

‘Unseeing’ Photography: Academic Freedom and Human Rights after Tiananmen

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Abstract

This paper explores the presentation of a contentious image in the space of an international classroom. The image, known as *Tank Man*, has come to signify much more than the student pro-democracy protests, and subsequent government response in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in 1989. Seen by the West to exemplify a ‘moral bottom-line’ regarding China’s human rights abuses, it has been subsequently banned in China. How might presentation of this image be problematic for those students compromised by what they *should not see*? What are the limits of ‘academic freedom’ in such situations? The issue of whether to reproduce the image in this article serves as an interesting case in point. We develop a practice of *unseeing* that may help us understand how an image can reduce complex historical relations to a divisive symbol of national interest. We consider the West’s own hypocrisy in its reference to China’s human rights record through an image that often remains only partially analyzed by those who claim to see it.

Keywords: Tiananmen Square, Tank Man, unseeing, academic freedom

Introduction

‘... and who did not do that? Who failed to fail to see sometimes?’
(Mieville 2009, 64)

It is generally considered that photographs are objects relating to the world of the seen, whether of the world *as it is seen*, or as it *could be seen*. But what about photographs that are deemed ‘unseeable’, and must remain ‘unseen’ because they contest certain ideological positions or beliefs? How do we negotiate such contentious images in international educational settings? Furthermore, how might we learn to understand the qualities and ideas associated with certain images in ways unfamiliar to us: how might we see with the eyes of those who may be harmed, or even dispossessed, by what they see?

This article analyses *unseeing* from several different perspectives. On one hand, from the perspective of those for whom 'seeing' an image is an act of defiance against the state. On the other, from the perspective of those who are taught aspects of history that consolidate moral certainty, so that a single image comes to substitute analysis of an ethically complex historical relationship.

As its central example, we take what is often mistaken to be a single image: a photograph known in Western Europe and America as *Tank Man*. The photograph has come to define the Chinese student movement of 1989, in which hundreds of thousands of pro-democracy supporters gathered in Tiananmen Square. After seven weeks of largely peaceful protest, on June 3rd the Chinese premier commanded the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to clear the square by dawn the next morning, leading to the injury and death of hundreds of Chinese students, civilians, and soldiers. For the West, *Tank Man* has become a synecdoche of authoritarianism and human rights abuses by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In China, the image is banned, considered to be mobilized as Western propaganda. This act of suppression is seen by the West to further exemplify the CCP's lack of human rights in openly discussing or memorializing the events of June 1989.

The context for the discussion is an international classroom where Chinese, European and British students are studying photography. Presentation of this image by a British student raises questions regarding how to discuss what, for some, is banned and cannot be seen or spoken about, and for others, is an indictment of that same country's human rights record. How then, to address this image in a way that facilitates the potential engagement of all, without putting at risk those for whom this image presents a transgression.

Researching the *Tank Man* photograph via Chinese and Western documentary, photobooks and articles, the paper develops a theory of what it might mean to 'unsee' certain photographs and historical events. The concept of 'unseeing' borrows

from literary and decolonial practices, as outlined by Mieville (2009); hooks (1994); Azoulay (2019), and Mani (2020). It is hoped that this paper will contribute to discussions regarding pedagogical methods and the photographic image. Furthermore, that such analysis can initiate a conciliatory tone, rather than a divisive one, between students. I begin by attempting to discern my duties as an educator, according to human rights legislature.

Educational Context

The United Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is clear that education should promote '... understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups ...' (Article 26:2). Furthermore, education should be directed toward '... strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. ... And so further the activities of the United Nations (2021) for the maintenance of peace' (26:2). We are interested here in the situation where tolerance and fundamental freedoms are problematized, being understood differently by subjects from conflicting political ideologies.

Following western liberal ideals, Judith Butler (2018) reminds us that it is a central obligation of universities to protect academic freedom and promote agonistic enquiry. Political pressure should never restrict freedom of thought, nor the capacity to develop criticality, framed by Butler as 'productive contestation' (2018). Ideally, the global university should oppose censorship: academic freedom being not an individual liberty, but a contract of non-interference between university and the state (Butler 2018). Yet, neither should all political utterances be deemed politically legitimate (Butler 2018). The task of protecting freedom of thought, while deeming some utterances illegitimate, highlights the sensitive negotiation that an academic accepts in their contract as educator.

China presents an interesting case in the context of a western university. Recent reports suggest that some Chinese students and non-Chinese teachers 'self-censor' in university classrooms (HRW 2021).

