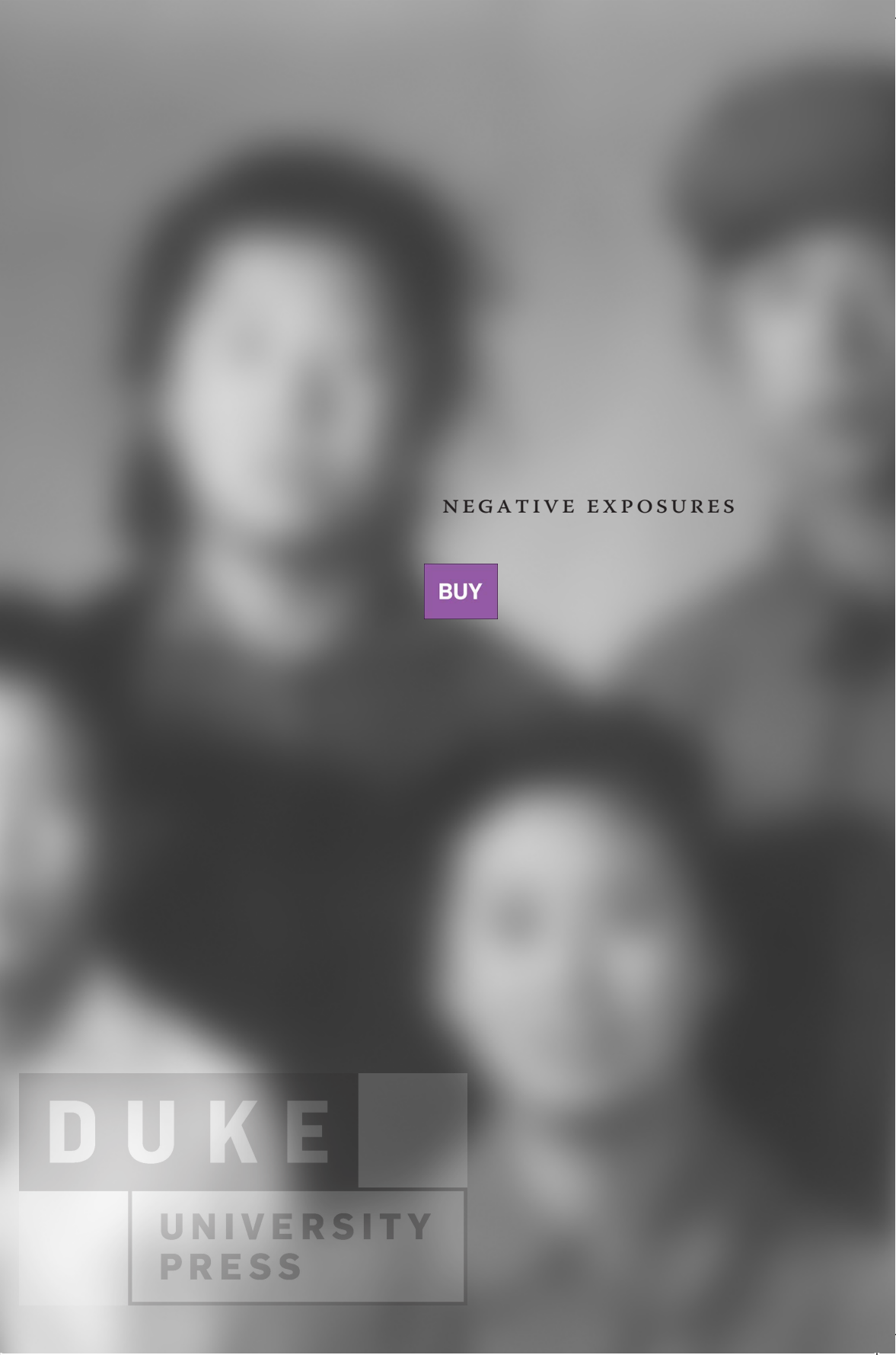
Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China

MARGARET
HILLENBRAND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and Eileen Cheng-yin Chow

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Series Editor's Preface

In his 1925 essay "On Photography," Lu Xun recalls how when he was growing up in Shaoxing ("S City") during the final decades of the nineteenth century, locals were very apprehensive about the technology of photography that had begun to gain popularity around that time. In particular, he recalls that many of them resisted having their photographs taken on the grounds that "a person's spirit could be stolen by the camera." He further notes that a persistent rumor spread that foreigners would pluck out people's eyes and preserve them in brine so that the vestigial images preserved inside their pupils could then be used to make photographs. Lu Xun, here, is describing an early view that photography relied on a process of extracting and materializing a set of filmlike layers that are present in all material objects.

Pioneering early photographer Nadar similarly recounts how, in the age of the daguerreotype at the very dawn of photography, Honoré de Balzac once cited similar concerns to explain his reluctance to be photographed; he contended that "all physical bodies are made up entirely of layers of ghostlike images, an infinite number of leaflike skins laid one on top of the other. . . . Repeated exposures entailed the unavoidable loss of subsequent ghostly layers, that is, the very essence of life."

Today, of course, it is widely recognized that photographs are simply images produced after light strikes a photosensitive surface, and consequently they have no direct material connection to their referents. Nevertheless, the notion that photographs retain an intimate, almost magical link to the objects they depict remains surprisingly common even today. As a result, not only do photographic images contain verisimilar likenesses, they may also generate complicated layers of affect—even as the photographs themselves may become overdetermined objects of emotional investment in their own right.

In his 1931 essay "A Small History of Photography," Walter Benjamin suggests that photographs have the potential to reveal what he calls the optical unconscious—which is to say, those elements of the visual field that may be perceived subliminally but that, under ordinary circumstances, rarely rise to the level of conscious cognition. This is particularly true, Benjamin argued, for our perception of physical motion, in that photographs are capable of capturing and revealing individual components of what is normally perceived as merely a continuous movement.

Margaret Hillenbrand's *Negative Exposures* uses photographs—and more specifically a transmedial category that she calls the "photo-form"—to probe modern China's optical unconscious as it pertains not to physical motion but rather to the movement of history. In particular, Hillenbrand attends to the ways in which these photo-forms may offer a transformative glimpse into the legacies of traumatic events, and although the Chinese state has systematically attempted to suppress public discussion of these events, they nevertheless remain indelibly inscribed in the private memories of the citizens who lived through them. By examining how historical photographs from these earlier periods have been retrieved and remediated in "paint, ink, celluloid, codex, mural, fabric, sculpted matter, the digital image, even human skin," Hillenbrand treats these photo-forms as virtual windows into a set of traumatic legacies that, like the unconscious, are simultaneously invisible and ubiquitous.

This is the first extended study of this category of the photo-form in contemporary China, and Hillenbrand offers fascinating analyses of examples drawn from elite and popular art, public performances and private artifacts, as well as images produced by figures based both inside the People's Republic of China and throughout the world. In this respect, Hillenbrand's study replicates the function that she attributes to the photo-form itself, in that it similarly seeks to bring critical attention to a phenomenon that is both invisible (the category of the photo-form itself did not even have a recognized name prior to her study) yet at the same time universally recognized. And although she does not directly cite Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious, Hillenbrand does engage closely with his notion of revelatory justice—the way in which a process of publicly disclosing something previously kept secret can contribute to the pursuit of justice. This volume examines an array of attempts to use the category of the photo-form in order to pursue revelatory justice, even as the study itself engages in a parallel pursuit of justice on its own terms.

Carlos Rojas

Acknowledgments

It is now nearly a decade since I first noticed the rich afterlives of historic photographs in China and began to wonder what these images might mean in the here and now, and why they have been repurposed in such profusion by makers of culture. The more I looked for these images, the more I found. But it took me some time to understand that the stories they told were essentially about those strange limbo histories that are remembered all too well but that people are not supposed to discuss. It was in many ways due to the insights of others that I began to make sense of this, and I am very happy to have the chance to thank those people now.

Several of the artists whose work I discuss in this book kindly submitted to my questions, and I am very grateful to Badiucao, Lily and Honglei, Sheng Qi, Xu Weixin, Zhang Dali, and the late Chen Shaoxiong for so freely sharing their thoughts with me. Those interviews were inspirational for me.

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My close friends and family have sustained me during the time I have spent working on this book. Thank you to Andrew, Nick, and especially Batul for over four decades of friendship. Finally, I am more grateful than I can say to my parents and sister, Ruth, who have supported me without end; to my sons, Sam, Max, and Alex, who have given me so many happy distractions from this project; and to my husband, Tom, who has always had faith in me and who has been the best possible companion throughout. I dedicate this book to him.

Preface. Negative Exposures

The negative is the equivalent of the composer's score,
and the print the performance.
—ANSEL ADAMS, 1968

In the spring of 1989, Beijing-based photographer Xu Yong 徐勇 became caught up in the protest movement that was unfolding at speed across the capital. As he puts it, it was hard not to be swept along, since "time seemed to have stopped for all other activities in Beijing" (Lee 2015). He began going to Tiananmen Square every day, with his Konica, to photograph the swelling crowds who were demonstrating for change. "I believe," he said later, "that no one had ever seen such a spectacular protest in Mainland China" (Lee 2015). After the bloody crackdown on June 4, when tanks rolled in and mowed down thousands of protestors, Xu Yong hid in his archives the scores of 35 mm negatives he had taken, and turned his attention to other projects. The images stayed buried for twenty-five years, until they began to fade and yellow with age. Fearing their attrition, or perhaps to mark the quarter-century anniversary of the protests, Xu decided in 2014 to publish his record of those days in a remarkable photobook.[1] Entitled *Negatives* (*Dipian* 底片), the book is an elegant hardback; at first sight, it looks like standard coffee-table fare, encased in a clear cover artfully mocked up to look like a photographic transparency. Inside are sixty-four images, each 17.5 cm by 24.5 cm, selected from Xu's secret photographic cache. They are reproduced as color negatives, without captions or commentary, but with their trademark serrated edge clearly visible.

FIGURE P.1 Xu Yong, *Negatives*, 2014. Reproducing an image as a color-inverted negative makes an elegant pretense at secrecy.

The first image sets the tone for the collection (figure P.1). The immediate impression it delivers is of an abstract painting rather than a photograph, and it is only when the eye trains itself harder that the mystifying patterns of the negative begin to resolve into recognizable shape. The visual field is divided roughly into two diagonal halves: the left is populated by scores of small pale circles, which upon closer inspection are revealed to be the heads of the protestors, turned white as the tonal values of the image are inverted. The right half is thick with densely crosshatched shapes, which turn out to be bicycles. Flags are held aloft, splashes of malachite on the dark background; their Chinese characters appear as mirror images and are only partially visible. The image, in its chiaroscuro and chromatic inversions, is set up as a puzzle that the viewer must work to decipher. This provocation persists across each of the sixty-four images, whose very number is itself a kind of clue, as 6/4 is a source of euphemistic puns for the events that occurred in Tiananmen during the first week of June 1989. These encryptions are, obviously enough, a response to the status of the bloody crackdown as a forbidden thing in contemporary China—unsayable, unseeable, and so approachable only in "scrambled" ways. Yet flick back to the photobook's epigraph and it clearly flouts the

taboo, stating that "these photographic negatives were taken 26 years ago, in 1989." To this we might add that most people who purchase Xu's book already know exactly what it is about, and indeed, they have bought it precisely because of its subject matter. So why reproduce coded negatives instead of positive prints? Why telegraph the photobook's subject matter, only then to hide it via smoke and mirrors?

Xu Yong's *Negatives* is a photographic record of the Tiananmen protests, for sure. But he also intends it to be a photographic representation of their legacy, and as such, its mixed messages constitute its core meaning. They show the viewer, via their tactics of feint and counterfeint, that the June 4 bloodshed is something both very known and very secret. It is an event whose afterlives dwell in the space between taboo and totem: unspeakable, yet always looming at the edge of outcry, threatening to break into politically destabilizing speech. Like several other episodes in China's violent twentieth-century past that I discuss in this book, the June 4 protests are contained under a broad but fragile carapace. If enough people pretend they are not there—seared across China's collective consciousness of its past—they may disappear, like those brain-teasing, "spot the object" optical illusions in which hidden tigers slip in and out of camouflage. Xu Yong keeps up this idea of his photobook as a sort of ploy when he states repeatedly during interviews and press junkets that its guiding concept is not political.[2] Instead, he gambits, the book is intended as a meta-meditation on photography and its shift from analog to digital practices of image-making. Xu's argument here is the predictable one that negatives have a pristine quality that ramps up their documentary capacities in an age of ceaseless photographic dissimulation. But both these claims are strategically disingenuous. To publish a photobook on the Tiananmen Square protests and call it unpolitical is so patently implausible that Xu's political purpose merely shouts out all the louder. And sure enough, the book is banned in China. Xu is disingenuous here not in the hope of slipping through the net of censorship, but instead to mirror the strains of staying on message about June 4, of pretending that the matter of the protests has been cleanly resolved when everyone of a certain age in China knows very well that they have, rather, been rendered utterly unbroachable. What's more, any viewer of *Negatives* will also realize within seconds that it is not the apparently immaculate truth of the photographic negative that Xu is channeling in his book either. Instead, it is the status of this image prototype as photography's dark avatar, a space of the repressed and inadmissible, that *Negatives* persistently harnesses.

If photography has always had a whiff of the occult about it, then the negative occupies its most uncanny zone. The negative, as Oliver Wendell Holmes stated

in 1859, is "perverse and totally depraved," so much so that "it might almost seem as if some magic and diabolic power had wrenched all things from their proprieties, where the light of the eye was darkness, and the deepest blackness was gilded with the brightest glare" (741). Sigmund Freud, in "A Note on the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis" (2005), takes the analogy further, developing a linked metaphor that entwines the operations of the darkroom with the psychoanalytic process and the relationship between unconscious and conscious activity: "The first stage of the photograph is the negative; every photographic picture has to pass through the 'negative process,' and some of these negatives which have held good in examination are admitted to the 'positive process' ending in the picture" (139). Although Freud's focus here is on the "'positive process' ending in the picture," his analogy also figures the photographic negative—and the darkroom that some such images never leave—as the hinterland of the unconscious to which those things that have failed to "hold good in examination" are consigned. There they lie: undeveloped, unprocessed, a point that the Chinese term for "negative"—*dipian*, which literally means the "base" image—captures well. Negatives, by this logic, connote what the camera saw but what the photographer preferred not to look at, and their visual language of inversion and silhouette captures what Eviatar Zerubavel calls the "fundamental tension between knowledge and acknowledgment" (2006, 3).

