One cannot help think of the Chinese gold rush in the nineteenth-century in America, or the Chinese migrants to Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. Unlike the European settlers in these continents, the Chinese were perceived as temporary residents and were accused of being opportunists who did not want to contribute to their migration destination, but just wanted to make quick money to send back home. They too wanted (and many of them did) bring glory to their families and ancestors by building grand houses back home. Many of these houses, in places like Taishan and Kaiping in Guangdong Province, hometown of most early Chinese migrants to the new colonies during the Gold Rush remain intact, but unoccupied, they became historical heritage because the people who built them did not return, having settled somewhere else. (2018, 192–93)

By the end of Gao’s books, what is patently clear is the existence of an international migrant labor model “domesticated.” For most of its population, the idea of settling permanently in Gao Village is an afterthought; settling in urban centers is equally a non-starter. Though something like Gao Village still stands, daily village life has been decimated and those who work and are educated elsewhere begin to feel alien towards village life and traditions.

One might ask: what is the purpose or meaning of these hustling ventures except for making money? There does not seem to be any certainty or destination for people. Everything seems transitional to something else. For Gao villagers, their only certainty and purpose seem to be to build houses back in the village for their families, competing for the better-looking ones, and to get their children properly married. In recent years, there seems to be another purpose, which is purchasing a car, and of course, competing for the most expensive ones. (2018, 143–44)

Gao has touched upon a sense of commercialism feeding into a sense of historical nihilism in village life. Meaning cannot be made not because we lack clear historical markers or signposts but because we lack direction of any kind. This sort of critique extends beyond China’s borders as the realities of migrant labor and the demands of global capitalism threaten the daily life of rural populations worldwide. Gao tells a tale not of the dreams achieved of a small village in rural China but of the dreams of a people and a country deferred, sacrificed in the short term to satisfy the more pressing labor demands of global capitalism.

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Western observers often attribute Chinese suppression of undesirable information to state crackdowns on dissidents, pervasive censorship apparatus, and even self-censorship. For contemporary Chinese citizens under a certain age, Tiananmen Square protests allegedly did not happen. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) leadership’s private lives are shrouded in seccries, mythologizing their larger-than-life images. The Cultural Revolution and the Nanjing Massacre are remembered only in grand, jingoistic narratives endorsed by the state. In this thought-provoking book on photography, Margaret Hillenbrand argues that “public secrecy”—collective knowledge of what not to know—is a more powerful force than censorship. Public secrecy structures and sustains permissible histories of China. The paradox here lies in the shared nature of this knowledge. It is widely known—but not spoken of—among contemporary Chinese that these versions of China’s recent history are distorted—in the form of “public secrecy” (7), and that knowledge is important for survival. Similar to Jonathan Abel’s Redacted: The Archives of Censorship in Transwar Japan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), Hillenbrand demonstrates that the removal of an idea from circulation inadvertently creates a map that draws attention to impermissible items.

Collective trauma may seem unspeakable in the “People’s Republic of Amnesia,” but photographic images—often systematically doctored (220) and more recently repurposed—induce a visual language for communal engagement with public secrecy. The book’s four chapters, copiously illustrated, along with the introduction and conclusion, delineate historical photographs and their afterlives in literature, art, and web formats. The common denominator seems to be shame on a state and a personal level. Artists become ever so creative in alluding to iconic images, as evidenced by street slapstick performances that showcased the Feminist Five that imitated the Beatles’ Abbey Road (218) and Miller Yu’s viral meme consisting of four oversized yellow rubber ducks lining up in front of a single man in reference to both the iconic Tank Man during Tiananmen Square and Florentijn Hofman’s installation art work (192).
Chapter one traces the peculiar resurgence of previously censored photographs of atrocity during the Nanjing Massacre in the wake of Tiananmen Square Massacre in the mid-1990s. Widely circulated via commemorative albums, exhibitions, films, and videogames, these violent photos form what Hillenbrand calls “an ocular shorthand” for jingoistic patriotism. One shocking revelation is that these grotesque photos of unspeakable trauma are shown to children as part of China’s nationalistic propaganda. This is in line with China’s habitual instrumentalization of anti-Japanese and anti-Taiwanese sentiments as distraction from internal crises.

Chapters two and three examine family portraits and a portrait of a singular victim during the Cultural Revolution. Photo essays by writers such as Liu Xinwu fly under the radar as they share collective experiences without naming the taboo, spectral events. Similar to photographs of Nanjing Massacre, family portraits taken before parting or at reunion form a “visual idiom” to address the lack of societal reckoning of damages. More complex than the Japanese-Chinese oppositions during the Nanjing Massacre, the Cultural Revolution is redacted not only by the state but also private citizens who, in the 1990s, disavow their actions during that time period. Focusing on “object lesson” (137) that is the afterlife of the portrait of Bian Zhongyun who was killed by her Red Guard pupils, chapter three argues that the circulation of the photo of Bian, now a martyr, did not so much trigger collective guilt as open up an avenue for public reflection by former Red Guards, forcing “a crack in the ice of public secrecy” (42).

Turning to the legacy of the Tank Man during the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, chapter four reveals important, intergenerational differences in understanding the public secrecy based on people’s lived experiences or lack thereof. Another key feature of photographic public secrecy is its ephemeral nature. Spin-offs of the Tank Man are short lived and have small, ad hoc audiences. What might the future be for China’s public secrecy? In a few generations, would there be a true gap of ignorance—rather than consensual blanks—in historical knowledge? Would the Tiananmen Square Massacre—if it still exists in the archive—become an unknowable object? Will there be Chinese equivalents to Holocaust deniers?

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3 Editor's Note

FEATURED AUTHOR: Lu Min

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