It is suggested that some students fear being reported to Chinese authorities by patriotic colleagues if they express opinions at odds with the CCP (HRW 2021). In a recent photography seminar in London, one Chinese student told me that they were unable to offer an opinion about the recent situation in Hong Kong, even if they wished to. We may well understand such cultural differences as barriers to academic freedom, criticality, or 'freedom of expression', as defined and protected by the UDHR (see Article 19). But it also demands that we understand the boundedness of 'academic freedom' where the other may be put at risk by an insistence upon the exercise of certain rights that are deemed 'universal'.

It is important to recognize that what constitutes the 'universality' of human rights, is its applicability to certain contexts and domains (Donnelly 2013, 93). The UDHR provides only a guideline that is not enforceable by law, giving rise to specific national/local interpretations and legislation (Donnelly 2013, 93-105). Neither is the UDHR recognized by all countries. Even where it is recognized, it is constantly evolving in respect to different technological, social, and cultural relativities (98). Donnelly stresses the dangers of 'excessive or "false" universalism, especially when a powerful actor mistakes its own interests for universal values' (117). Furthermore, while human rights offer a base line for implementing human dignity, questions of (historical) colonialism can emerge in situations where external pressure is used to force what is perceived to be a largely western agenda (112). Thus, it is important to understand the nuances of what we may consider to be 'academic freedoms', and 'freedom of expression,' being that they are also contextually defined.

In her influential book, *Teaching to Transgress* bell hooks (1994) claimed that teaching strategies must be constantly reconceptualized, according to the specificity of each new teaching experience (11). Furthermore, the 'multi'-cultural classroom suggests *multiple* approaches and references to a topic, rather than the fixity and relative safety that

come with a singular perspective and narrative (36). Scholars must relinquish the notion that a classroom can be a 'safe space', free of conflict: culture is not an 'undisturbed space of harmony' and to assume so is to 'subscribe to a form of social amnesia' (McLaren in hooks 35). hooks advocates 'radical pedagogy' that insists upon acknowledgement of all present, creating a sense of community rather than 'safety' (40). Bearing these ideas in mind, this paper attempts to bring together a number of disparate sources that explore the possible interpretations of a single iconic image.

The events described here unfold in the classroom of an English university, where distinct cultural understandings of a single image serve to temporarily suspend dialogue. A British student is talking about *Time Magazine's* list of 100 'most influential images of all time' (Time 2016). He has brought prints of those that most interest him and one of them remains upon the table. Imitating the photographer's vantage point, the image situates us on the balcony of a high building, diagonal to the road below. In the center of the road, a line of four tanks in miniature. In front of them, a tiny man wearing a white-shirt and black-trousers, with what appear to be shopping bags in his hand. The vast grey surface of the road is marked with white lines and arrows that seem to urge the tanks forward with graphic embellishment, perhaps indicating a future that has already escaped the frame. Cropped at the front right-hand of the image, a group of white circular lamps branch from the stem of an ornate iron post like sentries, imitating our own passivity as viewers. Historical sources tell us that the man in the photograph is an unknown civilian who stood in front of advancing PLA tanks travelling along Chang' an Avenue, blocking their advancing path, and forcing them to stop. For some commentators, the picture of a lone man confronting state military has come to represent the 'ultimate spirit of freedom' (Qiang cited in Gordon and Hinton 1995). Subsequently, *Tank Man* is often referred to as one of the most iconic images of the Twentieth Century. It is understood by *Time Magazine*, to be taken by American

photojournalist, Jeff Widener on June 5th, after Tiananmen Square was cleared of protestors. Images and commemoration of these events are banned in China by the CCP. Even as I write this paper, I hear news of Hong Kong media mogul, Jimmy Lai's 13-month imprisonment for unauthorized assembly at a banned vigil marking these events (BBC 2021).

Let us briefly consider the Chinese political context in 1989, giving further background to the student protests and their aftermath. After the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, the CCP moved into a phase of economic modernization (Wright 2008, 31). Some members of the party were supporters of moderate political reform, including Hu Yaobang, who had supported earlier student protests and was eventually forced to retire (Wright 2008, 32; Liang, Nathan, and Link 2002, 31; Gordon and Hinton 1995). The death of Hu in 1989 led to public outbursts of mourning that were the catalyst for the pro-democracy movement among students (Liang, Nathan, and Link 2002, 31; Gordon and Hinton 1995). It is useful to understand that although the university curriculum was still 'centrally dictated', in the post-Mao period, unsanctioned student groups were tolerated for short periods (Wright 2008, 34). However, punishment for disobeying the ruling Communist Party could include expulsion from university, or unfavorable remarks on a student's permanent record, negatively impacting future prospects (34). To be designated a traitor of the CCP was to face imprisonment, forced labor in 'Re-education Through Labor' camps, or even torture (34). Unsurprisingly, some students were keen to bring party loyalty in line with calls for a more democratic, transparent political system (Gordon and Hinton 1995). At the height of the pro-democracy protests, 1,000,000 people are said to have gathered in the square, many setting up camp for the duration. The initial unwillingness of the CCP to talk with the students led to hunger strikes. When talks finally did occur, they were inadvertently

sabotaged by members of an increasingly fractious student movement (Gordon and Hinton 1995).