It does so because this "perverse" play of light and shadow parlays with the viewer directly in the idiom of the ghost. Moving through the book, the spectrality of the images is almost overwhelming. Presented as negatives, Xu Yong's shots of the square seem to take place at night or in the gloaming; the bodies of the protestors are translucent, the shadows they cast lighter than they are themselves; their eyes become hollow sockets; and the trees, as they switch from green to purple—its complementary color—look like radioactive clouds. In fact, the sheer force of the sixty-four imprints, page after page, makes them look like more than simple negatives. They take on the air of repurposed or even doctored objects whose haunting shapes and colors are a deliberate aesthetic strategy that Xu's eerie mode of presentation enhances. Rather than serving as the blueprints for finished photographs, in fact, these ghostly, never-developed negatives seem to prefigure actual events, since some of the protestors who appear as wraiths may well have been captured by Xu Yong mere hours before their death. This point becomes menacing in the final image of the book, which shows the spectral, faded outline of a tank (figure P.2). As such, these pictures impart, despite their shadowy shapes, a hard solidity to the idea of the darkroom as a repository for those things that are documented all too well in many private minds but remain disowned in public

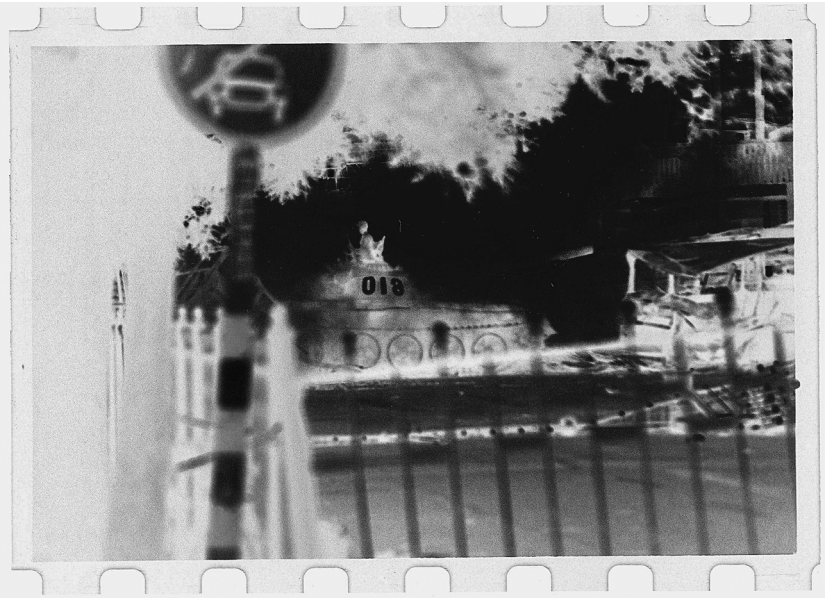

FIGURE P.2 Xu Yong, *Negatives*, 2014. *En marche* to the Square; or, Tank Man foretold.

culture. Their silhouettes stand for those troubled parts of China's modern history that a coalition of state and social actors have agreed not to develop into positive prints: those things that are at once both very known and very secret. And just as important, Xu's use of uncaptioned but eloquent images tells a necessary story about the role that visual culture—and photography, especially—come to play in arenas where powerful interdictions on certain acts of speech lie in place.

At the end of Xu's book, the viewer finds some instructions stenciled on the transparent back cover: "To interact with the works in *Negatives* with your iPhone or iPad, go to 'Settings' 'General' 'Accessibility' and turn on 'Invert Colors.' Then use the camera to reveal the positive images of the negative works. Other devices have similar functions, such as camera setting 'Color Effect—Negative.'" Inverting the colors is more difficult than these instructions suggest; it took me few minutes of fumbling with my phone to make the switch (figure P.3). Obviously, this heightens the moment of reveal—and the sense of spectatorial engagement. As the images flip from negative to positive through the camera function on a small handheld device, all the uncanniness vanishes like ghosts at daybreak (even as the skin tone of my own hand was ghosted to an X-ray-like blue-green as I turned the pages), and the iPhone becomes a time

FIGURE P.3 Xu Yong, *Negatives*, 2014. Through the looking glass: the camera lens of a smartphone becomes a slim portal to the past in all its colors.

machine, teleporting the spectator back to a long-hidden past. The protestors and the square do not simply come alive—though of course, that does happen, as their hollow eye sockets radiate light and hope, their pale lips become smiles, the green flags turn to the red of political action, and the energy of so much massed humanity is restored to the frame. They also come to constitute a shared secret, an initiation into forbidden history that viewers must activate for themselves, entering into a pact with the artwork and agreeing to its demands for a measure of spectatorial effort and labor. This quota of engagement is necessary, *Negatives* suggests, if we are to wrestle with those things that are simultaneously very known and very secret. It is not enough merely to look and ponder at these negatives that visualize the disavowed of history as ghosts. These works about public secrecy in China stipulate more: they enjoin a specific kind of parallax viewing community made up of all the people with their phones who invert the colors and stare straight at the unsayable.

I begin here with Xu Yong and *Negatives* because his photobook encapsulates succinctly the themes that dominate this study. The first of these is the overlooked power of public secrecy about China's troubled past as a containing force in its sociopolitical present. At first sight, Xu Yong's negatives seem

like long-forgotten objects. More than this, in fact, they seem to exemplify the idea that histories that are censored will fade from mind, just as the photochemical images faded to yellow. Yet rather than suffering oblivion, the reels of film in Xu Yong's archive were forced into hiding, whereas the memory of what happened in 1989 stayed so fresh that the book's epigraph barely needs to gloss it ("These photographic negatives were taken 26 years ago, in 1989"). In this sense, Xu Yong's photobook serves as a paradigm for the claim, made throughout this study, that the forces of censorship and amnesia cannot adequately explain why parts of China's modern history are missing from public discourse, and that it is also the collective decision not to talk—not to develop the negatives—that keeps the past in a state of restless quiescence. In the chapters that follow, I home in on three core episodes from China's long twentieth century—the Nanjing Massacre of 1937; the Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976; and the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests—to argue that understanding their afterlives in terms of public secrecy opens up new ways of thinking about the past as an ongoing process of making and unmaking that textures life in China today. All these momentous events are well remembered by those who experienced them. But all have, at different points in the past, been rendered either publicly unsayable or open to only limited kinds of enunciation.

Yet even as they have struggled for open speech, these episodes have all left astonishing traces on the photographic record: stills that grip and wound the viewer. These images have been hidden, classified, or suppressed at different points in their circulation histories; but in recent years they have emerged from deep cover, either via underground circuits or through state-sponsored channels. And as they have broken the surface, makers of culture have seized on these photographs, repurposing them in paint, ink, celluloid, codex, mural, fabric, sculpted matter, the digital image, even human skin—whatever medial substrate comes most readily to hand. I call these objects photo-forms. This book theorizes this aesthetic category for the first time and shows how these works function within suppressive environments as modes for visualizing what is hard to say aloud. Photo-forms, I show here, are key sites in which public secrecy and our relation to it happen. As Xu Yong's *Negatives* also makes clear, this is because of the way in which such works—via their encrypted nature—compel from their spectators an active and interrogational kind of viewing. The key point here is that grappling with public secrecy is not about suddenly "seeing" that which once was hidden, about opening a long-locked drawer and finding something explosively clandestine inside. Rather, to paraphrase John Berger, it is about different "ways of looking": strategies of defamiliarization that encourage viewers to gaze anew at the social world precisely

within its settled groove and thus allow the elephant in the room, the nudity of the emperor, to crystallize into an apparition worthy of notice, thought, even action. Photo-forms give their spectators a code to crack, and this labor of decipherment binds the artwork and its audiences together, creating fleeting worlds in which the shape of things that are hard to say aloud can be seen or sensed. Relatedly, Xu Yong's *Negatives* also points to the insistent presence of ghosts across aesthetic practices that try to grapple with the unsayable-but-unforgotten. The way that *Negatives* uses wraiths to explore ghosted histories, and the people who are disappeared by them, belongs to a consistent practice of spectrality in works that riff on well-known photographs of troubled pasts.

Finally, Xu Yong's work points up the overarching claim made in this book: that it is indeed possible to study the clandestine in China. Questions of secrecy and surveillance, of accountability and the opaque, have an escalating salience in our contemporary world. Yet scholars who work on China have mostly shied away from these themes because of the manifest difficulties of pursuing them in a hard-core cryptocracy. Sealed archives, closed trials, "disappeared" dissidents, and the notorious sock puppets and astroturfers who patrol the Chinese web conspire to make the topic seem unapproachable. In what follows, I show that artworks can be as revelatory about secrecy as any declassified document or leaked file, and never more so than when that which is hidden is also very widely known.

Introduction. Staking out Secrecy

My trouble is that I struggle to forget—or to forget entirely—and those things that I cannot wipe from mind are what have produced *A Call to Arms*.
—LU XUN 魯迅, "Preface" to *Nahan* (A Call to Arms), 1922

Public Secrecy and Its Discontents

The afterlives of China's twentieth-century past are strangely misaligned. While the memory of some events is cherished, vaunted, or held up as an unrepeatable example, other episodes languish in zombied half-life, uncommemorated in public culture despite their incalculable impact. This book interrogates that anomaly. It is hardly an undocumented one: not just in China but across the globe, cultural historians of the twentieth century in particular have probed the protocols of disavowal—the neglect of the dark side of imperial history in Britain, the denial in some quarters of Japanese society of the nation's wartime atrocities, the pall of silence that fell over core aspects of the Partition of India and the Spanish Civil War, the reluctance of many Germans during the Third Reich to dwell on the death camps in their midst—exploring how nations that decide to disown their violent or troubled pasts attempt to calcify that strategic renunciation into hard social fact. Scholars who research China, a prime "disowning" nation, have argued repeatedly that this process is led by the state. Such histories are censored to the point that they either fade from mind or live on only in the tamed or remolded ways that the government permits. Omitted from school textbooks, deleted from social media, banned in books or films, the red-hot core of such events suffers a commemo-

rative attrition that results—or so it is argued—in slow amnesia, in a kind of vanishing. Censorship and amnesia couple up to conjure the disappearance of "bad" pasts.

In this book, I argue that such a top-down view is missing a dimension, and that the disavowal of history in China has many stakeholders, whether willing or otherwise, affiliated with the state or not. I proceed here from the premise that extreme events are seldom forgotten by those who lived them, however diligently the government and its agencies apply themselves to the task, and however keenly individual subjects might crave release from their memories. What happens, then, to that red-hot core? If it does not disappear into oblivion, how is the radiation of the past contained or even cooled? This book argues that public secrecy—what Michael Taussig calls that which is "generally known, but cannot be articulated" (1999, 5), whose not-saying is a convention most conspire to maintain—is an overlooked structuring force in Chinese sociopolitical life today. Moving away from the standard narrative of censorship and amnesia, which accords more power to the state than to the people in the management of troubled pasts, I argue here that the hushing of history is a densely collective endeavor in China. The silences of the present are conspiratorial.

Public secrecy of the kind practiced in China vis-à-vis the troubled past is akin, in certain ways, to the forms of passive or aggressive non-acknowledgment found in other historical contexts. Self-evidently, knowing what not to know is a stricture as pervasive in liberal-democratic states as it is in authoritarian ones. Indeed, it is among the grossest of public secrets that several liberal-democratic orders—those in the U.S. and the U.K., for example—rest nervily on infrastructures built on slave labor or race-based imperialist conquest, dependent on those historic abuses for their current political rationale and rhetoric. What's more, every time the revelations of a whistle-blower barely ruffle the surfaces of power, every time an exposé discloses little more than what was fully intuited already, every time a major information leak seems to bed in, rather than bring down, malfeasants in power, the public secret whispers its ascendancy. And it does so everywhere, even as different societies answer the call to silence differently. In this sense, the attention I pay to China in this study is intended, in part, to suggest that its responses to the felt exigences of the public secret might have a broader valence, particularly at a time when new regimes of the clandestine are on the march.

That said, the tense interplays between a party-state with real muzzling powers and a citizenry conflicted over the troubled past give public secrecy in China a specifically textured complexity. In an evident sense, public secrecy is

self-defensive, because those who break the silence in China might face grave sanction. It is similarly protective, in that elders may choose not to share stories with the young because that initiation into knowledge can bring related risks. It is preeminently social, since members of a given cohort who share a troubled past—Red Guard factions, for example—come together in their adherence to non-saying. It can be embarrassed, because sometimes not only the emperor is naked, and so calling out awkward truths can be self-shaming, particularly in a contemporary moment in which the passion of revolution has long faded. It is often pragmatic; it sees the benefits of letting sleeping dogs lie. It may even, on occasion, be palliative, constituting a form of repair that has fallen out of fashion in the confessionally exhibitionist culture of contemporary Euro-America. In short, and in direct contrast to the rigidity of censorship and the numbness of amnesia, public secrecy in contemporary China is a highly agential process whose actors choose to obey the law of *omertà* for shifting, mindful reasons.

I should make it clear early on that this study of aesthetic forms does not try to prove the unprovable—namely, that the public secret is qualitatively more potent than amnesia or censorship as a strategy for subduing the restive past, for example, or that it is quantitatively more rife in cryptocratic settings than in others. Common sense might decree that the latter point most likely holds because secrets breed secrets. But to an extent, it would require a different kind of study, one rooted in comparative sociology and politics, to flesh out any such claims. Yet in a deeper sense, the public secret—as something deemed unsayable and therefore left unsaid—may ultimately lie beyond the purchase of empirical fact. This is Ian Kershaw's point about the Nazi genocide when he writes that "documentary evidence can hardly provide an adequate answer to the question: 'how much did the Germans know?'" (1983, 364). Or as Robert Eaglestone puts it: "Evidence here is effervescent, hard to pin down, much more a matter of judgement than a document. . . . This is also precisely the sort of issue about which people are unlikely to be honest if asked" (2017, 11). As a quantity that lies "beyond the limits of the discipline of history" and instead "within the discursive space of personal and communal subjectivity" (9–15), the public secret resists positivistic analysis and leaves little concrete trace. For this reason, aesthetic works are better tooled to capture its fluid but decisive workings, and I present the case studies here not as data-driven offerings on the structuring power of "knowing what not to know," but rather as conceptual ones.

A further clarification: this book implies no equivalence between the events whose legacies it tries to rethink. In a self-evident sense, a profound

incommensurability separates the Nanjing Massacre, the Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen protests from one another, and it is an incommensurability in every register, from loss of life to popular involvement to historical impact to aesthetic afterlife. Just as tellingly, a significant disjuncture exists in the ways that these events have hardened into public secrets. To argue that they can—even should—be approached together is not to flatten this incommensurability; in fact, the chapters that follow disaggregate different forms of public secrecy precisely in order to honor the incommensurable. In studying these events together, my claim is rather that public secrecy is a neglected force whose operations require a mode of academic address, and the mode I use here is the multiple case study. Case studies are, by their very nature, partial rather than impartial, and they rely on the logic of selectivism, even sampling. Thus other historical events that also lie in some ways within the domain of the publicly unsayable—such as the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Famine, the Sichuan earthquake, the experiences of non-Han peoples—might also have served as exemplars if space had allowed. Brought together, though, the case studies I explore here permit a purchase on public secrecy as a force that has decisively contoured the shape of the past in the present.

Yet public secrecy is a stubbornly penumbral form; its operations are tricky to track. Secrecy is hardwired to resist study, which is partly why "secrecy studies" has only recently begun to gain traction as a field within the Western academy. If that field has fought for a foothold in democratic settings, how are we to approach the workings of the clandestine in China? This is a society in which cryptocracy reigns, where secrecy of any kind does not even exist as a local object of academic enquiry. Unsurprisingly, then, no substantive discourse on public secrecy has developed among historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists who work on China, however proficient individual citizens may be in "knowing what not to know."[1] I argue here, though, that such disciplines may not be our most propitious route into the subject anyway. This is because public secrecy, as a felt but elusive force, leaves its most visible traces not in historical archives, fieldwork data, or government legislation, but in aesthetic forms—and in one category of representational objects, in particular. These are works that riff on well-known historic photographs.

