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Political Persecution, Red Square, Harbin, 1966

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On 26 August 1966, tens of thousands of people gathered in Red Guard Square in the northeastern Chinese city of Harbin to participate in a surprise public criticism of Ren Zhongyi, the province's Communist Party secretary.¹ According to photographer Li Zhensheng's testimony, the Red Guard faction had announced Ren's name in front of the amassed crowd without the secretary's prior knowledge and proceeded to tie his hands behind his back and force him into a 90-degree angle on an unstable folding chair. Li's own photograph focuses tightly on Ren's profile as he stands in his bowed position, a placard inscribed with the words "black gang element" hung around his neck and a meter-long dunce cap protruding from his head towards the chanting, seated throng. Black ink stains his face and his white shirt, eerily invoking the imagery of dripping blood in the sharp black-and-white contrast. The shouting around both Ren and Li is almost palpable, a wall of sound made visible by the cameraman on the left side of the image cupping his hands around his headphones. This disturbing scene is just one of an immeasurable number that occurred between 1966 and 1976 during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of China, a period of criticism, revision, and complete cultural transformation during which high-ranking party members were purged and 17 million *zhiqing*, or educated youths, were 'sent down' to the countryside for manual labor.² Li Zhensheng had been a photojournalist for the *Heilongjiang Daily* just before the start of the revolution and, despite the oppressive political environment, used his camera, notes, and personal memories to weave together an account of a history that the public would go on to ignore and repress for decades. Fearing persecution for the images he had captured, Li developed and processed all of his own film before hiding away 30,000 negatives, stored in paper pouches with detailed captions and wrapped in oil cloth, under floorboards. He was finally able to publish a selection of them in 2003 as the book *Red-Color News Soldier: A Chinese Photographer's Odyssey through the Cultural Revolution*.

Photography's history in the Cultural Revolution has long been complicated by the active destruction of images, the limited availability of equipment, and the small range of styles permitted by state-imposed restrictions on the press. Broadly speaking, the medium was split between private and public spheres as a commercial tool for family portraiture and as a means for disseminating officially sanctioned messages whose compositions paralleled those of propaganda posters.³ News photography, popularly understood to be comprehensive documentation of real events and people, became highly skewed to emphasize the salubrious effects of labor and communal living and to celebrate formal party gatherings. Li Zhensheng's



Figure 1.22 Li Zhensheng. At a rally in Red Guard Square, Provincial Party secretary and first Party secretary of Harbin, Ren Zhongyi, stands on unstable chair with his hands behind his back. His face has been smeared with black ink, a placard around his neck has the accusatory label “black gang element,” and he holds a string attached to an ill-fitting dunce’s cap. Harbin, 26 August 1966. © Li Zhensheng/Contact Press Images, Courtesy of the artist.

brutal but stunning series of images transgressed this private/public binary to reveal a more physically and psychologically violent facet of the Cultural Revolution than had previously been seen in print; he photographed the public criticisms and executions that would come to embody the horrors of the revolution. With a background in painting and filmmaking, Li drew on influences from a variety of artistic, photographic, and filmic traditions—including Goya’s images of war, Cartier-Bresson’s documentary journey across China and Soviet Socialist realist cinema—as well as his own experiences of forced

relocation and manual labor during the earlier Socialist Education Movement, which sent thousands of artists, performers, writers, and other “cultural professionals” to the countryside in order to solidify the Communist Party’s control over such restless urban factions.⁴ Even as he attempted to distance himself from the public events by consciously framing his photographs within conventions of objective reporting, Li’s most striking images are those that position him and the viewer in the center of action. His involvement as both participant and documentarian is keenly felt as he describes his process: “When I wasn’t taking a picture, if the crowd chanted, I chanted; if everyone raised their fist, I raised my fist also. Revolutionary passions ran high, and if you didn’t follow the crowd they could easily turn on you.”⁵ In the photograph of Ren Zhongyi’s criticism, Li’s physical presence is alluded to in the direct stare from a woman seated in the aisle just below the secretary’s angled dunce cap. He plays a part in the history to which he also acts as witness, using camera and memory together to record the events playing out before him.

The censorship during the revolution created a marked absence of images like Li’s in the public sphere, and family photographs and propagandist images became the sole tangible legacies of the tumultuous decade. Passed on to new generations and contrasted against the increasingly capitalist culture of contemporary China, these remnants would alter the perception of the tumultuous decade from one of trauma to one of nostalgia. When Li finally unveiled his photographs, first in the late 1980s as political tensions began to ease and ultimately with the 2003 publication, many people in China and abroad experienced their first visual exposure to some of the worst tragedies that had been sidelined by the official state response to the Cultural Revolution.⁶ The photographs he captured and their accompanying memoir-style text took on the unique role of reconstructing a lost narrative that encapsulated collective experience mediated through personal memory. Li Zhensheng destabilized notions of fixed truths by proving that history is formed not only through the documentation that is disseminated but also by the documentation that is excluded, and in doing so, he opened up new lines of dialog about confronting past traumas within changed political contexts on both a personal level and a global scale. *Red-Color News Soldier* is thus a portrayal for past and present audiences, public and private spheres—a site for protest, reinscription, and remembrance that makes the forgotten visible once more.

Notes

- 1 Li Zhensheng, *Red-Color News Soldier: A Chinese Photographer’s Odyssey through the Cultural Revolution*, edited by Robert Pledge (New York, London: Phaidon, 2003): 73.
- 2 Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 18.
- 3 Nicole Huang, “Locating Family portraits: Everyday Images from 1970s China,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 18 (2010): 672–9.
- 4 Li Zhensheng, *Red-Color News Soldier*: 22–7.
- 5 Li Zhensheng, *Red-Color News Soldier*: 79.
- 6 Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010): 102.