While hardliners of the CCP have been widely condemned for sanctioning, and even congratulating the PLA for their actions in 'clearing' Tiananmen Square, it is also true that moderates within the party supported the student movement and advocated for reform. Documents from CCP meetings before the clearing of the square, stress that there should be no bloodshed (Liang, Nathan, and Link 2002, 481; 487). The picture is a complex one, underlined by divided factions both within the CCP and the student movement. Indeed, the stakes were very high.

Back in the classroom, I look toward the students, more than half of whom are from China, and ask the class if anyone knows this image? There is a moment of silence in which I fear my own discomfort is palpable: despite my relative certainty that this image has not been staged, the certainty that my own knowledge has not, can no longer be assured. One student confidently refers to the image as testament to human rights abuses carried out by the Chinese government, indicating an assumption of moral authority that, perhaps inadvertently, implicates a divisive split of those in the room. Other students remain notably silent. Even for those who recognize this image, it is possible to suggest that in its lack of specificity, the singular iteration of *Tank Man* celebrated by *Time Magazine* has become a substitute for analysis and part of a wider practice of what I will refer to as 'unseeing.'

Unseeing

The idea of 'unseeing' is taken from China Mieville's (2009) novel, *The City and the City*. The novel depicts 2-neighbouring cities, whose inhabitants are forbidden to see one another- even when they inhabit neighboring houses on either side of an invisible border. Populations are taught from an early age to 'unsee' one another and must practice doing so, in order to avoid being disappeared by an authority named *Breach*.¹ An entire 'acclimatisation pedagogy' has developed around learning to *unsee*

one another's culture (Mieville 2009, 160). In this sense, unseeing is of an importance usually reserved for seeing. If seeing is paradigmatic of Western enlightenment and empiricism, then *unseeing* might be a means of questioning the easy equivalence of seeing with knowing.

The term 'unseeing' also appears in Bakirathi Mani's (2020) book *Unseeing Empire*, concerned with how South Asian photographers might create 'new ways of seeing [leading] us to ... experience our own lives as unbound by states of empire' (203). The implication here, is that the colonial empire must be *unseen* in order to rewrite and reclaim histories of the South Asian diaspora. That photography's legacy of visibility was itself a technology of empire and racialization, can neither be denied nor allowed to underwrite all subsequent representation. In this respect, plurality overwrites singularity.

The notion of *unseeing* can be interestingly aligned with 'unlearning,' used by bell hooks to emphasize the necessity of 'unlearning racism' (hooks 1994, 25; 38). Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's (2019) book, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, develops the concept of 'unlearning' in relation to visual culture, describing it as: '... a commitment to think against and prior to imperialism without forgetting ... to what extent imperialism conditions us and invites us to act as its agents' (20). It is concerned with bringing the moment of dispossession into the present in order to think before it (17). This, '... undoing of imperialism, entails going backward, revisiting violent conjectures and their effects, and giving these situations a second life, knowing that we live in their wake' (149).

Unseeing then, underlines the importance of understanding events from multiple perspectives: acknowledging forms of complicity in the history and perpetuation of colonialism, while understanding experience beyond and outside of these events. *Unseeing* names the desire to imagine away what is clearly there to see, to negate the experience of others in order to retain a sense of cultural primacy. It requires exploring the willful blindness one culture

can have toward another, as well as toward one's own culture. As method, unseeing may provide a way of reconciling this blindness: acknowledging plurality where singularity persists.

The following sections address both the CCPs attempt to *unsee* through suppressing a photograph in order to control the national narrative, while the West attempts to *unsee* its own violent entanglement in China's history by mobilising that same photograph. The process of selecting some histories and suppressing others is understood here as a feature of both authoritarian and liberal democratic societies, although the latter tend to associate such practices with the former. Some claim that the economic expansion of global capitalism is predicated upon cultural amnesia, which is 'built into' global capitalist practices and 'incorporated into the bodily experience of its life spaces' (Connerton in Sealy 2019, 45). We might consider this tendency for cultural amnesia as a constituent of unseeing.