As mentioned in the preface, I call these objects "photo-forms." Their presence, this book shows, is profuse in places where public secrecy reigns. Some photo-forms, both in China and elsewhere, are celebrated or even canonical in their individual instances; after all, arresting photographs were born to be remediated. But the status of these works as a discrete genre or genus, bearing what Wittgenstein calls a set of "family resemblances" (*Familienähnlich-*

keit) (2009, 67–77), has yet to be discussed, and the talismanic role they play in cryptocratic societies has been overlooked altogether. This book names and conceptualizes the photo-form for the first time, and it specifically identifies these works as key sites within which public secrecy, so ungraspable a force as it steadies the social world, emerges as material form in suppressive environments. Photo-forms are adept at shadowboxing with those things that people find difficult to say aloud, principally because they are visual objects that "speak" the language of secrecy. The very making of a photo-form mimics the act of hiding, as a well-known photograph is cloaked in different material guise. And as part of this process of cloaking, the visual field of the photo-form bristles with clues and allusions that the viewer has to decipher—a process that, in its turn, mirrors the experience of being initiated into a secret. The circulation of these works is often samizdat, or below the radar; as a result, viewing photo-forms creates an in-group or clandestine collective. But at the same time—and crucially—the fame of the original image means that a photo-form always remains instantly recognizable, even as its shifted shape allows it, for example, to dodge the online militia who patrol the Chinese web. Just like the public secret itself, in other words, photo-forms are both occluded and blindingly obvious, encrypted and clear as day. In places where public secrecy reigns, photo-forms and the communing they enjoin can form a fleeting parallax world: an alternative space in which public secrecy can be named and even owned, and in ways that bind spectators both to the artwork and to each other.

As such, photo-forms become akin to what in European folklore used to be called a "familiar," a regular spirit companion or alter ego of the maker of social magic that is the public secret itself. Indeed, another reason why photo-forms can stage a reckoning with public secrecy is because these works are insistently spectral. In part, this is the shadow of ghostliness that is cast over all photographic objects: the historical photograph as a chronicle of death foretold, in Barthes's famous formulation. The haunting character of the photo-form also comes from its status as an interstitial object. These works hover between media, and they often dwell in liminal, halfway spaces: in banned films, in the hidden cracks of the internet, in social media posts that are deleted but still pop up in online searches, in exhibitions that get closed down quickly and leave only vestigial traces. But for the most part, photo-forms look like phantoms because their makers actively spectralize them. Ghostliness is the dominant visual language of the photo-form—whether poignant, satirical, fugitive, vengeful, or uncanny—and it recurs because these image-works are haunted by the gaps that public secrecy seeks to paper over, gaps that ghosts,

as figures of absence made visible, can register. These revenants do not refer predominantly to the dead and to our mourning of them, although this urge is always latent. Rather, as Avery Gordon puts it, "the ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing. . . . What it represents is usually a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken" (1997, 63–64). It is in this sense that photo-forms, as noted earlier, shadowbox with public secrecy. This notion of a gentler kind of combat is crucial because it recognizes that public secrecy is not an axiomatic social evil that always requires, or will necessarily succumb to, hard antagonism as its main response. If the spectral force of these works can offer what Walter Benjamin called "a revelation that does justice" to the secret (1977, 31), this is because it acknowledges, through the persistence of its returns, the enduring magnitude of what cannot be said aloud. But at the same time, the ghost's fitfulness—the tactful nature of those returns—is also a recognition that keeping *schtum* is sometimes a social need, a strategy for survival for those who might otherwise capsize in the backwash of history.

In this introductory chapter, I sketch out these core arguments in close focus. I begin by noting the elusiveness of secrecy as an object of study whatever its provenance, and most especially in hard-core cryptocratic environments, where the deterrents to research are daunting. Yet public secrecy is a highly social affair, and precisely as a shared quantity it is hard to quarantine, spilling out in unexpected ways; furthermore, it expands in natural tandem with the overall secretiveness of a given social order. Of all the secrecies, it should be the hardest to hide. Given this, I ask why "knowing what not to know" has yet to be properly acknowledged as a force in postsocialist China. I argue in answer that public secrecy is missing across cultural, academic, and media accounts of how China has processed its troubled pasts because two linked and highly plausible proxy forms have conveniently covered up its labors. These proxy forms are the discourses of censorship and amnesia. Together they have coalesced into the now entirely normative argument that China's troubled past is mute or barely talkative because it has been policed into oblivion, and that we should look to the etiology of memory fail, brainwashing, even coma to explain why contemporary historical consciousness is so cratered with gaps. But the question then becomes: If public secrecy is itself so hidden, where do we go looking for it? I show next that representation is often the place where public secrecy breaks cover, as makers of culture exploit the powers of encryption harbored by representation—and the photo-form in particular—to encode the unsayable in their work. I go on to parse the photo-form as an aesthetic category with a distinctive ontology and scope out the parallax world formed by these image-works, their makers, and their audi-

ences. These are fleeting spaces in which public secrecy is named and outed via the visual language of the ghost who serves as an undying reminder of justice and its demands.

The Missing Discourse That Is Public Secrecy in China

Secrecy is perennially evasive as a form, repelling those who enquire after it. Its persistent elusiveness as an object of study is partly why the sole journal expressly dedicated to such an enterprise, *Secrecy and Society*, brought out its first issue only in 2016 (as an open access publication, appropriately enough). Writing in that issue, Clare Birchall begins by noting the core epistemological slipperiness of the secret: How can we study it when that very process of investigation renders it no longer clandestine (2016a, 1)? The act of uttering the secret aloud sheds its aura, turning it instead to hard-and-fast information, a point that Derrida flips around when he observes that the origins of the secret also lie, paradoxically, in speech (1989, 16–17). Secrets both are born and move steadily toward their death through the act of enunciation, a perversity that Susan Maret acknowledges in a different way by calling secrecy a "wicked problem" in theory (2016, 1–28), borrowing from Rittel and Webber's (1973) coinage. This "wickedness," always there, has become more wayward over the past two decades as the intersection of social media in a confessional key with wraparound digital and spatial surveillance has created lifeworlds in which secrecy is at once nowhere and the substance of pretty much everything. This sort of untrackability extends to tracing secrecy as an evolving conceptual construct: while many theorists engage with it, they often do so either intermittently or as a cog or constituent part within larger frameworks, as in Max Weber's studies of bureaucracy, Elias Canetti's conceptualization of crowds, Deleuze and Guattari's anti-capitalist philosophy, and of course Derrida's many insistent but irregular returns to the theme. Although Georg Simmel, "the sage of secrecy studies" (Maret 2011, xx), published his landmark essay, "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies," well over a century ago, it may not be accident that a concentrated disciplinary energy has begun to build around the subject only since the millennium.

This emergent, newly named field has an extensive, though critically scattered, repertoire of conceptual resources on which to call, still more so if we include adjacent topics of surveillance, whistle-blowing, propaganda, and so on. These resources are fullest in the social sciences, where studies of secrecy in governmental, corporate, state security, scientific, or technological environments since World War II have helped pin the theme down as a moving

target for inquiry. These studies, almost invariably and often without specific acknowledgment of the fact, take the so-called Western democracies as their theater of action, with certain a priori assumptions about such matters as free speech, public accountability, and access to information. They pass over their non-democratic others, for whom Sissela Bok's aphoristic point about "the sheer extent of all we do not know about the many aspects of secrecy" becomes a hard deterrent to research (1989, 282). The rigors of the Maoist era were such that the only studies to delve in depth into secrecy as a norm or force in revolutionary China are those by Frederic Wakeman (2003) and Michael Schoenhals (2013) on espionage, and by Michael Dutton (2005) on public security and policing. And few could dispute that secrecy studies in contemporary China is just as tough a sell. From where exactly, in one of the globe's most secretive states, is the study of the clandestine supposed to launch itself?

This creates a theoretical quandary or impasse, another wickedness. In a sense both real and rhetorical, secrecy is not fully researchable as a topic for scholars who live and work in China itself, however sensed and immanent a force it may be.[2] This is the grim logic that the tighter the cryptocracy, the less accessible secrecy itself becomes as an object of inquiry—or the more we need to study secrecy, the less we can. The inverse of this logic, as suggested a moment ago, is that the more transparent a society is, the more it luxuriates in theoretical articulations of what it means to live with secrecy. Cryptocracies, in other words, are implacably self-sustaining in their secretiveness. By using "cryptocratic" as a descriptor for contemporary China, though, I seek to expand on the standard definition of the term—namely, a society in which *éminences grises* behind the scenes, rather than publicly elected representatives, exercise power—to suggest a more comprehensive governmental mode. Taking the term back to its etymological root, "rule by secrets," I use "cryptocracy" here to refer not simply to nations that govern via secrecy in the shadows. After all, even the most professedly transparent of states possess a "secret core of government where information is considered and decisions taken far from the public gaze" (Harrison 2004, 1). And needless to say, the Chinese state ranks high on these normative measures of the clandestine—as many Western media accounts have shown, zeroing in on China's hidden overseas aid empire, its secret bitcoin mines, its covert nuclear program, its use of cross-border extraordinary rendition, even its espionage tactics against global lingerie giant Victoria's Secret. The predations of state secrecy against the government's own subjects have also emerged as an inevitable parallel theme: the exact number of clandestine executions China carries out, the vast sums that some high officials have secreted in offshore bank accounts, the undercover "clean-ups" the

state carries out against some of its most vulnerable citizens. Yet in dubbing contemporary China cryptocratic, my aim is to highlight how this tight sequestering of information also coexists with the status of secrecy as a mode of governmentality that is practiced, rather more paradoxically, out in the open.

Media and even academic commentary on China that chiefly views the state as the custodian and arbiter of *arcana imperii*—those "mysteries of rule" that must always remain occluded from public scrutiny—misses the extent to which the Chinese government seeks to advertise its clandestine powers: not in their details, of course, but via the deeper message that secrecy rules, that it is a governmental *modus operandi* crafted as a visible strategy even while its practical workings remain necessarily obscure. As I discuss in greater detail in chapter 3, this mode of spectacular secrecy is, of course, by no means restricted to China. When Debord noted some time back that "almost no one sees secrecy in its inaccessible purity. . . . Everyone accepts that there are inevitably little areas of secrecy reserved for specialists; as regards things in general, many believe they are *in on the secret*" (1998, 60–61; emphasis in the original), his point was that secrecy has leached away from sacralized status, and it has done so precisely by becoming bigger and more apparent. Debord continues with the observation that "the spectacle has brought the secret to victory" (79), and the fruits of that triumph are ubiquitously on display in liberal-democratic states, from the consumer ploys of "secret cinema" (in which the deliberately hidden details of an upcoming show become a marketing technique), to the in-house security services now commonplace within major corporations, to the surveillance satellites that we know full well are always watching us.

Against this widespread backdrop—we all live in cryptocracies now—secrecy in China stands out because both the chokehold on information and the deployment of secrecy as a spectacular power play operate at full tilt. They exist in a kind of magnetic balance and produce a prevalence of secrecy that is not just generalized, to use Debord's term, but palpably ambient in quotidian life, helped along by a comprehensive surveillance regime consisting of wraparound CCTV, an incipient "social credit" system which encourages self-monitoring,[3] and the spreading deployment of biometrics for social profiling purposes. This climate has led to an abundance of so-called hidden rules (*qian guize* 潜规则) and at the same time has created the conditions in which "knowing what not to know"—public secrecy—has become something close to a normative felt need. As a mode of concealment, public secrecy is not shuttered in closed archives but dwells in the interstices of the everyday and the everywhere, akin to what Birchall calls "shareveillance" (2016b, 1), a form of control in which we are all enforcers. And as such, it is as brittle as its co-conspirators

are ubiquitous and unpredictable, always susceptible to the little boy of legend who finally scoffed at the naked emperor. The status of public secrecy as a molecular thing, stretched out thinly across the social world, is both its power and its vulnerability. At the very least, it should make this covert quantity a discernible object for attention.

This apparent accessibility of public secrecy makes its absence from the discourses about the afterlives of China's past all the stranger. When I began writing this book, I imagined that its separate chapters would each take in various modes of secrecy; that as a whole the study would follow the naming pattern prevalent in the contemporary humanities and feel the need to pluralize its object of study ("secrecies in China"); and that the legacy of Tank Man and the crushed Tiananmen protests of 1989 would serve as the sole standout of the publicly unsayable as a specific phenomenon. Certainly, each of the following chapters begins with a different premise about secrecy and pursues its distinct outworkings. But what transpires, sooner or later, is that public secrecy repeatedly surfaces as a core force directing the journeys that these events—the Nanjing Massacre, the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen protests—have made to the present. All have been shaped by precisely that kind of willed opacity that shields people from what is not in their gift or power to acknowledge openly. Or, as Taussig puts it, "if secrecy is fascinating, still more so is the public secret into which all secrets secrete" (1999, 223). These unforgotten, unsayable things are also pluralized themselves; thus their publics may be greater or lesser, and the kind of knowledge they disown may be particular to a cohort or more generalizable to a generation. Yet public secrecy is as present throughout as it is missing from the interpretive apparatus of China's modern history: a public secret in and unto itself. The only study to date that begins to grapple with the unsayable as a social force in China is Stephanie Donald's *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China* (2000). But rather than China's vexed pasts, her focus is on women and children, and the public space that Chinese cinema affords for their visible expressions.

At a now-notorious Pentagon briefing in 2002, Donald Rumsfeld set out some stakes for knowledge, power, and the role of secrecy as their broker: "Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones."[4] But as Slavoj Žižek (2004) later pointed out, there is also

a fourth category: "the 'unknown knowns'—the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values." In fact, we might revise Rumsfeld's tongue twister to suggest that, when looking through the histories of "unfree" countries, it is this final category that tends to be the truly "difficult one." Public secrecy about the shared past may well be the toughest form of knowledge to grapple with in China, despite its ubiquity and the fact that the concept has been crucial to the growth of secrecy studies in societies where its articulations (or inarticulations, one should say) are rather less palpable and determining. Sparked in many ways by Michael Taussig's rich study *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (1999),[5] public secrecy has become a core paradigm for the clandestine in the age of WikiLeaks, as Abu Ghraib, race relations, the prison system, and other rankly present crises remain, despite regular exposés, strangely unsayable as facts and more untouchable still as problems.[6]

Significantly, though, the origins of Taussig's book lie in Colombia during the 1980s, a situation of paramilitarism and so-called low-intensity democracy, in which seeing and speaking no evil was a response to fear more than to awkwardness. In this sense, the noisy silence over forms of injustice in contemporary Western democracies may better fit the paradigm of denial set out by Stanley Cohen in his study of compassion fatigue, bystander passivity, and other kinds of political and private blinkeredness. Here, the decision not to know mostly relates to the lives of others, as the terms "compassion fatigue" and "bystander passivity" show well enough (Cohen 2000). Such silences can also be understood in terms of what Peter Galison terms "anti-epistemology," a mode of enquiry that asks not how knowledge is produced but rather how it "can be covered and obscured" (2004, 237). Also relevant is the new discipline of ignorance studies, which explores "the mobilization of ambiguity . . . [and] the realization that knowing the least amount possible is often the most indispensable tool for managing risks and exonerating oneself from blame in the aftermath of catastrophic events" (McGoey 2012, 3). The strategic options availed by ignorance, by deliberately seeking to be ill-informed, are a step beyond considered silence, because a lack of knowledge can be openly voiced, even declaratively owned, and we can surely expect the resource of ignorance to be harvested more intensively as surveillance grows. But these varieties of non-knowledge as a paradigm falter in the face of mass collective experience. What the suppression of certain histories in China forces us to consider is how a surfeit of shared knowledge, inadmissible and steeped in pain, has been socially managed.

