematic attempts to suppress public discussion. In the current environment, the notion of the photo-form is elaborated to embrace a series of online techniques, from playful memes to smartphone apps, that may confirm the relationship between the physicality of the holder of a smartphone and the place of past events. Hence their subversive potential to commemorate and share moments that might otherwise be silenced by party-state power. The photo-form shares knowledge about "public secrets" and simultaneously shares in sustaining the secrecy of the secret.

Hillenbrand traces her argument centrifugally from its core in China out to different political systems across time and place. The book begins with reference to the pictures of June 1989 taken by the Beijing-based photographer Xu Yong, who hid his negatives of the events until in 2014. It concludes by aptly quoting Diane Arbus (1923–1971), whose words

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effectively summarize the argument built up in the preceding chapters: "A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know."[1] The influential US photographer put her energies into humanizing the "freak" in pictures by placing them in familiar settings, yet the very contrast between the "strange" and the "banal" does little to reveal the secret of the strange.

In China, the photo-form has not always been used for subversive purposes. The artist Zhang Dali, who makes an important appearance in the concluding chapter, pairs images of "original" and "manipulated" photos of leaders and places in his archival project *A Second History* (2003–2006). In this, he shows how the Chinese Communist Party has "doctored" its own photographic record of the revolution by scrubbing individuals out of the frame (recall the disappearance of Lin Biao and Jiang Qing, for example, from the official record of party leaders at key celebratory events) by adding slogans to a scene, by altering the backdrop of a portrait with tree blossoms, or by airbrushing wrinkles from the portraits of aging leaders.

But there is nothing specifically Chinese about the photo-form, even if its political potential is heightened in an environment where public secrecy reigns. Photo-forms appear across many places and spaces, from Marlene Dumas's photo portraits of Osama bin Laden, Gerhard Richter's famous picture cycle of the Baader-Meinhof photographs, to Lawrence Holofcener's bronze sculpture *Allies* (1995) of Churchill and Roosevelt sitting on a bench in central London, doubtless exchanging comments of relief at the absenting of Stalin from his seat at the Yalta Conference.

One doesn't need to look far to find relevant examples of public secrets in liberal democracies either, such as those propelled into public scrutiny by the Black Lives Matter movement concerning the barbaric histories of slavery, the systematic attempts by the British and US establishments to forcibly and inhumanely silence the revelations of their lies brought to light

1. Margaret Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 209.

by whistleblowers and Wikileaks, or the hidden, nepotistic, and "chumocratic" practices explaining the US and British governments' mishandling of the COVID crisis.

Hillenbrand's brilliant and often moving exposition of the repurposing of the iconic image of the Tank Man reveals that what may be celebrated as a powerful emblem of the struggle in one context may in another—China—be subject to absenting and forgetting, such that the image is little known to China's young millennials. Even further removed from the living memory of millennials is Bian Zhongyun, who, thanks to filmic and online remediation, has effectively become a metonym for the violence of the Cultural Revolution. The former vice principal of the elite Girls Middle School attached to Beijing Normal University, Bian was arguably the first high-profile person to be killed by Red Guards in August 1966. After four decades of total public silence about her murder, Hu Jie, the now internationally known independent documentary filmmaker, persuaded Bian's widower, Wang Jingyao, to reveal the story of her death. Following Hu Jie's 2005 film *Though I Am Gone* (*Sui wo siqu*), Bian Zhongyun's photograph, long kept hidden by Wang Jingyao, acquired an exceptional afterlife as photo-form in diverse online displays.

So the key question is why, so many decades down the road when the architects of the Cultural Revolution are no longer around, has there not been any public reckoning of the abuses of the past? Why are the party-state censors at pains to prevent such a reckoning, thus spawning the extensive production of Bian's photo-forms and contributing to a collective knowledge of this public secret? One answer is that these photo-forms have become the visual code for problematizing the power of the party-state's princelings, some of whom may have been involved in Red Guard violence of the time and may be complicit in concealing Bian's murderers. The chapter thus hones in on how the photo-form operates as a means of reckoning with regimes of secrecy.