Abstraction

In this section, we begin to think against and before the British/US imperialist perspectives in an attempt to 'unlearn' what we think we see, building on existing work by Hariman and Lucaites (2007). The authors claim that the *Tank Man* photograph is paradigmatic of modernist simplification in reference to both its stylistic, compositional, and iconic qualities (223). Referring to the flat uniformity of the concrete street and lack of 'human scale', the authors liken the image to Modern abstract painting of the Twentieth Century (215-16). The omnipotent viewpoint of the photographer is equated with an imperialist one, where the lens of the camera is considered the 'centre of global order' (225). By achieving a distant, and seemingly 'neutral' point of view with the photographer, we too are 'seeing like a state', which is to say, according to modern panoptic qualities (215-16). Modernist simplification and over-visibility can be considered characteristic of photographic media and have become intractable features of surveillance societies. It is notable that China, the UK, and the USA boast some of the

most surveilled cities on earth (Bischoff 2021), demonstrating a wish by governments to control public space and populations through mediation. Indeed, modern photographic technologies have been increasingly devolved into human surveillance networks as biopolitical techniques for eliciting conformity. The language of the arrow-marked tarmac, like the grain of analogue film, increasingly situate us in a period of naïve aspiration for an 'international' style. Yet the simplified aesthetic design, and the symbolism of the lone individual in front of state military apparatus, had direct appeal to Western sensibilities, particularly where the Cold War had pitched liberal democratic and communist ideologies against one another. In the image of *Tank Man* we see, not only a confrontation between the lauded individual of liberal democracy and a derided communist state, but between Chinese state military and the machine of American media: the man is trapped between the PLA's tank and the USA's media and as such, speaks of a panoply of military and biopolitical apparatus deployed in the theatre of global politics. The photograph then, is an extension of the ideological contest of two state machines, between which the civilian intervenes and is trapped.

A photograph is always invested with a totality of events that unfold beyond the frame, in this case, allowing the West to appropriate the image as 'a critique of authoritarian regimes and a celebration of liberal democratic values' (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 215). In this manner, the democratic self-assertion of China is mediated by the politics and aesthetics of a Western audience (227). These points give us further insight into the immediate appeal of the image for a Western audience, how it fulfils and reproduces moral supremacy, inadvertently introducing us to the West's commitment to a monopoly on representation.

It is important to note that the *Tank Man* image exists in several similar, but distinct iterations by different photographers. In their circulation through Western news media, the interchangeable images are often further cropped and colored, making

them more difficult to attribute to a precise author. Hariman and Lucaites (2007) draw attention to three of its iterations: Jeff Widener (USA); Stuart Franklin (UK); and Charles Cole (USA) (211). Like the photographs themselves, these male photographers appear to be interchangeable representatives of Twentieth Century Western media. Yet, in the authors wish to demonstrate the picture's allegiance with Modernist abstraction and design, they neglect to mention a fourth image by Hong Kong photographer, Arthur Tsang Hin-Wah, who was working for Reuters.

A recent article from the *South China Morning Post* (Chan 2017), entitled '*The Other Photographers Who Snapped Tiananmen's Tank Man ...*', features interviews with all four photographers who were positioned on balconies of the Beijing Hotel overlooking Chang'an Avenue, when they took their now famous photographs. The fact that Chinese and American sources (Witty 2009; Chan 2017), are still 'uncovering' the image's fourth iteration after twenty years or more, tells us much about the West's own strategic project of 'unseeing'. Such an act gestures toward the contingent trajectory of history, where some are credited with greatness, and others are forgotten. The indifference to detail or authorship is striking here, even more so as Jeff Widener's particular shot is given precedence in Time's *100 Greatest Photographs*, while Newsweek's Charles Cole won *World Press Photograph of the Year* for his photograph, and Stuart Franklin's image was included in Life Magazine's *100 Photographs that Changed the World* (Life Magazine n.d.). In order to reproduce these images in an academic journal such as this, prices appear to be inadvertently 'scaled' according to their perceived importance and distribution. So, while editorial use of Widener's image costs £159 from Associated Press via Shutterstock; Stuart Franklin's photograph costs £80 from Magnum; and Tsang Hin-Wah's, £75 from Reuters.² The fact that such an image continues to create capital for Western media organizations exists in a strange tension with the idealistic neutrality aspired to by the documentary photograph,

particularly in a situation that records another country's political strife. And where, as we shall see, the relationship between these countries has been so consistently defined by economic antagonism. It is largely for this reason, that the images are not reproduced here.³

The insistence upon a single image, a single instant, and a single photographer, even when we cannot be quite sure *who* took the photograph we are looking at, nor the precise details of the events that it records, reveal the limited capacity of the 'seeing' to actually 'see'. Photography is the medium of abstraction par excellence, and this capacity to distil complexity into a signature of national interest far outweighs concerns regarding a photograph's indexicality. That similar images can appear as one and the same, and that the same image can serve evidence on opposing political sides, are what give photography its greatest utility. It is the malleability of photographic media to fit human purpose that make it so successful as a medium and as an art.

