REVIEW — Books: The Great Forgetting

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By Benjamin L. Read

The People's Republic of Amnesia

By Louisa Lim

Oxford, 248 pages, $24.95

Tiananmen Exiles

By Rowena Xiaoqing He

Palgrave Macmillan, 212 pages, $29

A quarter-century has passed since the 1989 movement that shook Beijing and almost brought down the ruling Chinese Communist Party. Yet the passage of time has not necessarily made it easier to grasp the full dimension of the six weeks of protests around the country and the brutal suppression that began on June 3.

The university students who formed the backbone of the movement are now well into their mid-40s, and many Tiananmen veterans have published memoirs. Yet the supremely photogenic and emotionally stirring movement lends itself more to romanticization than clear-headed analysis.

More daunting is the vacuum that surrounds the topic in the country where it occurred. The Chinese authorities have been remarkably successful in blotting out the public memory of the events, in propagating misinformation about the movement and in supplanting the protesters' regime-challenging, pro-democracy nationalism with a populist, regime-supporting, xenophobic nationalism. Within China today, large numbers of people are wholly ignorant or only dimly aware of what happened in 1989.

In "The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited," Louisa Lim visits four of Beijing's top universities and confronts students with the iconic photograph of "Tank Man," the lone, anonymous figure who blocked a column of tanks in central Beijing in defiance of the crackdown. "Out of 100 students" in her furtive survey, she writes, "15 correctly identified the picture."

It is common in China to deny that any atrocity happened at all. In "Tiananmen Exiles: Voices of the Struggle for Democracy in China," Rowena Xiaoqing He describes young people insisting that "no killing ever took place," that "the massacre was just a story that had been 'made up' by the Americans" or that if anything took place it was "a CIA conspiracy."

Others justify the June 4 massacre in ways that parallel the government's position. Jack Ma, the founder of Alibaba, the e-commerce giant with an upcoming IPO, said last year that Deng Xiaoping's unleashing of the People's Liberation Army on the demonstrators was a "cruel" but "correct decision." This sentiment is commonly heard in private homes in China, and Ms. Lim's campus conversations confirm that the younger generation has internalized the party line.

Both of these books grapple with this poverty of accountability and its implications. Ms. Lim, an NPR correspondent, presents a sequence of sensitive, skillfully drawn portraits of individuals whose lives were changed by 1989. Her first chapter nimbly reverses the usual perspective by profiling Chen Guang, who as a frightened 17-year-old soldier participated in the clearing of Tiananmen Square. He is now an artist obsessed with painting images related to the trauma -- including renderings of the souvenir watch given to all the troops who helped impose martial law. We meet Zhang Ming, one of the student leaders who suffered prison and torture. (Force-fed milk while on a hunger strike, he now shuns solid food and maintains an all-milk diet.) He dabbles in business projects, focuses on raising his young children and refrains from political entanglements. He finds hope in the gradual evolution of the party and the rise of its newest cohort of technocratic leaders.

Ms. Lim visits the homes of two women who lost teenage sons to the massacre and coped with their grief by founding Tiananmen Mothers. Despite heavy pressure from the state, this organization has compiled a roster of the crackdown's victims and demanded compensation. She drops in on the brashest movement leader, Wu'er Kaixi, who fled China after the demonstrations and has had a checkered career. Under the eyes of a government surveillance team, Ms. Lim chats at a Beijing McDonald's with octogenarian Bao Tong, a former mainstay of the Communist Party's reformist faction and the highest-ranking official who served jail time after the crackdown. These portraits show us how the party tightly constrains those who defy it, but they also depict determined resistance and even suggest an optimism among those most directly affected by the events of 1989.

China is today a society mesmerized by wealth, and the post-Tiananmen generation is bent on getting ahead. Ms. Lim profiles a college student who has abandoned political questioning in favor of faith in the party and a 32-year-old used-car dealer who joins a rowdy but state-approved demonstration outside the Japanese embassy during tensions over the Senkaku Islands. These are by far the more typical Chinese citizens, products of the shackled educational system and filtered media environment. Incuriosity and indifference to historical truth abound in a China that sees itself as hurtling toward the future.

The "Great Forgetting," as Ms. Lim terms it, started, of course, with the coercion of the state, its carrots and sticks, and its vast manipulation of information, from editing textbooks to censoring the Web. But she discerns secondary factors as well. Parents shield children from their own firsthand knowledge of what happened. She notes that Mr. Zhang -- once No. 19 on the government's most-wanted list -- never brings up the movement with his younger wife. She and her friends have no interest in it. "The reason they do not like to talk about 1989 is not because it is a politically sensitive topic or because it makes them uncomfortable. It simply does not register."

An undercurrent of outrage animates the "The People's Republic of Amnesia." Ms. Lim is incensed that "the people themselves have colluded in this amnesia and embraced it." She confronts, for instance, a woman she meets at the daily dawn flag-raising ceremony in Tiananmen Square, asking whether she knew about the violence that had been wreaked along the avenue leading to that very spot. "Her face fell. I had cast a pall over the moment, behaving in the stereotypical way of the doubting Western media." Ms. Lim passes harsh judgment on some in China who pursue ordinary lives and work with or in the government.

Rowena Xiaoqing He, a visiting scholar and instructor at Harvard University who herself took to the streets during the uprising 25 years ago, is more specifically interested in the problem of the movement's exile and marginalization. Her book focuses on the lives of three student leaders who now reside abroad: Shen Tong and Wang Dan, well-known figures from the Beijing protests, and Yi Danxuan, a leader of the demonstrations in Guangzhou (the last two served time in jail for their activities).

Made up mostly of annotated transcripts of interviews, "Tiananmen Exiles" conveys the difficulty of maintaining a political movement far from a country in which you are "like ghosts or invisible men." The author draws the exiles out on such themes as the meaning of "home" and the tensions between maintaining political commitment and pursuing private fulfillment. Mr. Shen, for instance, found that the violent nightmares he endured for years ended soon after the birth of his first child, but he is uneasy about his choice to take time off from politics in order to provide for his family. The relationships of these exiles with their parents and the way their childhoods helped set them on the risky path of activism -- Mr. Yi developed a rebellious streak when he was not allowed to date his high-school girlfriend -- are revealingly explored.

In the end, though, any detailed sense of their political action during the long years in exile remains elusive. While free from any immediate threat of harm, Ms. He's three grown-up student leaders -- she describes them as "children in adulthood" -- endure the same vexations as Ms. Lim's Tiananmen survivors, including internecine squabbles with other dissidents, the unfinished nature of their cause and isolation from the mainstream.

Ms. He is devoted to keeping alive the 1989 "dream." Both Messrs. Yi and Wang object to this term as overly romantic. "I think we are no longer at an age to dream," Mr. Wang says. "We are no longer the children of Tiananmen." In one way or another, the exiles have decided that they need to take care of themselves and their loved ones rather than pursue their cause single-mindedly.

Both these books enhance our sense of the human costs of suppressing the past, of dulling the young's understanding of their world and capacity for critical thought, of severing people from a homeland that they yearn for -- and of trying to pretend that none of it is happening.

What might it look like if the Tiananmen exiles were free to return to China without forsaking politics or if a free discussion of their struggle were to become possible there? Neither book speculates, and we are unlikely to know anytime soon. In time, the events of 1989 may be treated like the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s and early '70s -- itself the subject of state-sponsored amnesia and the source of a wave of emigres. That trauma has slowly become more

available for research, debate and efforts to work toward the kind of historical accounting that the people of China so need and deserve.

In the meantime, the Tiananmen Mothers still await a response to their demands for justice, while most in China remain unaware that they exist.

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