

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

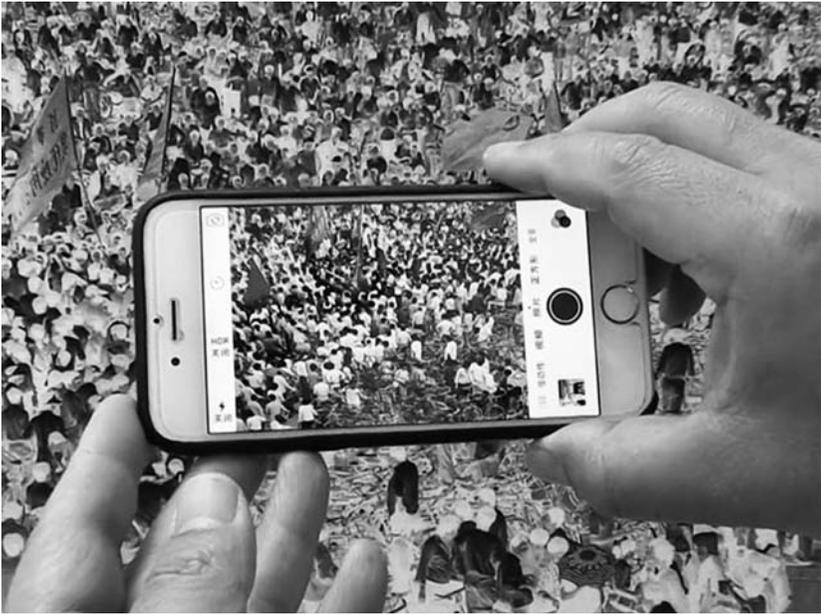


FIGURE P.3 Xu Yong, *Negatives*, 2014. Through the looking glass: the camera lens of a smartphone becomes a slim portal to the past in all its colors.

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 enjoy 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.