Wilful Blindness

That Hin-Wah's photograph was omitted from consideration of an aesthetic reserved for Western auteurs, recalls Hou Hanru's (2010) notion that Chinese art and culture have tended to be excluded from modern critical debate, rather reflecting Western ideas of Chinese culture and aesthetics (364). It is argued that after Tiananmen, the West could only see Chinese cultural production from the perspective of communist struggle and human rights abuses against its own people (363). Events of 1989 are said to have 'awakened the humanist conscience of Westerners,' coinciding with an interest in Chinese contemporary art that reaffirmed the West's 'ideological superiority' (363). Thus, Western authors tend to,

'... concentrate their energies and interests on revealing how 'unofficial' artists suffer from political pressure in the country, as if the significance of both artists and work can only be found in ideological struggles. This recalls the methodology of the Western

official ideological propaganda during the Cold War' (364).

Hanru reflects upon two styles of Chinese contemporary art often selected as representative by contemporary Western curators: *Cynical Realism* and *Political Pop*. These styles are seen to reflect the cynicism of the failed student movement, and consumerist influence after China's opening up to the West (Hanru 2010, 363). Again, critical, artistic discussion is ignored in favor of stressing the tyranny of China's political system and an implicit dependence upon the West. This supremacist sensibility is traced not only through the Cold War, but through Nineteenth Century exoticism (363). The Nineteenth Century was a period which saw China and England engaged in *Opium Wars*, after the English cultured Opium addiction throughout China in order to secure the interest of its recalcitrant trading partner. Further military force led to a series of humiliating 'unequal treaties' whose 'agreements' included extra territoriality; the ceding of Hong Kong; and legalization of the Opium trade (Mao 2016, 433;434; 452).

In light of these details, we might infer that 1989 marks a point whereby the entirety of Euro-American imperial history in China, is summarily and willfully *unseen* by the West. The focus is rather upon the image of its own moral righteousness and relative benevolence- a move which helps distract attention away from the West's own historical human rights abuses in China and beyond. Of course, the general sense of moral disapproval for China by the USA and Europe, comes hot on the heels of its economic expansion (Hanru 2010, 363). Such an expansion poses innumerable questions for the West, not least the fact that this expansion has been, and remains, much aided by the Western reliance upon China for cheap labor and goods. For example, in recent decades, the assembly of electronic goods and cotton production in China have become central to the global economy. Many remain largely unmoved by working conditions in Chinese factories, providing goods for so many of the West's leading brands. A recent UK Parliamentary report states that many global

companies operate a 'wilful blindness' toward modern slavery in regions such as Xinjiang (UK Parliament 2021, 7). Yet Chinese workers have long described the conditions in which they are expected to work, receiving little interest from its dependent international markets. Professor Anita Chan explained in 2006, that many factory workers were expected to work a 90-hour week for which they were typically paid around \$120 per month (Chan in Thomas 2006). Employee's were expected to sleep in squalid hostels, often 12 to a room (Thomas 2006). After several years, workers would leave, either through sickness, exhaustion or because they had slowed down and were fired by management (Thomas 2006). In this case, we see that China's 'lack of human rights' has worked in the West's favor and has largely been treated as a purely internal matter for China. Fixing our moral compass according to Tiananmen events has helped to exonerate us, not only from past cruelties and inflicted humiliations, but from indirectly *supporting and perpetuating* a sustained lack of human rights for Chinese workers. The point here is not to create a simplified moral relativity that justifies human rights abuses, but to understand how events may appear from different perspectives.

Missing Persons

While we have looked at how the *presence* of the image may indicate and mask implicit agendas on the part of the West, it is interesting to consider how the *absence* created by banning an image may have unintended consequences in China. The outright banning of images in China is not exclusive to *Tank Man*. Furthermore, these suppressions will be shown to intersect directly with forms of physical presence

Lee, Li, and Lee (2011) trace the evolution of symbolic meaning in the *Tank Man* photograph through three distinct periods in the West:

From 1989 to 1992, it was a sweeping symbol of Communist dictatorship. From 1993 to 2001, it represented specific human rights abuses. From 2002 to 2009, it faded to become ritualistic memory, and yet it still

crucially signified a moral bottom line for US foreign policy (342).