Hillenbrand makes comparisons to Edward Snowden and Abu Ghraib (and one could add here Julian Assange), where state secrecy was upheld in

the name of national security, arguing that while the drive for "full-frontal" publicity continues in liberal democracies, the state's demand for secrecy is clearly tied to power holding. In China, the online exposure of the secret of Bian's death creates an anonymous community and agency in visually transgressing the party-state's imposition of silence. Such practice can be aptly compared to black bloc activists' use of dark scarves and balaclavas in order to "disappear into a secret collective" that brashly taunts the secrecy of elites and the state. Yet the question remains: Can such attempts through the photo-form to expose the party-state's systematic attempts to prevent a societal reckoning of the Cultural Revolution succeed in their objective? Or are the cryptocratic interests of the party-state so deeply embedded in the party's leaders that they are impervious to the effects of visual transgressions?

Repurposed and displayed in more recent aesthetic forms by younger artists and photographers, the private and family photograph, including the selfie, has been reclaimed as a visual mode of attempting to compensate for the failure of societal reckoning with the past. Yet, however much they function as sites of unforgetting and commemoration, such remediated photographs may also serve the interests of the state by showing the extent to which public secrecy still reigns in the new millennium. Whether in photo-form of the man awaiting execution by Japanese swordsmen of the Nanjing Massacre of 1937, of Tank Man, or of Bian Zhongyun, the return of spectral images into the present demonstrates the dual effect of the power of ghosts to haunt the living: on the one hand, they can cement a sense of shared commitment to commemorate a traumatic past in order to secure well-being in the present, and on the other hand, they can pose an immanent threat to the sustainability of party-state control. Both effects suggest a reprise of the traditions of ancestor worship as rituals of respect of the dead in order to thwart the baleful revenge of their restless and hungry ghosts on the living. And in the process they acquire an uncanny iconic status.

While the spirit of the Tank Man makes his return in these forms, questions have to be asked about the party-state's response. It is impossible to

imagine, for example, that in viewing the "Rambo-esque bullet fest" of *Wolf Warrior 2* the state censors simply did not see the parallels between the long-shot of a standoff between the film's hero and a tank and its iconic forerunner of the 1989 Tank Man.[2] Could it be, therefore, the author asks, that the party-state is now attempting to come to terms with the troubled legacy of June 4, 1989, to neutralize its effects by appropriating, even "cannibalizing," the image? Rather than censorship or silencing, the "most imminent danger faced by Tank Man, China's little boy of legend, is that the emperor will laugh back and steal his legendary thunder."[3] This suggests however, that the emperor has to admit to his nakedness, that the public secret not only exists but is troubling.

A review of this length cannot do justice to the complexities and multilayered contours of Hillenbrand's analysis. Her narrative combines familiarity with the languages of popular culture, digital innovations in online visuality, film, and contemporary art, along with theorized interrogation of how systems of public secrecy and the "cryptosphere" take effect globally across very diverse political systems. And all made manifest through an unusual, erudite, and sometimes playful use of language that welds an array of readings seamlessly together with nods to the tech savvy of young creatives in the app industry.

In all, *Negative Exposures* is a powerfully and colorfully argued theorization of the tense and sometimes spirited competition between the state censors, ordinary people who prefer to "forget," and others committed to prizing open and restaging the events of the past in the photo-form. Its analysis makes no claims to offer any overall evaluation of the main events examined here; hence, there is no reference to the role of the urban proletariat in the protests of the spring and summer of 1989, nor to those for whom the Cultural Revolution was less traumatic than the Great Leap Famine.

2. *Zhan lang 2*, directed by Wu Jing, 121 minutes (Beijing: Bona Film Group, 2017). Discussed in Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures*, 168–69.
3. Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures*, 207.

Nor does the book address the issue of how, in turn, the particular emphases of the dominant photo-forms examined in it discursively contribute to shaping and delimiting contemporary narratives on the same historical material. They too become elements of how we understand our pasts, in China as elsewhere.