In such a context, public secrecy almost inevitably becomes a hard norm, and one that is not merely socially avoidant but also personally defensive at a population level. Yet, true to its name, this norm has hidden itself from discursive scrutiny even as its reach as a processual mode for troubled histories in China has become extensive. Ultimately, it is in this sense that public secrecy is a "wicked" problem since challenges of this kind "defy efforts to delineate their boundaries and to identify their causes, and thus to expose their problematic nature" (Rittel and Webber 1973, 167). To be more precise, public secrecy has escaped notice because other explanations for why historical consciousness in China is so full of potholes have proved both more politically gratifying and less politically awkward. These proxy forms are censorship and amnesia. As a paired argument, they have functioned as stand-ins for public secrecy in cultural, academic, and media discourse even though their epistemological limitations are often quite well understood. Both strip out the lateral sociality of public secrecy—the sense of horizontal cohorts who withhold lived experience en bloc and as a joint labor—in favor of top-to-bottom relations that locate agency in the state and treat the people as coercible herds. As such, they gratify the grandiosity of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which strives after precisely that absoluteness of power over its subjects. At the same time, they also suit the pieties of liberal-leaning foreign media, whose indignation at that regime is often so tunnel-visioned that the more discomfiting point that silence might be shared work slips from their view.

All Power to the State and Its Censors

The first reason for the neglect of public secrecy is the focus on censorship among many who write about contemporary Chinese culture: its enforcement, its evasion, and the distortions it inflicts on social behavior and creative acts. This is not to deny the role that organs of censorship play in keeping troubled histories muzzled. China's censorship apparatus is both vast and tentacular, "unprecedented in recorded world history" in its capacity to regulate different kinds of speech acts and varied platforms of articulation (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 1): from literature to instant messaging, print media to video games, school textbooks to memorial steles. This apparatus consists of regulatory bodies such as the National Radio and Television Administration, which issues directives, acts as a gatekeeper of new content, stipulates revisions, restricts circulation, enforces the removal of material deemed unacceptable, and exercises opaque discretionary powers over all stages of the culture-making process. Just as crucially, this redoubtable apparatus has also bred habits of

self-censorship among makers of culture throughout the twenty-five-year period I focus on in this book. Strategic ambiguities, gnomic pronouncements, and invisible red lines keep writers, filmmakers, and artists on the *qui vive*, so fearful of breaching the code that many barely broach its outer edges.

Censorship also preoccupies itself in almost ceaseless ways with micromanaging the online world in China: blocking websites and VPNs, voiding certain keyword searches, stipulating real-name registration for online forums, disrupting messaging services, and making platform stakeholders responsible for the content on their sites. In its mission to ensure that the Chinese web stays both economically turbocharged and politically obedient, the state is served by a vast corps of internet cops who labor round-the-clock to identify and delete undesirable content. Censorship is just as formidable in education, ensuring that episodes such as the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957–59, the Great Famine of 1958–61, the Tiananmen Square crackdown, and sensitive aspects of the Cultural Revolution experience are either omitted from school textbooks or downplayed in a vague sentence or two. It extends decisively into scholarship, controlling archival access and using digital tools to amend the archive itself by deleting critical articles from databases (Bland 2017). University classrooms are also subject to both surveillance and sousveillance, especially during the Xi Jinping 习近平 era, when many historians have felt compelled to swerve around the glitches in the China's modern past in favor of bland studies on Marxist-Leninism. Censorship also shapes the physical and discursive limits of commemoration in contemporary China, as the state's refusal to lay wreaths, erect statues, honor sites, build museums, establish national holidays, and encourage intergenerational dialogue about taboo pasts produces a dehistoricized landscape.

As a supple strategy for political control, censorship in China does not simply denote banning cultural texts, products, or activities; as suggested above, it also involves modifying and managing provocative content. Here, though, I deploy the term principally in its most rigid and prohibitive form, as an instrument for keeping certain kinds of material out of the public domain. And it is in this guise that state censorship might reasonably be taken as a core architect of the many taboos that shroud the past in contemporary China. According to this view, stories are not told, remembrances are not shared, histories are not researched, and commemoration is not performed because the government muzzles any such speech acts the moment that they fall from the lips of the people—and the people respond by stayed close-mouthed because they have little other choice. Yet this focus on censorship treats enunciation as a preeminently public act. It passes over the point that private, unsurveilled

spaces can—in theory, at least—serve as arenas in which friends and families breach state injunctions on not-saying. In China, however, widespread ignorance among later-born citizens about the nation's *verboten* pasts suggests that such opportunities are mostly forsworn as elders censor themselves—or so the standard argument goes. Yet to make this claim is to assume that the people always wish to speak, that words would brim forth if only they were permitted to flow freely. This view discounts the possibility—the likelihood—that many survivors, witnesses, and perpetrators of violent histories are gripped by no such urge to speech, and indeed they may actively prefer, for reasons of pain, fear, complicity, guilt, or shame, to abjure discussion of their pasts. Self-censorship is an inadequate descriptor for silences such as these, for reticence that may be willing. Indeed, we might even suggest that rather than chafing under the yoke of state censorship, cohorts exist within Chinese society who quietly welcome, and for many different reasons, the injunctions placed by the party-state on "speaking evil"—or speaking at all—about the nation's wounded past.

But the argument about (self-)censorship dominates nonetheless, and it is often framed in accusatory terms. Prevalent here is the suspicion that saying nothing is a strategy that reaps rewards as part of a tacit pact between rulers and ruled. This point about the perks of self-censorship emerges in an essay by Ai Weiwei 艾未未 published in 2017 in the *New York Times*, entitled "How Censorship Works." In it, the artist argues that the state and its subjects in contemporary China contract a Faustian pact in which creature comforts are exchanged for keeping *schtum*:

> Whenever the state controls or blocks information, it not only reasserts its absolute power; it also elicits from the people whom it rules a voluntary submission to the system and an acknowledgment of its dominion. This, in turn supports the axiom of the debased: Accept dependency in return for practical benefits. . . . The most elegant way to adjust to censorship is to engage in self-censorship. It is the perfect method for allying with power and setting the stage for the mutual exchange of benefit. . . . That's what we have here in China: The self-silenced majority, sycophants of a powerful regime, resentful of people like me who speak out, are doubly bitter because they know that their debasement comes by their own hand.

This critique is, in some ways, an exegesis of Jiang Zemin's 江泽民 famous motto for the post-Tiananmen era, "Keep your mouth shut and get rich" (*mensheng fadacai* 闷声发大财), and Ai Weiwei's notion of the "self-silenced majority" skewers

certain social behaviors in the contemporary PRC with undeniable acuity. Yet a critical difference exists between self-censorship and public secrecy, even if they may overlap at points in the Venn diagram of non-saying, and that difference swims into focus when we consider the legacies of China's troubled pasts. Keeping quiet is not always the clear-cut moral choice that Ai Weiwei claims it to be here; nor do those who maintain these consensual silences always do so as a strategy for acquiring "benefits." Critiques of self-censorship, which focus on "currying reward and avoiding punishments" (C.-C. Lee 1998, 57), fail to acknowledge that those who do not speak are sometimes protecting private secrets rather than wearing the muzzle of cynical obedience.

As a flawed but eye-catching paradigm for why silence happens, censorship draws attention away from this wide prevalence of secret-keeping about the past in China. Thus it functions not just as secrecy's tool but as its proxy, a force that can be railed against for its throttling powers and sclerotic effects, while the larger force—secrecy in public culture, secrecy as public culture—avoids scrutiny. In present-day commentary on China and its cultural scenes, lamenting censorship has assumed the status of a default liberal critical position to the extent that studies of the topic absurdly outnumber those that explore secrecy as a mode of sociopolitical containment. In this sense, we might argue that censorship serves its master exceptionally well, not simply because it blocks specific kinds of creative content but because, together with amnesia, it has supplanted public secrecy itself as the chief object of intellectual inquiry. Rather than the elephant in the room, a presence whose huge size causes discomfort because it is ignored, public secrecy has thinned out into the ambient air. It is so obvious—of course China is a cryptocracy!—that its movements in culture have barely been tracked.

Oublier *Amnesia*

This notion of public secrecy as a mindful process is flatly refuted by the second part of the two-step story about why certain histories have such scant traction in China's present. This is the discourse of amnesia: the notion that if troubled pasts strain for speech in contemporary China, it is because state censorship has succeeded in wiping them from the popular mind. Just as it has become commonplace to describe China's twentieth century in the language of cataclysm, so too is it now standard to view the flawed processing of that past in terms of memory fail. In a regime that fears its own guilty history and has tools of deletion at its disposal, forgetfulness becomes state policy and has crystallized as a cultural, academic, and media trope. Literary and cinematic

works such as Wang Shuo's 王朔 *Playing for Thrills* (*Wanr de jiushi xintiao* 玩儿的就是心跳, 1989), Ma Jian's 马建 *Beijing Coma* (*Beijing zhiwuren* 北京植物人, 2008), Chan Koonchung's 陈冠中 *The Fat Years* (*Shengshi: Zhongguo 2013* 盛世: 中国 2013, 2009), Wang Xiaoshuai's 王小帅 *Red Amnesia* (*Chuangruzhe* 闯入者, 2014), and Fang Fang's 方方 *Bare Burial* (*Ruan mai* 软埋, 2016) feature characters whose memories have been wiped, warped, and medicated into void, or who even engage in what Yomi Braester describes as a flippant kind of forgetting (2016).[7] As writer Yan Lianke 阎连科 (2013) puts it, "Have today's 20- and 30-year-olds become the amnesiac generation? Who has made them forget? . . . Are we members of the older generation who still remember the past responsible for the younger generation's amnesia? The amnesia I'm talking about is the act of deleting memories rather than merely a natural process of forgetting. Forgetting can result from the passage of time. The act of deleting memories, however, is about actively winnowing out people's memories of the present and the past. In China, memory deletion is turning the younger generation into selective-memory automatons."

At some point in a dystopian future, what Yan Lianke calls "state-administered amnesia"—a key plot element in *The Fat Years*, in which the authorities dose the population with MDMA—might be actualized in the water supply of repressive regimes. In the short term, it is more likely that those who carry *verboten* memories will pass away, thus obviating the need for chemical intervention. Until that point, though, amnesia needs also to be understood in its role as a figure of rhetoric, whose invocation can perform acts of finessing. To query this twist in the mnemonic turn is not to discount the value of studies that document or instigate actual processes of remembrance: these are far too numerous to list and have steered a transformative shift in Chinese historical studies over the past twenty years. Memory as methodology starts to falter when remembrance-related terms are deployed counterindicatively as "amnesia," "selective recall," "coma," and "brainwashing," words that suggest forgetfulness not merely as failing cognitive function but as a medicalized etiology. Nor is it my intention here to dispute that the failure to commemorate the past in public can impair memory, forcing it inside and underground, and denying those who remember the chance to activate their recall through telling and retelling. All the events I discuss here are diminished by missing memories: the details of people, places, words, smells, sounds that have been permanently lost as the state makes commemoration taboo. But at the core of these events lies the unforgettable, and for those who have been scorched by its fear, violence, and shame, true oblivion is surely a chimera, a pipe dream, even. Mass forgetfulness is a misnomer because rather than being a nation of amnesiacs,

China is divided between those who cannot fully forget but stay mostly silent, and those who have never, or barely, learned about the events that are seared across the cortices of their elders and so have nothing to unremember.

In this sense, the Chinese amnesia discourse is always overdetermined by irony. Hints of this are visible in Yan Lianke's subject-nonspecific syntax ("the act of deleting memories"), a symptom mirrored by the recurring use of the passive voice in academic accounts ("about once each decade, the true face of history is thoroughly erased from the memory of Chinese society" [Fang Lizhi 1990]). Another instance is the use of scare quotes around words such as "forgetting," which carries a similar sort of hedging effect. The rhetorical character of the amnesia discourse also surfaces in the often sardonic tone in which it is called to account, such as the title of Louisa Lim's study of the Tiananmen protests—*The People's Republic of Amnesia* (2014)—and Geremie Barmé's (1987, 2017) two essays on the subject, which lampoon "China's memory hole industry." In other words, the amnesia paradigm is caviled at in such discussions even as it is asserted, and this use of irony points to the limitations of memory fail as a methodology. Rather than amnesia *per se*, it is the shadowy pressure of the nonspecific subject, the enforcement inherent to the passive voice, the sense of the arguably inaccurate implied by scare quotes, and the mordant critique that reveal more about why certain events struggle for sound in the present. Some might call these strategies the "art of forgetting," harking back to Nietzsche's notion of "active forgetfulness," which helps ordinary life proceed and functions as "a preserver of psychic order, repose, and etiquette" (1989, 58). Or as Elizabeth Jelin puts it in relation to traumatic pasts, "oblivion is not an expression of absence or emptiness . . . rather, it is the presence of that absence, the representation of something . . . that has been erased, silenced or denied" (2003, 8). My aim here is not to refute the concreteness of what cannot be said, but rather to query whether the lexicon of forgetfulness always captures it rightly. The caviling strategies listed above are symptoms of a broad awareness that something else is at work, and so it might be argued that simply renaming "amnesia" as "public secrecy" might be sufficient remedy in and of itself. Yet it is equally symptomatic for the secret to seek out proxies for its doings, and this use of dummy fronts suggests that its practices need closer attention on their own terms.

Furthermore, if the discourse of forgetfulness is in large part euphemistic, then we should ask why it is deployed so routinely. Euphemisms themselves are of course a form of public secrecy, a means of covering up obvious but awkward truths—an irony too rich to overlook. Rather like the term "ethnic cleansing," which has come to denote the filthy practices of forced emigration,

deportation, and genocide, or the military sex slaves who are still unconscionably called "comfort women," "amnesia" in the Chinese context functions as accepted code for a relationship with the past that is in many ways the very opposite of forgetful. And just like "ethnic cleansing" and "comfort women," "amnesia" is a term that suits the forces of oppression, as the power to make its people forget the past is precisely what the Chinese state wants to own and flex. Reminiscent of Cold War paranoia about the Yellow Peril—mind control and brainwashing of a passive populace—the top-down execution implied by the memory wipe makes "amnesia" a term that we should deploy only under advisement. The repeated use of terms such as "ethnic cleansing," "comfort women," and "amnesia" has a long-term softening or distracting effect, even when these euphemisms are deployed, with scare quotes, by those most opposed to the realities they mask. Indeed, the expression "veil of semantics" has currency precisely because language is often where secrets go to hide. To call Chinese society "amnesiac" is—in effect, if not intention—to elide once again the agential nature of the silence that shrouds the past: its status as a social fact that is made and maintained by the many. Keeping secrets, as Simmel pointed out, is a highly social business (1906, 464).

