

Review: *The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited*

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Louisa Lim. *The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 266 pages. ISBN-10: 978-0190227913. ISBN-13: 978-0190227913.

In this book, the author, who held positions as a special correspondent in China for BBC and National Public Radio (NPR) until 2013, attempts to reconstruct the historical memory (and amnesia) of the 1989 suppression of a pro-democracy movement (the Tiananmen Incident) through interviews with concerned parties at various levels. Although the structure of this book is not systematic, in this reviewer's opinion, the content can be divided into three subjects.

(1) *Participants in the movement who were suppressed, and their family.* Zhang Ming, who appears in the second chapter, "Staying," and was a student leader at the time, remains haunted by the aftereffects of repeated torture he endured during seven years in prison. The third chapter, "Exile," features Wu'er Kaixi, who was a student leader in the 1989 movement, and whose hunger strike and other conspicuous performances drew attention. His performance of resolutely returning to certain arrest in China after the incident briefly garnered attention, but in actuality carried little political influence. With regard to relatives, the fifth chapter, "Mother," features Zhang Xianling, whose 19-year-old son was killed in the incident. Zhang, along with Ding Zilin and others who lost their sons, launched the "Tiananmen Mothers" movement to investigate the truth of the incident and demand an apology. These mothers have, as a result, been kept under strict surveillance by the government and have at times been arrested, but they continue the movement to this day. The eighth chapter, "Chengdu," covers the suppression of a pro-democracy movement that occurred in Chengdu in 1989, and is an attempt to inquire into incidents of regional suppression that have been concealed in the shadow of the term "Tiananmen Incident."

(2) *People who were on the side of the military and government at the time of the incident, but who were effectively placed in a position near to those suppressed.* Chen Guang, an artist who appears in the first chapter, "Soldier," was a 17-year-old soldier at the time of the incident; he remains traumatized from his participation in the suppression of the movement. He resists the surrounding amnesia and continues to produce works that recall the incident. Bao Tong, who is covered in the seventh chapter, "Officials," was an important reformist bureaucrat who lost his position and was jailed as a result of the incident. His son, Bao Pu, runs a press in Hong Kong that publishes leaked documents from

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the Communist Party.

(3) *People who have completely forgotten the incident.* The fourth chapter, “Student,” covers the consciousness of students today. Due to the government’s information controls, youth are almost completely uninformed about the incident, but even when there are opportunities to learn about the event, they exhibit no interest. The sixth chapter, “Patriot,” introduces the spread of patriotic education adopted by the Chinese Communist Party when, after the incident, it faced a crisis of political legitimacy. The chapter also introduces the thinking of a generation that has been inculcated with this patriotic education, and that has participated in demonstrations to criticize other countries and to defend, rather than protest, its own government. The content of these chapters does not directly relate to the Tiananmen Incident, but as expressed in the “Amnesia” of the title, the extent to which the incident has been forgotten in China today is also an important theme of this book. The book describes the struggle of individuals to resist amnesia as accompanied with the feeling of powerlessness in the face of the power that suppresses such resistance and indifferent masses. In the epilogue, the book places a faint hope in the 2014 pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong.

When the Tiananmen Incident is narrated, certain questions might be posed, such as whether there were any problems with the attitudes of the student leaders, or whether the government’s restoration of stability contributed to China’s later economic development, even if the methods of suppression warrant condemnation. With regard to the former, since the incident, some people have pointed out that testimonies about the “Tiananmen Square Massacre” given by student leaders who defected contain misinformation (e.g. “there were no casualties in the ‘Square’”). Others have further criticized the resolutely confrontational position of the students as one factor that invited the tragedy. Similarly, this book references criticism directed at student leaders Chai Ling and Wu’er Kaixi, as well as the sense of self-reproach that Zhang Ming carries to this day.

That being said, tracing the memory of the incident surely has further meaning apart from the dimensions of whether or not to sympathize with the assertions of the student leaders, or to affirmatively evaluate the movement. Those involved who remain in China today have experienced arrest and imprisonment, and even now remain under strict surveillance. Like those who sought to pursue and narrate the truth of the incident, Chen Guang, who appears in Chapter 1, was arrested in May 2014 (after the publication of this book), and in the same period, famous human rights lawyers such as Pu Zhiqiang were arrested due to their participation in activities to commemorate the incident. The continuation of this suppression indicates that memory of the incident has actually not been offset by economic development, and that the legitimacy of the Communist Party thus still rests on using violent methods to seal away memory

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of the incident. To borrow the words of Wang Zheng, perhaps it can be said that, “China’s democratization might finally begin from the point of disclosure of these historical truths.”¹

Most of the people covered in this book were already known in the Hong Kong media, and they cannot be said to have been independently “discovered” by the author. With the exception of those in Taiwan and Hong Kong, however, they have all been marked by the authorities, and interviewing them must have entailed considerable risk. In that sense, this book’s attempt can be ranked as one difficult step in the “democratization of memory”, taking its place alongside documentary films by Hu Jie, Wang Bing, and others on the subject of intellectuals suppressed in the Anti-Rightist Movement.

Finally, the reviewer would like to add that the U.S., Japan, and other “democratic countries” are not exceptions to the working of power to conceal unwelcome history, and that the “democratization of memory” is not a problem confined solely to China.

¹ Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), extracted from Kindle, location no. 5015.

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