

## Post Processing: Freedom in Documentation of Lived Experiences and Histories



This photo, titled “Tank Man”, is often the first thing that comes to mind when the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre is mentioned. The Chinese Party of China (CCP) has done significant work in censoring and re framing the narrative of the events that took place in 1989 in order to protect its image and feed into a positive narrative for the party. However, while the party can rewrite history in a way that protects their interests, images like this one which continue to occupy such a large space in people’s consciousness of this event do not hide the severity of the atrocity that occurred. It immediately conveys the violence and force of the communist party as it is posed to crush the peaceful resistance of the ordinary citizens. For this reason, the [CCP is desperately trying to hide this picture from the people within China.](#)

We live in an era where we are met with influx of news from around the world on a daily basis. The commodification of information and value of truth has come to dominate conversations surrounding media and news. While countries which enjoy freedom of press have the task of determining the legitimacy of sources, countries which face amounts of government censorship of the press receive an extremely biased and twisted view of events. However, while censorship poses an obvious threat to the ability news sources to accurately depict current events, there is an additional layer in which the documentation of history and is at risk of being bent to work in the favor of the state driven narrative.



Taking China as an example, through censorship of news sources and control of the written material documenting Chinese history, the state has crafted a narrative which positions the current party in a favorable light. In the case Tiananmen massacre, the [communist party has re framed the event as something necessary and positive](#) for the state while censoring images like Tank Man which are in contradiction to the nature of this message. This highlights the fact that history as it is presented in the books we read in school is not set in stone. The way it was written often comes as a product of a particular viewpoint, but there is not necessarily a single way and the framing of certain narratives have significant consequences.

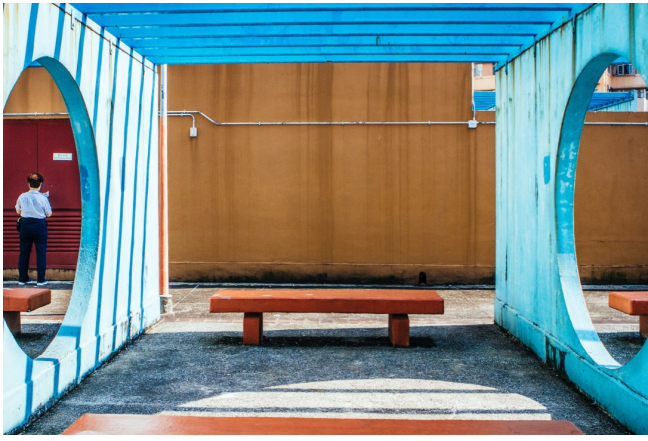




Historical narratives are often presented to us in written form that we grow accustomed to by reading textbooks throughout school. However, not all stories benefit from being told through this medium. One such alternative is art which can be used to capture particular narratives which are not best told with words. Works can be used to synthesize threads competing viewpoints, various challenges faced in a particular place and differing experiences. Art is able to have levels of social engagement as it is able to transcend the restrictions imposed by writing to form a more complete notion of freedom and understanding of one's sense of self within a particular time and place for both the artist and viewer.

Because there is not as tight a bound on the thoughts and reactions which a particular form of art can elicit, there is even more reason for state censorship to try to control and silence it. The ability to process and make sense of the historical threads allows those in the current reality to realize that things do not necessarily have to be as they are. As the well-known Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei, stated when asked about [why authoritarian regimes feel the particular need to censor art](#), “Art represents our instinct, our sensitivity, which we cannot—or still have not—clearly defined by science or by philosophy; it always comes so fast and unpredictable, and it bears a lot of danger because it is unpredictable.”





While there are many art forms which can be used to fully realize the freedom to process the events and histories one is met with, photography is a medium which is frequently presented alongside writing for its ability to capture the situation and sentiments of a particular place and time. Images such as Tank Man become common points in the collective's consciousness by which individuals and communities can process lived experiences and past histories.

From a personal perspective, when I travel to a new place the process by which I experience and consider the location I am visiting not only takes place in the moment but through my photography. For example, spending a handful of weeks in a Hong Kong while the massive protests that have been mobilized in response to the extradition bill has forced me to consider what it means to be in this place at this given time as a foreigner and a young student. Traveling around the city and viewing the news and people my age protesting has forced me to consider and learn about the current composition and complex history of this place. Its status as a former British colony, its complex relationship with china, its generational divides and humanitarian issues it faces regarding migrants, refugees, and housing shortages are all narratives which I have been confronted in the past few weeks but have never really thought about deeply before.

For me, taking in this place visually and seeing how these histories manifest in the construction of the city and its inhabitants is the way which I consider my experience in the context of a complex current environment. Seeing how the crowded high rises across the city which struggle to accommodate the city's population are situated alongside sleek sky scrapers and luxury shopping centers emphasizes the wealth disparity the city is plagued with. Walking through the city and seeing the students dressed up in protest gear and on their phones and then watching older people sitting within small antique and dry goods stalls highlights the drastic generational divide. Seeing these images and processing them through photography adds complexity to the situation that we see in the headlines regarding the current situations in Hong Kong as one realizes how all of these narratives are running in parallel to one another. The historical threads do not yield to the new stories arise, but instead merge into the life and image of the city at large.

Through photography I am able to engage with the contrasting details of the space in a way which puts me in a more intimate conversation with how history has formed the details and image of this particular place. Physically moving through these spaces puts the scale and nature of these topics in a perspective which I am able to make sense of. While these are all issues that I had read and heard about, they are not necessarily topics which are easy to process outside of the context of the daily experience that one has in the city. For people within repressive regimes, the ability to record and process their own histories and experiences in a similar manner is important for them to emerge with a fuller sense freedom and identity from a complex historical backdrop that often obscures their position in time and space.