In short, it is not my intention to add to the already extensive documentation about state-managed memory in China, nor to join the many voices who impugn the CCP for its grip on informational access to the past, though those voices constitute an inevitable background chorus. Nor does this book significantly revisit traumatic memory in China, a topic that others have ably explored already.[8] Ultimately, the discourse on memory and its distortions in China is what the philosopher Max Picard called one of the "loud places of history" (1952, 84), a space of noisy disputation in which, perhaps most vocally, dissident exilic intellectuals shout back to the Chinese government about its betrayal of the past. In writing about history's "silent side" (84), Picard's aim was both to recover silence as a social good and to show that it can be a Durkheimian "social fact" in the aftermath of brutal history, a way of "acting, thinking, and feeling . . . invested with a coercive power" (Durkheim 1982, 52). The chapters that follow are neither ethnographic, anthropological, nor sociological, but instead push toward a cultural turn in secrecy studies, an emergent discipline in which the social sciences still mostly rule.[9] Sensing out public secrecy in culture is crucial because it is in representational forms that these silences, via the antagonistic responses that makers of culture address to them, can take discernible shape. As such, the works I look at here are never "just" aesthetic. They also constitute forms of knowledge—speech acts—that feed back as ripples and show that the past lives on despite the silence that shrouds it.

Secrecy, I argue here, is best engaged with on its own terms, especially in cryptocratic societies, where antagonism must remain in the shadows. Representation offers exactly the disguise and encryption necessary for this kind of endeavor because it mimics in its deepest structure, and in the provocations it offers to those who read and view, what Simmel called the "charm of the secret" (1906, 465).[10] This is evident as a blatant meta-strategy in the genre of the *roman à clef*; in the labyrinth walk of Chartres Cathedral; in Leonardo's visual puns and in Holbein's rebus of mortality in *The Ambassadors*; in the work of all the artists, from van Eyck to Velasquez to Picasso, who have slipped hidden self-portraits into their paintings; and in the venerable Chinese literary tradition of "using the past to satirize the present" (*jiegu fengjin* 借古讽今) via elaborate encrypted allusion. These works advertise representation as the craft of encoding, and reception as the labor of its decipherment—so much so that *The Ambassadors* is a painting that is so spectacularly known, in an arresting paradox, precisely for the secrets it hides with such *mysterium*. It is via the devices of concealment that the painting vouchsafes, down the generations, the thrills of revelation that have secured its fame and exposure.

Works of this kind are less an outlying category than extravagant exemplars of a fundamental relationship between creative objects and their audiences. Or, as Frank Kermode puts it of the secretive potential of even the most candid narrative, "If we are willing to do so, we shall find over the plot the shadow of a secret that has defied . . . readers who want the work to be throughout like beer in a glittering glass" (1980, 94). It is this fundamental, already existing relationship between secrecy and representation that makes aesthetic forms so natural a site or seedbed for any effort that seeks to do justice to the unsayable. The stakes for the aesthetic realm, and the revelatory burden it needs to bear, grow of course in tandem with the grip of covert powers. But if we take public secrecy—even more than "disappearances," closed tribunals, and blatant "black ops"—as the surest marker of such a society, then the relationship it comes to bear with representation becomes more pointed still, as *The Ambassadors* also makes clear. In a pictorial space jostling with secrets—the globe, the mosaic floor, the lute with its broken string, the half-hidden crucifix, the polyhedral sundial, the hymn book in Luther's translation—it is the anamorphic skull floating in the foreground that has always grabbed the limelight. The space it occupies is the "locus of the secret" in an archetypal sense. As Daniel Collins notes, anamorphosis as a perspectival device has a history rooted in secrecy and the illicit: "The effect has been widely used to surreptitiously

depict subjects one might otherwise be reluctant to represent: the erotic, the scatological, the occult, the religious, the politically controversial and the philosophically abstruse" (1992, 77). It operates like the keyhole, glimpsable only as the viewer passes through a particular observational point, and only if that viewer is prepared to peer hard.

Indeed, such images require what Collins calls an "eccentric" spectator, one who is not simply "willing to sacrifice a centric vantage point for the possibility of catching a glimpse of the uncanny from a position off-axis" (1992, 73), but who is ready to engage in the labor of image-making, because "there are few models of vision that explicitly place the percipient in the role of creating her own experience" (78). Figurally, then, the elongated skull belongs to an order of the clandestine different from that of its companion objects, which all adhere to their God-given perspectival shapes and places. These other objects also cleave to the broader notion that some kind of disclosure—the crucifix unveiled, the broken string decoded as religious disharmony—will solve the secret puzzle. The skull defies this logic of resolution. Certainly, the spectator's efforts are rewarded when the skewed slash in black-and-white resolves into a skull, seemingly illustrating Shakespeare's point in *Richard II* that ". . . perspectives, which rightly gazed upon / Show nothing but confusion—eyed awry / Distinguish form . . ." (2011, 184). But where, really, does this leave the secret? In a way, it remains as intractable as ever, because the death's head merely encrypts the picture further: Is it a memento mori, a virtuosic display, an authorial signature, a "trap for the gaze," as Lacan (1998, 89) argued in his equally cryptic seminar on Holbein's masterwork? More to the point, this desire to uncover the secret may lure the viewer into missing what is arguably the real "reveal." This is because the sideways apparition of the secret skull forestalls a focus on how that glitched, paranormal shape actually functions within the immediate visual field of the painting, viewed head-on and without the always anticipated mitigation of the left angle. In an image overinscribed with the language of the code and the crypt, the skull viewed head-on shows that secrecy is most distorting when it is most central, most present, most public. If anamorphosis makes the familiar strange, then Holbein's perspectival play reveals not the secret-as-content so much as secrecy as a structural force within the very plane of normal human vision. It shows secrecy as something public.

As surveillance and secrecy have ramped up in recent years, artists have tried to grapple with the political order of the covert. The signature example of this is drone art: the work of photographers and artists such as Mahwish Chishty, who sets the sharp outlines of Reaper unmanned aerial vehicles against Pakistani "truck art" to show how these secret vessels are shaping the

milieu of the country's border regions; James Bridle, who created a drone identification kit in order to strip these aircraft of their grim mystery; Katheryn Brimblecombe-Fox, whose "dronescapes" juxtapose missiles with the vascular structure of the Australian aborigine tree-of-life symbol to explore the anthropomorphization of unmanned weaponry; and Trevor Paglen, who hired a helicopter to take eerie dronelike shots of the National Security Agency in rural Virginia. These works, which go head-to-head with forms of state secrecy, are all locked into the logic of exposure, mostly conducted from an implicitly overhead position that substitutes the surveilling eye of the drone with that of the artist and throws that which wants to stay invisible into sharp, seeable relief. As Paglen (2014) puts it, "My intention is to expand the visual vocabulary we use to 'see' the U.S. intelligence community."

But public secrecy, as a force that positively thrives on exposure, exists in a different kind of relation with the artwork. It requires a different kind of gaze: not the ability to see what was hidden but to look afresh on that which was always already there. This is why Holbein's painting offers a model for how representational forms might both get, and get at, public secrecy. *The Ambassadors* shows how the artwork can both find a language for the intractability of what is known but unsayable—the skull-blot—and also encode this language in ways that acknowledge that dealing with public secrets—exposing the familiar as strange—requires work, as shown by the labor of the spectator. And via this labor, representational forms can also engender a dialogic mode of reckoning with the shared things that cannot be said. They have the capacity to create what Nicholas Bourriaud has called a "social interstice," a "space in social relations which . . . suggests possibilities for exchanges other than those that prevail within the system . . . an inter-human intercourse which is different to the 'zones of communication' that are forced upon us" (2006, 161). Works that use encryption to take on public secrecy, to enjoin new ways of looking, induct the viewer into a different kind of relationship with the artwork, one in which she becomes "a witness, an associate, a client, a guest, a coproducer and a protagonist" (168). As they do so, such works forge coalitions of shadowboxers, made up of artists and audiences who are willing to experiment together with being more candid about those things that are broadly known but seldom said aloud.

Trash and Treasure

The question then becomes, What are those works, in China, that might enable public secrecy to enter the "zones of communication"? Where might we find them? In his work on spymasters and secret agents during the Maoist

period, Michael Schoenhals begins by arguing that "we must find room in our analyses of Maoism as a way of life for the informers, collaborators, and secret police" who made the "system work" (2013, 11). But he wastes no time in spelling out the manifold difficulties: the "blanket ban" the CCP issued in 1981 on the publication of scholarship "detrimental to the normal conduct of our present and future intelligence and protection work"; the archival materials that remain off-limits well into the twenty-first century; and the wry caveat of CIA analyst Olivia Halebian, who reminded would-be chroniclers of espionage in 1965 that "we should assume that all memoirs, biographies, and historical studies of the . . . intelligence services are prepared with the aid of disinformation experts" (quoted in Schoenhals 2013, 11).[11] For Schoenhals, what ultimately made his study of Maoist spies possible were "chance discoveries in flea markets and the back rooms of antiquarian bookshops in urban China of archival material that has *not* been subject to positive information management" (12). Schoenhals calls these "garbage materials," the flotsam and jetsam that made a historiography of the secret service possible (12). "Garbology," as a recognized mode of PRC historiography, is now a lively field (Brown and Johnson 2015), and its flea market finds are hugely instructive on matters of secrecy.

Although the term "flea market" exists in Chinese as a direct translation from English (which itself derives from the French *marché aux puces*), it is the Australian term for these bazaars—trash and treasure markets—that gets closest to their value for grassroots historians of Maoist China. These scholars have turned up discarded dossiers, personnel files, declassified policy documents, abandoned police reports, diaries, and private letters that often washed up there as work units have been disbanded and their reams of paperwork suddenly made homeless. Unlike the "eye of the drone," which scans the horizon for known targets, the garbological approach to pursuing the covert takes a worm's-eye view: it hunkers down in the dirt, scavenging for the as-yet-unknown. In part, this ground-level focus is necessary because secret-keepers open up what Istvan Rev calls "hiatuses, holes in the texture of history," forcing their investigators into fingertip searches for "the traces of nonobjects" (1987, 349): the shadows of things that never happened, of people who never were. In this sense, researching secrecy means acknowledging that we do not always know what we are looking for. Yet these dossiers that escaped the shredder are secrets tossed not merely into the trash but out into the open. By dint of their abandonment, such materials become a species of priceless junk, both worthless and invaluable. More than this, they materialize the public secret: they are objects once radioactive with clandestine meaning that are now allowed to lie in plain sight. As such, they demonstrate not merely that secrets have half-lives

whose duration can be difficult to quantify (officials have begun to crack down on the trade, thereby driving the papers back into secret storage once again), but also that public secrecy lies in unexpected places, in overlooked or overfamiliar things.

It is no accident, therefore, that this book also began in a flea market and is similarly prompted by what unexpected finds, hiding in plain sight, can tell us about public secrecy. Its origins lie in Panjiayuan 潘家园, a sprawling hive of stalls, shops, and arcades covering nearly fifty thousand square meters in Beijing's Chaoyang 朝阳 district just south of the East Third Ring Road. Panjiayuan is China's largest flea market, where sellers peddle antiques, heirlooms, knick-knacks, curios, kitsch, and the kind of Maoist memorabilia, both faux and genuine, that has become highly collectible. But what leapt out during one particular visit as I walked through the cramped alleyways of the market's central semicovered section was the way that the stalls of Panjiayuan seemed to offer up a randomized slideshow of modern Chinese history in assorted objects. Artifactual moments from China's long twentieth century, from the late Qing period to the premiership of Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, flashed by staccato style, rather like the jerky motions of Muybridge's famous animated horse. Indeed, if something about the scene was akin to the galloping race horse, it was because so many of the objects on sale that day riffed on the past photographically. Photographs were—and still are—everywhere on Panjiayuan's main drag. Originals, reproductions, and creative reconfigurations hit the eye every few seconds, jumbled and achronological.

Vendors hawk photobooks of Beijing's vanishing courtyards. Tea sets emblazoned with the faces of the party leadership circa 1966, playing cards with images dating back to the 1911 Revolution, postcards reproducing hand-painted daguerreotypes from the late Qing period, seductive pin-ups from Old Shanghai, alarm clocks embossed with photographs of Red Guards, sepia architectural views of the capital's landmarks, and vintage photographs of ethnic minorities in the 1950s or Peking opera stars on the stage (figures I.1 and I.2). The sharp-eyed visitor might spot grimmer images of militia on maneuvers during the Sino-Japanese War or scenes of torture and hazing from the Cultural Revolution. And, if requested, certain sellers in the book section will pull out plastic-covered albums full of faded family portraits, their names lost forever, even if rough dates can be hazarded from the Mao badges pinned to the subjects' lapels. Other uses of photography in Panjiayuan are more hybrid. Specialist stalls sell pointillist-style stone carvings modeled on photographic portraits of former Chinese leaders, while others produce crude pastiches of the work of China's globally fêted pop avant-garde artists, themselves inspired

FIGURE 1.1 Shuffling past and present: playing cards at Panjiayuan.

FIGURE 1.2 Red Guard alarm clocks stacked in a display of totalitarian nostalgia.

by old photographs. The presence of these photographic artifacts alongside stalls that hawk Maoist-era "garbage materials" is full of a symbolism that is only partly accidental. These objects—the kitsch, the fakes, the shabby second-hand goods—constitute another form of "trash and treasure" because they, too, have a bearing on China's missing histories. These photo-things cluster together densely at Panjiayuan, in part because flea markets have always been a home from home for secrets. But the objects at Panjiayuan are also a microcosm, or snapshot, of something bigger.

Photo Fever, Photo-Forms

During the late 1990s, something close to a sepia boom swept Chinese society as archival photographs began to enjoy an extraordinary afterlife in offline and online spaces. This rise of the historic photograph is commonly attributed to the launch of a periodical entitled *Old Photographs* (*Lao zhaopian* 老照片) by the Shandong Pictorial Press in 1996. As I discuss in chapter 2, the magazine stormed China's publishing market: by December 1997, 1.2 million copies of its first few issues had been sold, triggering a kind of photo-mania.[12] Scholars have mostly argued that this photographic turn was about misty-eyed, money-spinning nostalgia.[13] But photographs exhumed from archives and private collections also gave the traumas of the twentieth-century past a new visibility. Connections have not been drawn between the two, but it is no coincidence that the launch of *Old Photographs* dovetailed with the broad release of a state-sponsored photographic album that displayed previously classified images of the decapitated men and violated women of the Nanjing Massacre.[14] Not so long ago, historians in China lamented that the nation's museums gave photographs short shrift (Lai 2001, 44), but such a complaint would be impossible now. Photographs now loom large within exhibitionary space; they thickly populate online spaces about the past; and their presence is routine in scholarly, mainstream, and pedagogical treatments of Chinese history.[15] And although Frank Dikötter claimed as recently as 2008 that "we still know more about the history of photography in Bamako, Mali, than about the history of photography in China" (76), the photographic image in China has emerged in the years since as a freestanding historical subject in its own right.[16] Underlying these shifts is the assumption that photographs can unlock episodes that have long been recalcitrant in their secrecy (Bao Kun 鲍昆 2010, 365–67).[17]

Indeed, this rise of the photographic image speaks to a long-suppressed will to *visual* knowledge about the blind spots of China's modern past, those episodes that official historiography has placed off-limits.[18] David Der-Wei Wang

calls this version of the past "a discourse of make-believe," and his terminology is instructive (2004, 3). Discourse, in its primary definition, refers to acts of speech and script, and these antecedents of the word bear on the documentation of modern China's troubled pasts. Part of the reason why suppressing parts of Maoist history has been possible is because image-making during that epoch was mostly reserved for the demands of the utopian present, whether in the form of propaganda posters, Mao badges, or the photographs of ideal families that adorned publications such as *The China Pictorial* (*Renmin huabao* 人民画报).[19] As Jonathan Spence put it in 1988, "surprisingly large portions of the Chinese story are still not available in any visual form" (7), and partly dictating that unavailability was the photographic void within which troubled histories were subsumed.[20] Political and personal turmoil such as the Great Famine, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, and to a lesser extent the Cultural Revolution passed into memory with little visual assistance, even as the iconography of the rulers entered millions of homes via Mao's black-and-white *prie-dieux*.[21] As Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman point out, "The absent image is also a form of political appropriation; public silence is perhaps more terrifying than being overwhelmed by public images of atrocity" (1997, 17). In this context of fearful dearth, those photographs that do exist, and that have latterly come to prominence, matter all the more. This is precisely why extant images of *verboten* pasts have spawned aesthetic works of such range and volume both in contemporary China itself and in those places outside the mainland where Chinese cultural makers live and work.

