

Jeremy Brown, original pre-publication draft

Louisa Lim

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF AMNESIA

Tiananmen Revisited

288 pp. Oxford University Press. Paperback, £10.99

978 0 19 022791 3

At first, the Chinese Communist Party openly celebrated its violent suppression of what it called the “counterrevolutionary rebellion” of June 1989. Then it switched course and tried to make everyone forget that the military had opened fire on unarmed protesters. According to journalist Louisa Lim, censorship has been so effective that young people ignore the Beijing massacre “not because it is a politically sensitive topic or because it makes them uncomfortable. It simply does not register”. In what she acknowledges was a “crude experiment”, Lim showed the iconic “Tank Man” photograph to university students. One student thought that the image depicted Kosovo; another guessed that it came from Korea. Only 15 out of 100 admitted that they recognised the scene.

Lim explores the legacy of Tiananmen Square through portraits of individuals. Five of them had their lives drastically thrown off course in 1989: a military photographer who later became an edgy artist; a man so shaken by his time in prison that he never eats (he survives on milk alone); an exiled student leader; the mother of a student who was killed on June Fourth; and a deposed official. Lim also profiles two young men who know little about 1989 but whose futures have been shaped by China's direction since then. One is an ambitious job seeker hoping to join the Communist Party, the other is a confused nationalist affected by patriotic propaganda.

The book's final chapter uncovers the bloody and largely unknown crackdown against protesters in Chengdu, a city in southwest China that erupted in rage after residents learned about the Beijing massacre. The story of Chengdu does not fit with Lim's overall structure or her emphasis on the legacy of 1989, but it is the book's most original contribution. Lim's long-term residence in China as a correspondent for the BBC and NPR made it possible for her to earn her interviewees' trust and to elegantly depict their experiences since 1989. I can imagine top Communist Party officials in Beijing being annoyed by these human portraits. Lim's detective work about Chengdu, however, could do something more dangerous: surprise them.

Jeremy Brown