During the second of these phases, 1993-2001, human rights abuses such as China's occupation of Tibet, were high on the international agenda, and were often evoked in tandem with the *Tank Man* image (345). It is notable that, still today, images evocative of belief systems other than those held by the CCP, can be deemed threatening to Communist orthodoxy and subsequently banned. Clare Harris (2004) discusses photographs of the Dalai Lama as a salient example. In Chinese occupied Tibet, images of the exiled Dalai Lama are banned by the CCP (Ellis-Peterson 2021; Harris 2004, 138). Harris describes the role that these images have played in resisting Chinese authority since 1959, the mobility of the photograph being ideal for establishing 'networks of cohesion' (Harris 2004, 133). It is interesting to consider this physical mobilization as a result of image prohibition. The photograph becomes testament to the physical and spiritual presence of the exiled (141). The author alludes to the capacity of images to circumvent political control- and for solidarity to form in the vacuum of censored presence. The CCPs 'banning', of certain images is on an equivalence with its 'clearing' or 'exiling' of bodies, not only from the public square, but from the collective memory of entire communities. Yet, such photographs and the bodies they represent are inadvertently invested with an *extra-visibility* as the result of being *unseen*. After all, unseeing always implies a prior 'seeing' that must be disavowed. It is possible, as Harris suggests, that the photograph acquires an equivalence with embodied physical *presence* through its negation, rather than being associated merely with representation, or even the absence of those depicted: it is as though what returns is not an image, but a suppressed form of life itself.

To be publicly presented with an image that is banned in one's home country, is to be presented with a challenge to that culture. It is to affront, or even to pose a threat to the individual to whom it is presented. In Anthony Thomas' 2006 documentary,

The Tank Man, four contemporaneous students from Beijing University are handed one of the *Tank Man* images and asked to respond to it: 'Share this picture 'round and tell me what this picture says to you?' (Thomas 2006). The students regard the image and someone is heard to whisper "89". Another says aloud that, without context, the photograph is difficult to understand. The students continue to look, smiling at one another momentarily. 'They were baffled' says the narrator with undeserved certainty, 'It was clear that they had never seen the *Tank Man* picture' (Thomas 2006). It is less clear whether their bafflement was due to a white British, middle-aged journalist asking them such a question in front of a camera. Indeed, it is the narrator's *answer*, rather than his *question*, that waits, like an open trap, for a predetermined response that is already shared with the Western documentary viewer. Thomas neglects to consider the photographs context. Neither does he think to elicit answers from a group of Western students, born 17 years after the image was taken. Many born after 1989 may well have never encountered this image- wherever in the world they are from- yet efforts to suppress memorializing these events in China and Hong Kong undoubtedly function to draw attention to them. In this way, censorship creates a *counter-archive* of that which must be *actively* unseen. Again, there is a performativity to this disavowal: it must come *after* seeing, affirming only what is not given legitimacy as 'seeable'.

In Lin Wei's (2009) short film, *Unforgettable Memory*, the Chinese narrator is seen holding one of the cropped images and showing it to several Chinese passers-by, asking, 'Do you remember this photograph?' Some claim not to know it. Others simply describe elements in the image, not directly connecting it to Tiananmen events. Several are clearly performatively '*unseeing*' the photograph. Being themselves 'seen' by the camera, and by extension, the state, they are not at liberty to say what the photograph depicts. 'This stuff is not good to talk about', says one, because 'politics is too sensitive' (Wei 2009). When pressed, he maintains that

he does not know the image and the narrator asks, 'You really don't know or are you pretending?' At which, the man puts his hand over the camera saying, 'Don't tape me I am very sensitive' (Wei 2009). The political sensitivity of the image translates directly into the political sensitivity of the subject who is made vulnerable. The final interviewed citizen walks away immediately, saying, 'I don't know. I don't know,' waving his hand as if trying to erase himself from the scene.

These filmed encounters with a photograph are like the hunt for a missing person. The subject of the photograph is missing and, like the events it records, can be recovered only according to its Western canonical reading. Arguably, then, the event that the picture must *un-memorialise* through a process of *unseeing*, lends gravitas to the West's testimony rather than allowing a more open enquiry into its subject matter. Yet, the viewer may also be missing here: having been shown the image, they must unsee it and any memory of seeing it. An act of disavowing subjective experience.

Anthony Thomas assumes the global significance of the image and has a predetermined conclusion that counters any nuance or difference of opinion from his subjects. Lin Wei makes discomfort explicit alongside strategies of a noncommittal, compromised subjectivity. The camera polices the scene, registering the threat inherent in forms of governed surveillance. It is perhaps such threat that infuses the classroom where it is shown.