These works—photo-forms—remediate images whose retinal familiarity is such that viewers often do little more than merely "see" them. The process of repurposing, however, induces acts of "looking" as the familiar becomes strange, and these images begin to speak. How, then, to define the photo-form, and what it means and does, in a social context where public secrecy is a sensed force? The photo-form as I define it here does not refer all-encompassingly to any aesthetic entity that remakes a photograph in other medial matter. Such works evidently belong to a far broader genus, which might be usefully termed works-that-work-with-photographs. Rather, the photo-form narrows this expansive category to something much more specific: image-works that meld well-known historical photographs with different material substrates. This process of melding is diverse. A photo-form may be a family portrait reimagined in oils on canvas; a tattoo of Tank Man inked on an artist's skin; a statue that reproduces the two-planed outlines of a well-known image in three-dimensional bronze; a cartoon that edits down the visual data of a historical photograph and re-renders it in starker graphic form; a film or

animation that either intercuts live footage with instantly recognizable stills or restages photographs as "moving pictures"; an autobiographical essay that juxtaposes text with photographic portraits; a piece of performance art in which the actors reenact the scene of a historic photograph or wear masks modeled on an image; a mural in a museum comprising a medley of historical photographs; an augmented reality phone app that overlays a photograph over physical space; or an original historic photograph that the artist doctors, tweaks, or recomposites in some way. A book cover that reproduces and restyles a well-known image from the past is a photo-form, as is a T-shirt, key ring, or coffee cup which does the same.

As a term, "photo-form" is as arbitrary as most acts of naming, but these works do need a label—both for this book and more generally because they constitute a group of artifacts that possess a distinctive and not yet fully described ontology, at once circumscribed and quite loose-limbed. It is restrictive insofar as such objects are spawned by an image or category of images that possess a high recognition quotient, and such images are, by their very nature, limited in number. Yet it is simultaneously open-ended in the sense that photographs such as these—precisely because of their reflex and instantaneous knownness—can be repurposed almost to the point of faithlessness, and in prolix form, while always retaining their basic recognizability. Repurposing, then, is a portmanteau term for the multiple routes via which a well-known photograph can transition into a mixed-matter photo-form. This is itself another way of saying that the photo-form is a continuum object, a spectrum-situated artifact of varying aesthetic tone and photographic saturation that moves in fuzzy ways from painting and cinema, through the indexical arts of documentary and reportage, along to blog posts and T-shirts. This state of continuum is covered by repurposing as a definition, but with the proviso that this is a catchall for processes that can be more variegated on the ground.[22] Throughout this book, I alternate "repurposing" with close lexical companions such as "re-version," "remake," and "reconstitute" in recognition of the inexactitude that still bedevils the critical vocabulary of image/narrative transfer, from debates over what adaptation studies can and should include to the differences between remix and remediation in digital culture. But repurposing remains my key term here because of the dual semantic freight it bears. To call an object "repurposed" captures the historicity of its source image—its earlier life and times—at the same time that it specifically registers the fact of its adaptation for a different or even contrarian kind of use. Photo-forms are typically once-secret things that, in their new incarnation, try to reckon with that same secrecy. As they do so, they often disguise themselves

so that they both resemble their source image and yet are also tactically or rhetorically other to it.

It is this repurposed character that distinguishes photo-forms from works-that-work-with-photographs, whose manifestations date back almost to the advent of the daguerreotype. Indeed, the photographic image seems innately predisposed toward restless movement of this kind, forever seeking a stage, substrate, backdrop, or material companion for itself. Baudrillard might have claimed that "whatever the noise or violence surrounding it, the photo gives its object over to immobility and silence . . . it re-creates the equivalent of the desert, a phenomenal isolation" (1998, 86); but the photographic image itself is a vastly different animal. Photographs have always gravitated toward objects than can shelter, house, or display them, from lockets and albums to coffee cups and credit cards. Yet even when the image rests stock still in the palm of a hand, it is always gravitating instinctually toward forms beyond itself, if only to the words it summons from those who view it. When it does take wing, it is often impelled to do so by a desire to engage in more transformative relationships with other aesthetic forms, as the very names of genres such as photorealist painting, photosculptures, and photonarratives make clear. Such journeys have constituted a major aesthetic migration in recent years, as painters, writers, and filmmakers have subjected the photographic image to intense artistic reworking: Gregory Crewdson's narrative photographs, Lynn Cazabon's shadow photographic archives, Oliver Herring's photosculptures, Duane Michals's photosequences, and W. G. Sebald's photonarrative. The genus of works-that-work-with-photographs, even if it does not call itself that, has surged in tandem as a field of study.[23]

Like these works, photo-forms evince an indefatigable colonizing impulse for the photographic image: transgenre, transmedial, transcultural, transtaste. But their status as repurposings of well-known historic images endows them with additional powers and properties. If, as Hollis Frampton puts it, "where we once thought in language we now find that we think, more often than we know, in photographs" (2009, 100), this is in part because of the photo-form and its propagation of hyperfamiliar images, without even the most vestigial visual trace of light on photochemical paper. This latter point is crucial to the photo-form and its distinctive morphology. For some time now, photographic representation of all kinds has been inching, sometimes speeding, away from the notion that the "photographic" will necessarily take indexicality—once its *sine qua non*—as a determining criterion. This point is suggested by Mieke Bal, who notes that the presence of photography in Proust can be seen "in the cutting-out of details, in the conflictual dialectic between the near and the far,

and in certain 'zoom' effects" (1997, 201); and is implicit in Michael North's (2005) more encompassing argument that "camera vision" has shaped the way that many important authors see and write. Gerhard Richter (1995) puts it most pungently to an interviewer who questions whether his photorealist practice is at base a mimetic one. He replies: "I'm not trying to imitate a photograph; I'm trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then, I am practicing photography by other means: I'm not producing paintings that remind you of a photograph but producing photographs . . . those of my paintings that have no photographic source . . . are also photographs" (73).

Ultimately, it is photography's jettisoning of indexicality as baggage that has enabled it to journey so easily into other medial spaces. Potentially true of all photographic representation, this point is exemplified with extreme force by the photo-form, since the high recognition quotient of the source image allows its aesthetic offspring to proliferate in protean ways while always remaining, like an Ariadne's thread, traceable back to source. Put differently, the photo-form retains what Barthes called the *ça a été* of the photographic image by other means. In this sense, the photo-form recalls Rosalind Krauss's point that "categories like sculpture and painting have been kneaded and stretched and twisted in an extraordinary demonstration of elasticity, a display of the way a cultural term can be extended to include just about anything" (1979, 30). If, as Krauss suggests, "mirrors placed at strange angles in ordinary rooms [and] temporary lines cut into the floor of the desert" (30) can be called sculpture, then that migration of the sculptural from marble, clay, or alabaster to other sites and substances is a process stepped up radically in the photo-form, which ranges far into the vernacular, amateur, and prosumer realms—zones that scholars of photographic representation have not really touched. These objects assert the capacity of the well-known photographic image—once repurposed—to become a node within convergence culture, a sign of heightened agency that arrests attention in an era when most photos do not even make it into hard copy.

To speak of singular images in this way is to stray close to the territory of the iconic photograph, a zone that I have so far skirted. This hesitancy comes in part from the fact that the epithet "iconic" has been deployed to the point of semiotic overkill, often when the term is not merited,[24] and from the varying fame of the images whose aesthetic offspring I explore here. A photograph such as Tank Man is rightly dubbed iconic and has a reach that has been global from the outset, even as it remains taboo in China; the Nanjing Massacre archive is well-nigh iconic within Chinese visual culture, but it took decades to

achieve this status, and its signature images command less traction elsewhere; and the Cultural Revolution images I discuss belong more to the category of the "significantly salient" image, to borrow Hariman and Lucaites's (2007, 7) phrase. In *No Caption Needed*, their study of the tiny group of standout photographs that make up the "American family album," Hariman and Lucaites offer a trenchant analysis of how such icons circulate in U.S. public culture. These photographs exert an ideologically centripetal force: they help to model liberal-democratic citizenship in postwar American society by cultivating "the habit of being benignly attentive toward strangers" (17). Hariman and Lucaites are up-front about the limits of their study: "We examine only U.S. domestic media, as that is what we know," and "it remains to be seen whether and how iconic photos operate in other national and transnational media environments" (7). Although they discuss repurposings of these images, dubbing them "appropriations," their focus remains the source photographs themselves as constitutive elements of public culture.[25]

By contrast, all the photographs I discuss here have pasts, not in public culture but in secrecy, however exposed to view their offspring may later become. They are twilight, penumbral images despite the impact they possess. As such, it is their "appropriations"—photo-forms—that carry out the core labor of political making. Unlike the Times Square Kiss and others (images with scant secret history), the movements these works perform are for the most part centrifugal in character, emerging in interstitial spaces—small vents in the veil of generalized secrecy—where they look and act like specters, rather than figures who encourage "the habit of being benignly attentive toward strangers." This is why the "expanded field" of the photographic is so crucial a conceptual frame for the photo-form within a culture that sequesters certain histories from spectatorship and debate. It is the medial elasticity identified by Krauss that allows the photo-form to shadowbox with the unsayable in China via its accessibility to untrained, non-professional makers of culture (chapter 2); its ability to assume inventively hybrid form, often coupling intuitively with new and emergent media (chapter 3); and its capacity to remain recognizable to the in-group even while it shape-shifts to conceal itself from outsiders (chapter 4). If secrecy is everywhere and yet nowhere, so too are its photo-form antagonists, as they mimic this ubiquity in muted, sub-radar apparitions that often cluster together in collectives of works that share the same source image. Inevitably, this is also why the photo-form is the tool of choice for the Chinese state when, as I discuss in chapter 1, it chooses to publicize its own secrets.

Ultimately, it is also this elasticity that gives the photo-form its edge over other cultural forms that seek to grapple with public secrecy. Over the

past quarter of a century, a limited range of literary, cinematic, and artistic works have attempted to speak the unspeakable in China, and it would be absurd to suggest that the photo-form is the only aesthetic artifact that can give eloquent voice to public secrets. Any work that trades in allegory or allusion is, evidently, well tooled for this task, since such forms—just like Holbein's *The Ambassadors*—rely on the parallel labors of encryption and decipherment: they work with and through secrets. The photo-form does, however, arrogate quite specific powers to itself. To an extent, these stem from its pictorial status: in situations of unsayability, the duty of articulating the forbidden often falls most heavily on makers of visual culture because their ability to show rather than tell gives them a deftness not vouchsafed to other cultural actors. The senses substitute for one another; the ocular stands in for the sound of forbidden syllables. But beyond this truism, the photo-form has a heightened potency because it can cut to the quick far more incisively than the intricate, often invisible devices of allegory. A film such as Stanley Kwan's *Lan Yu* 蓝宇 (2001) is well understood to be a metaphoric treatment of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, but as Michael Berry notes, state suppression was so felt a force for its filmmakers that "the massacre is left unaddressed to such a degree that viewers unfamiliar with June Fourth would be left wondering what had actually happened" (2008, 331–32). A republished photograph would, of course, eliminate such uncertainty; but it would also have to travel through a surveilled world without disguise and without the incitements to pensiveness that a remediated image offers. By contrast, a cartoon remake of Tank Man wears the camouflage necessary to slip past the censors, but its resemblance to the source image means that it never needs to surrender its instant recognizability—its shock value, on occasion. That resemblance also brings with it a faint echo of indexicality that allows the photo-form to leverage some of the truth claims still vaunted by the photographic image. Yet at the same time, the process of repurposing grafts layers of fresh meaning onto the image's photochemical base, compelling viewers to look closer. It is in this sense that the full force of the photo-form as an artifact both concealed and open, as mentioned earlier, comes into its own. Other kinds of text or image may seek and sometimes gain a reckoning with the unsayable, but photo-forms have clustered so densely around China's forbidden pasts because their dual nature, their capacity to hide while staying seen, enables them to meet the public secret on its own terms.

If photo-forms are prolix, so too are their practitioners. They work inside and outside China, for and against the state, and with varied viewers

in mind. In this book, I discuss or refer to works by the artists Zhang Xiaogang 张晓刚, Ai Weiwei, Xu Weixin 徐唯辛, Li Zijian 李自健, Zhang Huan 张洹, Chen Shaoxiong 陈绍雄, Sheng Qi 盛奇, Lily and Honglei, Feng Mengbo 冯梦波, and Song Dong 宋冬; the sculptor Sun Jiabo 孙家钵; the writer Liu Xinwu 刘心武; the photographers Hai Bo 海波, Song Yongping 宋永平, Li Wei 李暐, Zhang Dali 张大力, Shao Yinong 邵译农, and Mu Chen 慕辰; the filmmakers Hu Jie 胡杰, and Lu Chuan 陆川; and the cartoonists Crazy Crab, Badiucao 巴丢草, Jiu'an 鳩鹌, and Rebel Pepper. I also explore the work of graphic artists, reportage writers, journal editors, web archivists, political performance artists, videogame designers, and popular historians. Relatedly, I take the photo-form as a resonantly vernacular form and investigate how "amateur" essayists writing creatively for the first time (sometimes even for a scribe), schoolchildren working on homework assignments, and netizens on social media platforms have created photo-forms that repurpose historic photographs in improvisational, sometimes ephemeral ways. Finally, I look at "authorless" works—book covers, websites, printed T-shirts, and museum exhibits—whose creators are unattributed but whose remakings of these images often command the broadest spectatorship.

Photo-forms are, of course, found in many places and spaces. They constitute what Marlene Dumas (Coelewij 2014) calls the "image as burden," freighted with the load that all difficult histories steadily accrue—from Gerhard Richter's fifteen-picture cycle on the Baader-Meinhof photographs, *October 18, 1977*, to the avant-garde Holocaust installations by Nancy Spero, to Dumas's own photo-portraits of Osama bin Laden, to Don DeLillo and the various performance artists, documentarists, and grotesque GIF-makers who have worked with Richard Drew's photograph of a man falling from one of the Twin Towers in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Lego memes of the raising of flags at Iwojima are photo-forms, too, as are the bronze statues of Roosevelt and Churchill by Lawrence Holofcener, entitled *Allies* (1995), which sit on a bench on the corner of Old and New Bond Streets in London, their staging powerfully suggestive of the photographs taken at the Yalta Conference of 1945 (figure I.3). To suggest that such works exist in greater profusion, and bear a greater load, in places where public secrecy reigns is doubtless an empirically unprovable claim, however intuitively plausible it may be. Yet the photo-forms that grapple with China's missing histories are so legion that they point clearly to the intimate relationship this category of objects sustains with the unsayable. These works exist as viral aesthetic responses to a climate of public secrecy about the past that steeps the Chinese present yet has itself not been outright named as such.

