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PROJECT

Listening to Thunder in Silence: Politics and Ethics of Memory of Tiananmen 1989

"Forgetting" has been a term widely used in academic and public discourses of the memory of the 1989 Tiananmen protests and the state's brutal crackdown. But it is conceptually unclear, empirically ineffective, and ethically problematic. Conceptually, it relies on a problematic assumption that silence means forgetting. Empirically, it lumps together different states of memory: don't remember, don't talk about, don't know, and don't care. Ethically, it blames the Chinese people for their "complicity" and distributes the moral responsibility equally between the repressive regime and the people, between the powerful and the powerless. I argue that "silence" provides greater conceptual precision, more analytical subtlety, and less ethical liability. Silence does not mean forgetting. Nor does it always mean the complete absence of sound. Rather, it refers to the absence of certain – not all – discourses about the past in some situations. I propose an empirical analytical frame based on different forms of silence: silencing, silenced, and silent. While prior studies have focused on Tiananmen exiles and public memories outside China, my project takes up the challenge to "listen to thunder in silence" within China by collecting textual materials and conducting interviews with silent or silenced people. I also advocate for an ethical neutrality based on silence, which recognizes individuals' moral-political dilemmas under a repressive regime and enables all involved parties to participate in a more inclusive transitional justice process to restore historical truth in the future. This project not only contributes to the specific literature on the Tiananmen memory, but also offers a general perspective on silence that can be useful for the politics and ethics of remembering in other contexts.

Recommended Reading

- Xu, Bin. *The Politics of Compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017.
- . *Chairman Mao's Children: Generation and the Politics of Memory in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- . *The Culture of Democracy: A Sociological Approach to Civil Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022.

Xu, Bin (Cambridge, 2022)

Chairman Mao's Children : Generation and the Politics of Memory in China

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1826837280>

Xu, Bin (Hoboken, NJ, 2022)

The culture of democracy : a sociological approach to civil society

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1807210197>

Cultural sociology series

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1807210197>

Xu, Bin (London, 2020)

Listening to thunder in the silence on Tiananmen : politics and ethics of the memory of the June Fourth Movement

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=185383257X>

Xu, Bin (London, 2019)

Intragenarational variations in autobiographical memory : China's "Sent-down youth" generation

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1853833495>

Xu, Bin (Stanford, California, 2017)

The politics of compassion : the Sichuan earthquake and civic engagement in China

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1632208261>