Official Narratives

The Tank Man includes a number of still-images, but there is another iteration in the form of a video clip, taken from the same vantage as the photograph, by CNN. The video footage gives a somewhat broader context to the unfolding interaction (Hubbert 2014; Hariman and Lucaites 2007). It was also used by Chinese media in the period immediately after events, to exemplify the *restraint* of the military toward civilians- explicitly diverting from Western media accounts (Thomas 2006; Gordon and Hinton 1995).

It is possible to say that as a sequence of moving image, the video humanizes the tank somewhat, and the state machinery by association, being that we see the care taken by the driver to avoid hitting the civilian, as well as the tank's human operative momentarily emerging from its hatch. The tank shifts position with what can only be referred to as a surprising delicacy in order to avoid hitting the man. In the broadcast by Chinese state media, the newscaster claims that,

Anyone with common sense can see that if our tanks were determined to move on, this lone scoundrel could never have stopped them. This scene flies in the face of Western propaganda. It proves that our soldiers exercised the highest degree of restraint (Thomas 2006).

Before such images were banned, several Chinese photobooks commemorated events in Tiananmen. It is notable that the CCP themselves released an official account, a book entitled *The Truth About the Beijing Turmoil*, first published in 1989 (Parr and Lundgren 2016, 262). Although an online version shows a re-print date of 1992, it too, is now banned in China (262; Han et al. 1992). The book gives graphic accounts of violence against troops and civic facilities by groups of apparently rogue protestors, attaching themselves to the protests (Han et al. 1992, 3-5). It features photographs of murdered soldiers. Several corpses are shown to have been burned alive, strung up and disemboweled (5; 61, images 75; 84; 85). Another burned body is strung up on an overpass (61; image 86). This last photograph is strangely framed so that the edge of the overpass and its grisly specter occupy a third of the image, while railings divide it from the street where citizens go about their lives, umbrellas set against the rain. One may wish only to look away, rather than try to make sense of a body reduced to something so unrecognizably human. The image of these corpses redoubles the indignity of their victims, but also bears testament to violence on the side of the protestors. We are told that another soldier had his eyes removed (5), as though

to be dead were not blindness enough: the act must be literalized in order that 'unseeing' becomes thematised: if the living can see so little, then the dead must relinquish ever having had eyes at all. Given the mistrust of China that circulates through Western media, we may question whether these images are fabricated by the CCP in light of subsequent events? It is interesting that we do not seem so predisposed to question the photograph of '*Tank Man*' himself, whose presence gave China an opportunity to globally demonstrate its apparent restraint. This is especially pertinent if we consider Charles Cole and Arthur Tsing Wah's claims that the Public Security Bureau were watching journalists from the rooftops, so clearly knew that they were there (Cole in Thomas 2006; Tsang Hin-Wah in Witty 2009). We have no real understanding of what motivated *Tank Man* to act as he did. Nor what became of him afterwards. The image is perhaps saved from our speculation as being 'set-up', not only by the apparent spontaneity of its subject, waving the tanks aside and clambering up toward its cabin, but by fitting a Western agenda so perfectly and being so thoroughly co-opted by Western media channels as a symbol of apparently free, possibly democratic, will.

The official CCP book contrasts sharply with another from 1989, *Beijing Spring*, showing events from the perspective of Chinese and American allies (Liu, Turnley and Turnley 1989). Howard Chapnick's foreword to the book highlights an unflinchingly naïve faith in photography:

'Words may be rebutted and challenged, but photographs provide inherent evidence and defy misrepresentation. Photographers, therefore, present an immediate danger to despotic and tyrannical governments to become prime targets in the suppression of reality' (1989, 16).

It is interesting to consider the photographic still as a 'suppression of reality', whether or not that suppression is by governments. This is not to suggest that all facts are entirely relative, but that

photographs, as partial documents, always require context and text in order to be understood. The coffee table size and layout of *Beijing Spring*, with its full-page, glossy color images is somewhat incongruous with the subject matter. The short text by Liu refers to students as naïve and sweet (20). Later, we hear that on June 3rd 5,000 mainly unarmed soldiers were sent marching toward the square before being stopped by a human blockade, whereby soldiers were 'mauled, bruised and scratched', some wept 'tears of frustration and bewilderment' (38). The author reports that Chinese TV aired selectively edited footage (41). Notably, the very first full-page of this book shows a blood-soaked student, carried by several others. This visceral and painful image is echoed in the later photograph of a morgue, where loosely covered bodies lay haphazardly on the floor, numbered between 6 and 15, like a cargo awaiting their distribution- in this case, through the lens of the camera.