FIGURE 1.3 Lawrence Holofcener, *Allies*, 1995. Stalin is forced to cede his seat at the Yalta Conference, creating an empty berth for map-toting tourists.

Spirited Images

To make this argument is to countermand a more obvious one: that of memory. At first, it seems perverse to suggest that photo-forms could betoken anything more powerfully than they do the transgenerational *aide-mémoire*. After all, works that repurpose well-known historical photographs generate an intricately textured sense of time for the simple reason that their source images whisper of so many different pasts. Any such photograph is at once a trace of that "real" moment in history caught in the viewfinder; a historical actor in its own right, which over the years is reproduced, circulated, consumed, or hidden; a piece of photographic history, taken with a particular camera, using particular film stock, and following particular genre conventions; and an artifact that can sometimes wear its age and experience so visibly that it comes to possess an archaeological history unto itself.[26] To these layered, crosscut temporalities is added the time of repurposing, or rather the viewer's recognition of that moment when the photochemical image was elided with a different kind of material support. Writing of phototextuality, Liliane Louvel argues

that the transition of the image onto the literary page constitutes a particular kind of "phenomenological event," one that she dubs the "pictorial third": ". . . a visual movement produced in the viewer-reader's mind by the passage between the two media . . . In between word and image, in the mind's eye or on its interior screen, the 'pictorial third' is more present when the image figures in the text and when it is a photograph, thought to be closer to extratextual reality" (2008, 45). This time of remediation, amplified by photography's proximity to "extratextual reality," arguably turns up the volume of the past still higher.

From this, it is no great step to identify the photo-form as a deft tool for the grafting of memory. Such works surge with sentience of the past, as these registers reverberate against one another to produce a sonorous sense of asymmetrical time. If, as Jacques Rancière (2011, 107–32) argues, photographic images can be "pensive" via the indeterminacy between aesthetic and social meaning they conjure, the photo-form summons a rich chronological indeterminacy, evoking pasts both experiential and inexperiential for the spectator. Invoking history *in* the image, history *of* the image, and history *as* the image, photo-forms insinuate themselves into memory, especially among the later-born, who are separated from the photograph's primal scene. We might suggest, then, that the photo-form belongs within the aesthetic repertoire of prosthetic memory, postmemory, belated remembrance, and vicarious witnessing, concepts that have been elaborated by scholars such as Alison Landsberg, Marianne Hirsch, James Young, and Froma Zeitlin in their work on the Holocaust.[27]

Yet as they are made material, in the very action of remediation, photo-forms often unsettle or traduce the transgenerational memory project. *Allies*, Holofcener's aforementioned sculptural monument to the postwar settlement, shows this process writ large. Roosevelt and Churchill sit at opposite ends of the bench, from where they converse amiably with each other over a space large enough to accommodate a tourist in search of a photo opportunity with the mediators of peace. The work's meanings are fluid: the space between is filled and then vacated by different people over time, turning the bench, worn and faded with all their sittings, into an active memorial. That space, though, is not neutral in its emptiness. It also marks an instance of excision, of Photoshopping by sculptural means: Stalin, present at the Yalta Conference and its photographs, is missing from the bench, ghosted by the London monument to peace. Stalin's absence goes unmentioned in discussions of the monument, which becomes, without him, a memorial to transatlantic amity rather than to the negotiations that decided the shape of postwar, then Cold War,

FIGURE 1.4 Yalta Monument, 2015. Stalin stages his supersized return on Crimean soil.

Europe. Yet anyone who has seen the Yalta photographs cannot help but sense Stalin's wraith hovering over the bench—indeed, that apparition is actively encouraged into presence by the voided seat between Churchill and Roosevelt. Stalin's failure to make it into bronze, presumably a political response to the long-term controversy of Yalta and its soured legacy, thus has something of the open secret about it: both evident and ignored in equal measure. In 2015, Russia unveiled its own repurposing of the "Big Three" photographs to mark the seventieth anniversary of Yalta, a ten-ton bronze sculpture by court artist Zurab Tsereteli, which not only reinserts Stalin but depicts the dictator as ten centimeters taller than his counterparts (he was a full twenty-three centimeters shorter than Roosevelt, by most accounts), as if in material compensation for his rubbing out elsewhere (figure 1.4).[28]

The Yalta statues—all of them—are commemorative objects, of course. But they also show how photo-forms, via the step change they make from one medium to another, open up spaces in which public secrecy—the marker of memory's limits as a paradigm—can be registered, at least for those who know the Yalta photographs and so see the elephant squatting soundlessly in the middle of the bench. For these spectators, the statues are indeed *prima facie* artifacts of memorial, but ones that also commemorate the "how" of memory's

failure to make it into the present, via the visual idiom that they imagine for the conspiratorial silences of the public secret. I referred to this visual idiom just now as the elephant in the room. This usage, though, is arguably malapropos, because what the Yalta statues suggest is not a surfeit of visibility, quixotically ignored, but rather a purchase on the seeable that flickers in and out and thus is better understood in the language of the ghost. Yet spectrality is mostly missing from Western discourses on public secrecy, which prefer to figure this taboo in terms of visual excess: the naked emperor; the elephant in the room; the three monkeys who see, hear, and speak no evil. According to this imagistic logic, that which cannot be uttered aloud compensates for its unsayability by becoming seeable in the extreme, as if to throw into relief the quasi-comic absurdity of silence. But is this really how the public secret works, most particularly in environments where breaking into voice can carry hard political penalties? If, as is the case in such places, the most fundamental labor of the public secret is to make woefully egregious things—trauma and violence—"disappear," then the specter, as something often banished but difficult to exorcise, is its far more apposite anointed symbol.

This, then, is the final core claim I make here: that in nations that deploy the protocols of disavowal, the ghost is an abiding trope for that which is "generally known, but cannot be articulated." To invoke spectrality in this way is a move that must be cautious, since the use of the revenant as a conceptual metaphor has swelled to almost catch-all dimensions in recent years as researchers have grappled with historical erasure across the matrices of race, class, and gender. The ghost may not quite have become "a meta-concept that comes to possess virtually everything" (Blanco and Peeren 2013, 14), but it has certainly been stretched close to the limits of reasonable utility. If, as Martin Jay notes, "the past makes cultural demands on us we have difficulty fulfilling" (1998, 163–64), we might press his point further to suggest that scholars now see apparitions around every corner because the specter is so ready a way of acknowledging these demands without getting around to satisfying them. It is the business of wraiths, after all, to elude our grasp. Yet spectrality remains critically underexplored as a conceptual metaphor outside Euro-America, despite the fact that its contours often emerge with renewed force and clarity in the "non-West." A core site for the investigation of such underexamined "spectropolitics" is China, a society that is shadowed by "mutually imbricated sets of spectral apparitions," as the ghosts of communism lurk in the "vestigial socialist institutions" of the capitalist present (Rojas 2016, 3, 12). What's more, these "spectral apparitions" are tightly bound to public secrecy: indeed, what secret is more spectacularly "out there" than the fact that the CCP, ruled by the

progeny of the Long Marchers, now presides over the world's most rampant capitalist economy?

Indeed, this recurrence of the ghost as core conceptual metaphor for public secrecy in China is so fitting that its relative absence in other contexts starts to seem strange. Like the ghost, the public secret is a thing that hovers between the visible and the occluded, the known and the unsayable. Just as we understand that ghosts are figments of our fancy but sense their force anyway, so do we know that public secrets exist all too brazenly but feel compelled to speak no evil. Both are entities that hide in plain sight, whose power impinges forcefully on political life even though it is nominally dismissed. What's more, both have a steadfast character: the public secret has nothing much to fear from revelation, nor does the specter need to quail before the exorcist, for the simple reason that both are necessary for society's functioning. Just as shared secrets form "the basis of our social institutions, the workplace, the market, the family, and the state" (Taussig 1999, 3), so do vestiges from the past that cannot be buried return again and again to remind those institutions of the duty they owe, and yet often betray, to the demands of justice. In this sense, the public secret and the specter are hostile *doppelgängers*, similar in their operations yet antithetical to one another, moving in gestures of feint and counterfeint in their parallel spaces. It is for this reason that cultural practices that seek to aggravate the public secret can productively take on the lineaments of the spectral to do so.

Yet how can we trace these lineaments when public secrecy remains so discursively elusive in China? Ghosted from open discourse, public secrecy has become displaced into the realm of the visual, where its apparitions give recharged meaning to the adage "a picture is worth a thousand words." And within the realm of the visual, the constant pull of cultural makers toward the historic photograph—an image-making practice that has itself always been tinged by haunting—helps invest their works about the unsayable with spectral force. In short, there is nothing accidental about the prevalence of the photo-form as a representational mode for modern China's disappeared histories. Photo-forms are natural-born responses to histories that have been ghosted by silence, thanks to the evocative shorthand that takes us from the black-and-white photochemical image straight back to the phantom. Photography, after all, is always already spectral, from stealing souls to spirit photography to Barthes's chronicle of a death foretold and Sontag's characteristically unforgiving point that "to take a photograph is to participate in another person's . . . mortality" (1979, 15). This relationship is encoded into the very language of photography in China, as Carlos Rojas notes: the term "*zhaoxiang*" 照相 (to

take a photograph) is "a synthesis of two more specific terms that have largely fallen out of use: *xiaozhao* 小照, or portraits of living subjects, and *yingxiang* 影像, or portraits of the deceased" (2009, 208).[29] Rather like its much-debunked but still loyal attachment to the referent, a photograph of the dead or disappeared retains the gift of haunting, even in these jaded days. As Marianne Hirsch puts it, "the referent haunts the picture like a ghost; it is a revenant, a return of the lost and dead other" (1997, 5).

The status of the photo-form as a *repurposed* photograph, an object that transitions from one medium to another, spectralizes these works further. In part, this is because photo-forms—as image-works that are not photography *per se* even though they are spawned from it—summon up the ghost as a double who dwells in the interstices: between spaces, between mediums.[30] As works that bear a strong but often twisted resemblance to their source image, photo-forms serve as aesthetic emblems for this in-betweenness and its spectral possibilities. They also evoke the link between intermediality and the spirit medium, because the repurposed image is always possessed by its original, whose "soul" it channels: the remake as dead ringer. Most significant, though, is the potential for warping the source image into something yet more uncanny that the process of aesthetic repurposing opens up—possibilities so rich that it is hard to find a photo-form about ghosted histories that does not exploit the visual idioms of haunting. As a conceptual metaphor for what is unsayable about the past, ghostliness coheres around a set of image vocabularies, a spectral lexicon that articulates itself through color, substrate, artistic techniques, and genre choices.

Thus photo-forms tend to adopt a grayscale palette, partly as a nod to their origins in black-and-white photography but also to display wraiths who subsist without corporeal form. When color asserts itself, it does so via sanguinary reds, as in Sheng Qi's canvasses of Tank Man at Tiananmen, which are awash with blood, or the popular histories of the Nanjing Massacre whose pages are steeped in red ink. Photo-forms also speak their ghostliness by means of their medial substrate (Zhang Huan remakes historic photographs in ash); through the aesthetic techniques they use (Chen Shaoxiong favors chiaroscuro ink animation, Xu Weixin deploys photorealist blur); and via the genres, platforms, and sites in which they are lodged (photo-altars, online cemeteries, burial sites). Missing body parts haunt these occult works (Song Yongping repaints his parents' wedding portrait in charcoal and cuts out their heads, Lily and Honglei "dismember" Tank Man, Li Wei "decapitates" himself using a specially designed mirror, Sheng Qi slices off his finger and makes his palm, haunted by that mutilation, the subject of the image). Photo-forms also bare the scars

of the past, whether via the eerie blotches that sear faces in Zhang Xiaogang's *Bloodline* series (*Xueyuan: dajiating xilie* 血缘: 大家庭系列) or in the battered family portraits that inspire the photo-essays I explore in chapter 3. The works I discuss here are preoccupied in equal measure by the *doppelgänger*, who leaps out unbidden when she or he should not (see the work of Zhang Dali), and by the "disappeared," who are forcibly deleted (see Hai Bo's photographic series with its trademark missing subjects).

Yet beyond these figural links, it is also the question of justice that makes spectrality the default visual language of works that try to grapple with China's silenced histories. In part, this is a response to the demands of mourning and it occurs most acutely in the works discussed in chapters 2 and 3, which speak to the unjust loss of loved ones. But the justice of the ghost is also—more so—about the lives of the living. Writing about the Cultural Revolution, Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik refers to "the means that made life after the event possible with people from different factions sitting side by side in one office" (2006, 1089). She argues that people managed this daily fraughtness by forming fragmented memory groups, discussing the past only with fellow carriers who shared the same databank of recall. But rather than a mechanism for memory, what is this if not a form of necessary and palliative public secrecy? In this sense, the project of theorizing the unsayable in contemporary China has to address this force not only as dysfunction and suppression but also as a functional mode of repair, if not actual redress. Ghostly figures recur in photo-forms because their in-betweenness gets the measure of this labile character of public secrecy. Like the ghost, secrets sometimes hide in the open because they have to, even though the burden of never saying can cost their keepers dearly.

Haunting is key to public secrecy, and to the artworks that register it, because ghosts, however angry they are, need sometimes to be denied: we can either choose not to see them or simply profess disbelief. As reminders of pasts that cannot be owned, their unobtrusive shape befits the limitations within which they operate. Photo-forms deploy spectrality as a language because they shadowbox circumspectly with public secrecy rather than attempt exposure or confrontation. This is the justice that is owed to survivors and the weight of the unforgettable-unsayable under which they struggle. In keeping with this, the specter also serves as a figure of the future: as Avery Gordon writes, "from a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope . . . it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory *out of a concern for justice*" (1997, 64; emphasis in the original). Here, "spectrality" refers to an alternative

history that is denied to the present but might yet find realization in a world to come. This sense of the road not traveled is never better illustrated than in the Tank Man image, whose iconography is not just about the Manichean standoff on Chang'an Road, but the political choice that opens up as a fork in the highway and that always carries the possibility of reversal.

Finally, it is because of this always imminent reversal that spectrality in these works is also about repetition. As David Der-Wei Wang has noted, a core motif of the classical Chinese ghost tale is the spirit who appears, and reappears, at times of chaos in the empire to mingle with the world of men, dwelling in "the hiatus between the dead and the living . . . the unthinkable and the admissible" (2004, 262–63). Makers of culture in China circuit back again and again to the historical photographs I discuss here because those images both mark the moment of chaos and register the injustice of the inadmissibility that now surrounds it. As artist Sheng Qi put it to me, "Tank Man has been blocked, he has been disappeared . . . so I paint him again and again" (personal communication, 2017). Indeed, a culture—a cult—of reiteration exists around the photo-form and occurs both within the work of individual artists and across informal groupings, as shown in chapters 3 and 4. These repetitions ask to be interpreted in terms of a coalition of solidarity; but they must also be understood as spectral returns. As projects of justice, photo-forms use ghostly figures to register loss, anger, remonstrance, and hope. But photo-forms also function as revenants themselves, remaking the same images because they speak of the things so many know and that are too momentous to be permanently hushed.