The research so far has focused upon the ways in which the *Tank Man* images have either been a synecdoche for certain national agendas, or simply 'disappeared' in an effort to suppress these agendas, with the unintended consequence of reinforcing them. My own struggle with whether or not to include the image(s) in the paper constitutes another aspect in this practice of visual research. To include the image(s), is to reproduce an expectation of liberal Western values that may be understood to perpetuate an imperialist agenda. It is an assertion that my understanding of academic freedom does not coincide with another's illegitimate utterance. As an academic creating cultural capital through writing this paper, I reproduce the privilege of the neoliberal subject, turning all of life into a form of value that might benefit me. More importantly, by showing the image, I create a predetermined split between those who may read, and those who cannot read, barring those for whom seeing the image presents a potential risk: I flout my own relative freedom to see, and what is more, I make payments to Western news agencies in order to reproduce the image. These agencies create capital at the expense

of those from whom the West has long extracted value, often at the expense of the human rights that it otherwise advocates. What is more, I support a framework within which the photographer is also the owner of events, even when these events belong to others. As Azoulay has it, the photograph 'has become institutionalized in discourse through its identification with the photographer, as his or her property' (Azoulay 2019, 23) and yet, '... the photograph is never the testimony of the photographer alone' (25).

On the other hand, to omit the image, is to be party to an authoritarian ban. It is arguably to relinquish academic freedom, duty and perhaps my responsibility toward my students and the wider community. To state that these images are freely available on the Internet for those who wish to find them (via VPN, where necessary), is perhaps a patronizing exclusion of some from liberal discourse. To leave students with a burden of responsibility that I might have taken for them. Yet, the image is described in detail here, as are responses to it. To insist upon seeing it is, surely, only to insist upon a repeated and tired cliché of Western visual supremacy. We perhaps inadvertently act as agents of imperialism, acts that *unlearning* might counter (Azoulay 2019, 20). In this manner, like the civilian who is 'trapped' between two state machines, we too are caught between ideologies that generate plurality and complexity were once abstraction and singularity seemed sufficient.

Conclusion

Can analysis of how images are unseen be a means of liberating multiple narratives and finding conciliation in academic settings? More broadly, can such analysis of a photograph aid greater understanding between opposing ideologies, rather than simply remaining divisive?

At the start of this essay, we considered how we might approach teaching in complex, multi-cultural environments, negotiating academic freedom with those things that should not, or cannot, be spoken of or seen. Through analysis of different cultural

perspectives on a single contested image, we might better understand how seeing *and* unseeing are instrumentalised by multiple actors in a number of ways. *Unseeing* implies a mode of seeing that must be disavowed in order to maintain its authority and singularity. We considered the counter-archive of an active and performative unseeing. We also considered how the hunt for the missing subject of the banned Chinese photograph can only be recovered through Western interpretation of an image, inadvertently lending gravitas to its historical supremacist corollary. Bakirathi Mani reminds us that we must avoid subsuming all photographic evidence into a singular (colonial/ imperial) perspective or aesthetic: it may be that banning an image compounds such interpretations leaving fewer opportunities for local counter narratives.

It is argued that after 1989, all Chinese cultural production is defined by communist struggle and its breach of human rights; yet rights appear to be of concern only when they are not in the West's immediate interest. The moral tone of this image helps to suppress Nineteenth and Twentieth Century imperialism of English and US allies, and the perpetuation of human rights abuses by the West. What better distraction from our own complicity in forms of trans-national violence than an iconic photograph that assures us so straightforwardly of our own relative virtue? The photograph of *Tank Man* stands in for a complex historical situation that, by remaining *unseen*, functions to shut down debate and foreclose a greater understanding of complex global relations. That same captured moment can be utilized to different political ends, demonstrating both military restraint and aggression, each one requiring a simultaneous and deliberate 'unseeing' of the other. On the one hand, this fluidity, this capacity to be contested and relativized, gives photographic media its greatest utility, and remains an obstacle to forms of conciliation. On the other, it can provide the ground for developing a plurality of meaning that, while not guaranteeing a 'safe space', or unlimited extrapolations of 'freedom', can help us to understand some of the complex positions that attend what is not ever, in fact, a single image.

Notes

1. Mieville's metaphor is used briefly by Nicholas Mirzoeff to describe the racialized, economic segregation that divides communities in the United States, in his book, *How to See the World* (pg. 198-199).
2. (Unfortunately, since Charlie Cole's passing in 2017, it has not been possible to trace the current copyright holder of the image)
3. The images are freely available online in the UK, or with a VPN from China.

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