Reading Public Secrecy

To flesh out these ideas in depth, this book is divided into five chapters, each of which explores public secrecy in its different but overlapping variants. Chapter 1, "Don't Look Now," focuses on the Nanjing Massacre and its infamous photographic record of beheaded men and violated women to show that the operations of public secrecy in reform-era China reach deep into the traumatic past. As signifiers of national cataclysm, these images of atrocity have a certain ubiquity in China today, where they constitute the heart and soul of patriotic discourse. Indeed, their prominence is such that it is easy to forget that these stills of rape and murder were sequestered state artifacts for decades. Yet in the mid-1990s, and in response to the turmoil that followed the crackdown at Tiananmen, photographs of these atrocities were released and briskly circulated, first via commemorative albums and then in popular

histories, exhibitionary culture, websites, films, paintings, reportage, graphic art, and videogames. The chapter explores how these photo-forms have spread the once-was-secret far and wide, mostly by repurposing the same core cache of ultra-violent images. Over time, these photo-forms have codified Massacre memorial into a fixed visual language, an ocular shorthand, a set of logos even, designed to embed a synaptic set of patriotic responses. Whatever their stated purpose, I show that these photo-forms have inaugurated new modes of public secrecy. Retooling grotesque perpetrator images as nationalistic propaganda (often displayed to children), these photo-forms confine the Massacre—whose trauma will always confound stark visual reckoning—to a continuing place of interdiction and the unsayable.

Arguably predominant among China's so-called amnesiac histories is the Cultural Revolution. Chapter 2, "Keeping It in the Family," takes this period as its focus and explores the genre of the family portrait, a form of image-making instantly recognizable for people who lived through those times. Taken at moments of emotional significance—before parting, at reunions—these precious images were often hidden away during the Cultural Revolution. But in the mid-1980s, a pioneering set of essays by the writer Liu Xinwu, in which he married family portraits to words, broke their cover. This new genre of photo-text went on to inspire the hugely popular pictorial *Old Photographs*, in whose pages amateur writers, with no training, connections, or reputation, used family portraits to share secrets about their Cultural Revolution experience, effectively under the radar. These photo-texts are poignantly spectral, deploying a visual language that plies the hinge between physical scarring and ghostliness. Their hauntedness touched many of China's leading artists, who were drawn repeatedly to the same portraits from the mid-1990s onward. Their works seek a visual idiom for the most taboo core of Cultural Revolution experience: the public secret that the ongoing absence of a full societal reckoning about those events serves multiple constituencies in Chinese society—not just the state, but also those citizens and their family members who acted back then in ways that they now prefer to disavow.

Public secrecy about the Cultural Revolution takes different form in chapter 3, "Cracking the Ice." There I trace the journeys of a singular photograph: the portrait of Bian Zhongyun 卞仲云, the vice-principal of the Girls Middle School attached to Beijing Normal University, who was beaten to death on August 5, 1966, by her Red Guard pupils. For decades, Bian's portrait was hidden behind a false-fronted bookcase in her widower's apartment. But since the millennium, that once-secret portrait has been repurposed repeatedly, and to the point of real fame, across varied aesthetic media. I argue that the makers

of these photo-forms have tried to apply lateral pressure on the larger public secret about the identity of Bian's killers and their likely connections with China's top leadership. Their purpose is not to "out" the guilty; rather, these photo-forms aspire to revelation and induct their spectators into an encounter with the dead that is numinous in its spectrality. By chance or otherwise, the work of this collective coincided with increasingly public reflection by Red Guards from Bian's school about the events of 1966. These reached a climax in 2014, when several former pupils bowed in apology before a bronze bust modeled on Bian's photograph. Their contrition met a mixed response, but it also forced a crack in the ice of public secrecy that surrounds the most sensitive aspects of the Red Guard legacy today.

Chapter 4, "Ducking the Firewall," turns to the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown and explores the aesthetic afterlives of the Tank Man photograph, über-emblem of citizen dissent. Tank Man is a famously *verboten* image in China, so strictly "disappeared" from public view that many claim he has been forgotten by the citizens of the "People's Republic of Amnesia." In this chapter I argue, to the contrary, that Tank Man exemplifies the public secret as a form of surreptitious intergenerational split. The image sunders Chinese people of a certain age, who have a retinal imprint of that encounter between man and tank, from younger people who have scant awareness of the photograph and the crushed protests it emblematizes. Tank Man constitutes a form of consensual silence whose tensions are heightened by the fact that the in-group and the out-group are constituted horizontally across society, across families. Since the millennium, however, Tank Man has been repurposed with increasing inventiveness by digital artists working inside and outside China. These works are harried by the censors, with the result that their audiences are small and short-lived. Man and tank must shape-shift to avoid detection, which they do in ways both comic and spectral. But precisely because of their fugitive character—which produces audiences who are alert, amused, and on the *qui vive*—these photo-forms ensure that Tank Man remains the grit in the clam of public secrecy about 1989.

The book's conclusion, "Out of the Darkroom," opens with a discussion of what may be China's most telling treatment of the relationship between public secrecy and the photographic image: Zhang Dali's *A Second History* (*Di er lishi* 第二历史, 2012). In this archival tour de force, Zhang presents a sequence of paired images to show how the Chinese state systematically doctored the most iconic photographs of the Communist revolution in its party-run photo labs: removing political enemies, rejuvenating the faces of ancient leaders, retouching discordant details. Displaying the manipulated images in panels alongside

their originals, which he unearthed through ardent detective work, Zhang shows how tight the relationship has been between photography and the clandestine in modern China. In this coda to the book, I use his work to reflect on why the photographic image has served as the persistent base for engagements with the openly unsayable. In part, this is because of the medium's origins in the darkroom, which is both a "chamber of secrets" and the place where those secrets are lifted from the acid into clarity. But Zhang's discoveries about how extraordinarily public images enacted extraordinarily blatant cover-ups also show that public secrecy is so pervasive because it serves deep public needs. At the same time, the series also exemplifies the powers photo-forms possess to generate coalitions of makers and spectators, contingent spaces in which the unsayable can find its voice.

Notes

PREFACE

1 *Negatives* was first published by New Century Press in Hong Kong, a small and controversial press that specializes in works about Chinese politics. The book was banned in China but then republished by the German art press Verlag Kettler.

2 See, for example, Lee 2015; and Wei 2016.

INTRODUCTION

1 When asked, my Chinese colleagues and friends are ready to improvise translations of the term (examples are *zhouzhi de mimi* 周知的秘密, *gongkai mimi* 公开秘密, *bu neng shuo de mimi* 不能说的秘密, *gongzhong mimi* 公众秘密, and *gonggong mimi* 公共秘密), but they also issue reminders that the concept lacks theoretical traction in China, however keenly its muting effects are sensed.

2 An exception in cultural studies is the spy thriller, a film and novelistic genre that thrived during the Maoist period and offers oblique insights into China's security climate. See Dai 2010.

3 It should be noted, though, that commentary outside China on the social credit system is sometimes inflammatory in its eagerness to ascribe entirely sinister powers to this emergent mode of governance. For a critique of this tendency, see Daum 2017. Daum is right to point out that the notion of trust—building it, keeping it—lies at the core of the social credit system; but it may also be the case that this system, over time, will breed a greater sense of vigilance over individual speech acts.

4 The text of the Rumsfeld briefing is available online: "DoD News Briefing—Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers," news transcript, U.S. Department of Defence, February 12, 2002, http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636/.

5 Earlier studies that dealt with public secrecy tended to focus on sexuality, the closet, and the silent accommodations reached by those who do not declare their sexual identities within their familial and social circles. See, for example, Barbara Ponse's (1976) discussion of "counterfeit sexuality" in lesbian lives.

6 See, for example, Bratich 2006; Mookherjee 2006; and A. Young 2011.

7 Braester argues that certain characters in post-Tiananmen fiction participate in a failure to recall the past that is "playful, noncommittal, but perhaps the only way to cope with an absurd reality" (2016, 442).

8 See, for example, Yang 2002; Braester 2003; B. Wang 2004; and Berry 2008.

9 Some exceptions to this rule, several of which predate the growth of secrecy studies as a defined field, can be found in the fields of literary and visual studies. Examples include Kermode 1979; Long 2004; François 2008; Pionke and Millstein 2010; Nair 2012; and McCall, Roberts, and Fiorenza 2013.

10 Belinda Kong calls this the "hermeneutics of evasion": the strategies of "metaphor or metonymy, catachresis or ellipses" that artist-activists use to engage the secret-keeping society on its own terms (2012, 27).

11 Unsurprisingly, little has changed during the reform and postreform periods. As Geremie Barmé puts it, "the atmospherics of plots and conspiracies are still central to the way that the CCP channels and responds to the specters of the past . . . to this day its internal protocol and behavior recall all too frequently its long history as a covert, highly secretive, and faction-ridden organization" (2012, 31).

12 As Zi Hui 子慧 notes, "almost overnight these fusty, pock-marked old photographs were ubiquitous right across the publishing world" (1998, 33).

13 This notion that "old photos" reveal folk-oriented microhistories is well established. Zhao Jingrong 赵静蓉 argues that the images most commonly anthologized "record the daily life, fashions, folk customs, marriage ceremonies, and funeral rites of ordinary people in China's towns and cities" (2005, 14). Photographs depicting "major historical events, historical figures, or historical scenes" are scant by contrast, because the "old photo" vogue is a reaction against "standard history" (*zhengshi* 正史) (14).

14 See Zhongyang dang'anguan 中央档案馆, Zhongguo di er lishi dang'anguan 中国第二历史档案馆, and Jilinsheng shehui kexueyuan 吉林省社会科学院 1995.

15 An exhaustive list of these would run to several pages, but examples include Cao Juren 曹聚仁 and Shu Zongqiao 舒宗侨 2011; Feng Tianyu 冯天瑜 and Zhang Duqin 张笃勤 2011; and Liu Ni 刘妮 2012. As Edward Krebs notes, "a comparison of books published today with those of ten years ago would surely reveal a great increase in the use of illustrations, especially photographs" (2004, 88–89).

16 Key examples include the essays by Yomi Braester, Andrew F. Jones, and Nicole Huang in a special issue of *positions: asia critique* 18, no. 3 (2010); those by James Hevia (2009) and Carlos Rojas (2009); and the book-length studies by Claire Roberts (2012) and Wu Hung (2016).

17 A vivid example of this came with the publication in 2017 of a photobook by Wang Qiuhang 王秋航 entitled *1966–1976 Wo de zipaixiang* 我的自拍像

(*Cultural Revolution Selfies*), which showed long-hidden images of the author-photographer drinking, gambling, and dressing up in bourgeois outfits during the austere peak of Maoist revolution.

18 As James Gao has argued, photography in China has "become an important terrain for the cultural representation of aspects of China's social suffering: famines, war atrocity, the Cultural Revolution and the 'pathology of modernity'" (2011, 100).

19 This is Zhao Jingrong's point when she notes that "as far as the more established social pattern of using script-based means to record the past is concerned, the (photographic) vogue marks a turning-point: people have begun to 'read images' as a means of understanding history afresh" (2005, 15).

20 In part, the origins of this photographic blackout can be traced back to the pre-Communist period. Hard-hitting photojournalism took longer to establish itself as a professional calling in China, and the first photographers to shoot social suffering in China were Westerners, whose images of victims were usually shipped home for domestic publication. Chinese cameramen, meanwhile, dedicated most of their efforts to artistic portraits and to recording exuberant urban life. This dearth of tough image-making was not just a matter of custom, however. Almost as soon as important Republican-era photographers began to claim photojournalism as a *métier*, the Nationalist government clamped down on photography that revealed social malaise. It was only during the Sino-Japanese War that cameramen such as Sha Fei 沙飞, Sun Mingjing 孙明经, and Wang Xiaoting 王小亭 could practice their craft in earnest. The Communist takeover, however, put new strictures on vanguard photojournalism of this kind.

21 As Claire Roberts notes, "photographs of Mao Zedong and other Communist officials were taken as they admired 'bumper harvests' during the Great Famine, but few images have come to light that record the devastating reality that gripped much of China during the period" (2013, 108).

22 For example, a pictorial history of the Nanjing Massacre, melding text with photographs of atrocity, arguably reproduces those images rather than repurposes them; yet this assumption comes under threat with genres such as the photomemoir in China, which illustrates Liliane Louvel's point that the text "'illustrates' the photograph and not the other way around," leaving both transfigured (2008, 38–39).

23 See, for example, Beckman and Ma 2008; Hughes and Noble 2003; Bryant 1996; Marcoci 2010; and Jacobs 2006.

24 David Perlmutter (1998, 11–20) offers a useful set of definitional criteria for the icon, enumerating these as the celebrity status of the photograph, the prominence of its display, the quantitative frequency of its media appearances, the profit it can engender, the importance of the event it depicts, its ability to generate a resonant theme that exceeds the referential meaning of that event, and its striking composition.

25 As they put it, "forms of appropriations are a crucial sign of iconicity, and more so than we realized at first" (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 37), a recognition

whose belatedness plays out practically in the more limited attention that the study gives to photo-forms.

26 An example is the infamous photograph of a baby wailing on the tracks at Shanghai South Railway Station in the aftershock of Japanese aerial bombardment, taken by "Newsreel" Wong, or Wang Xiaoting, in 1937. That picture is, on one level, a testament to the barbarism of the Japanese. But Wong's image also acquired an energetic life history of its own: it traveled to the U.S. and was exhibited in movie theaters, printed in newspapers, and featured in *Life* magazine, reportedly picking up 126 million viewers along the way (n.a. 1937, 102). This exposure embarrassed Japanese nationalists, who put a price on Wong's head and have periodically attempted to discredit the photograph as a fake (Higashinakano, Kobayashi, and Fukunaga 2005, 79–81)—efforts that remind us of the image's place within a more expressly photographic history. Is it genuine photojournalism or a ramped-up propaganda shot? Is it significant for the look of the image that Wong used a Leica camera, with its pinpoint-sharp glassware that enhances the camera's already "perverse noticingness" (Malcolm 1989, 89), to create an image of remarkable recessional depth and detail? And what of the patina of the photograph as viewers today most often see it, reproduced and reproduced again so that its once spruce contours blur?

27 See Landsberg 2004; Hirsch 2012; Zeitlin 1998; and Young 2000. Behind all of this is the notion of false memory creation; as Linda Haverty Rugg puts it, "the line between memory and photographs blurs, with photographic-era children uncertain as to whether their memories of childhood are memories of events they witnessed or photographs they have seen" (1997, 23). In a psychiatric study from 2002, Wade et al. corroborate this point, noting that photographs provide a cognitive "springboard" (598) that can generate "memories" of unexperienced events.

28 The statues were cast a decade earlier, but protests from Crimean Tatars, many of whom were persecuted by Stalin, prevented the work from being exhibited in Yalta itself until Russia's seizure of the peninsula from Ukraine in 2014 finally led to its public display.

29 For photographic nomenclature in China, see also Gu Yi 2013.

30 This clearly evokes Derrida's (1994, 10) much-referenced idea of hauntology as the bane of ontological surety, since re-versioning performs the fluidity of medial states.

CHAPTER 1. DON'T LOOK NOW

1 See, for example, Yin Jijun 尹集钧 and Shi Yong 史咏 1999; Zhu Chengshan 2002b; Qinhua Rijun Nanjing datusha yunan tongbao jinianguan 侵华日军南京大屠杀遇难同胞纪念馆2005; Zhang Xianwen 张宪文2006; and an updated edition of *A Photographic Catalogue of the Nanjing Massacre*, published in 2015.

2 Significantly, Number Two China Historical Archives, Nanjing Municipal Archives, and the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall did produce an earlier