

Female Speaker:

From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

David Taylor:

Hello, this is David Taylor at the Library of Congress. Saturday, August 30th, will mark the fourteenth year that book lovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival.

The festival is free and open to the public, and this year for the first time it will hold evening hours. It will also be at a new location, the Walter E. Washington Convention Center here in Washington, D.C. The festival's hours will be from 10:00 in the morning until 10:00 at night and for more details, please visit the festival's website, which is www.loc.gov/bookfest. And now it's my pleasure to introduce Louisa Lim whose latest book, "The People's Republic of Amnesia" is about the effects of Tiananmen Square protests, which took place in Beijing in June 1989, 25 years ago.

Louisa is originally from the United Kingdom. She became a journalist for the BBC and later for National Public Radio and she's now visiting professor at the University of Michigan. She's been based in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing among other places for her work. Louisa, thank you for joining us today.

Louisa Lim:

Well, thank you for having me.

David Taylor:

Let me begin by asking, how your book "The People's Republic of Amnesia" came about?

Louisa Lim:

Well, I was actually asked by my publisher whether I would be interested in writing a book about Tiananmen 25 years on. And my initial reaction was extreme reluctance, in fact. You know, at first I just thought that it would be too difficult, too sensitive a subject to touch. And then the more I thought about, the more that I really felt it was time for a book like this to be written and that too many people had been silenced by fear and by self-censorship, and so I did decide to go ahead with this book despite my initial reservations.

David Taylor:

Is your book the first to take stock of grass roots impact of the Chinese government's crackdown?

Louisa Lim:

Well, there were many books written in the years immediately after 1989, particularly by the Chinese student activists who had later fled to the West and some of them became quite famous after their books came out in the West, even though they initially had not been that well-known. But then really material about 1989 sort of started to dry up. People stopped writing books and there really hasn't been a very in depth look

at the impact of 1989 written in the last few years, perhaps even in the last decade.

David Taylor:

But in a way, it's surprising that 25 years had passed, which is a typical reaction that I guess that I have and I'm wondering if others have had that reaction too? What do you think?

Louisa Lim:

Yes, I mean, I think what happened in China in 1989 is really kind of emblazoned on our psyches in the West because it was really one of the first events that happened overseas that we followed, almost in real time, because of all the American TV networks were there anyway. They had all gone to report on the visit of Mikhail Gorbachev. So we were really watching events as they happened and I think they made a very deep impact on viewers in the West. And that's why it was all the more surprising for me when I started to look at how it was remembered and whether the events are remembered in China just to discover the kind of depth of ignorance there is about the events of 1989 and the fact that the State has really managed to delete the process and the crackdown from the collective memory.

David Taylor:

Talk more about that. Talk about "amnesia" as the operative word in your title.

Louisa Lim:

Yes. There has been a really wide spread kind of amnesia, so I did an experiment to see how much young people know about 1989 because I really thought maybe the Internet is having this big impact in breaking that amnesia and poking through that amnesia now that we know there's more than 600 million Chinese that are online. So I took that [unintelligible] iconic picture that we all think about when we think about Tiananmen Square, the picture we call "Tankman" of the one man standing in front of a column of tanks in Beijing. And I took it around four Beijing universities and I spoke to a hundred students and I asked them if they could identify the picture and if they said yes, I would check to see whether they really know what it was. And I was surprised that only 15 out of 100 students knew even what the picture was. You know, many of them simply had no idea, they asked me whether it was taken in South Korea, whether it was taken in Kosovo, and they simply had never seen that picture before. So I think a lot of young people in China, they simply don't know that anything happened in their country in 1989.

Whilst among older people there is a more complicated kind of amnesia, although they may themselves know what happened, they won't talk about it likely with their children because they're worried about the impact that that knowledge could have on them. Really, knowledge of China's history, particularly the more sensitive parts of it like the events of 1989, is seen as dangerous.

David Taylor:

Louisa, please comment on the ways you've learned that the People's Republic of China has attempted to induce that amnesia.

Louisa Lim:

Well, if you try to find about the teaching of Tiananmen, you will very quickly find that it isn't really taught at all. Students will not learn about it at school. If you search for it on the Internet in China, nothing comes up except for information for the tourist's information about Tiananmen Square. There's really a very widespread censorship of the events of 1989. In the classes that it is taught in, for example, if you're studying history at university, there is a very kind of shallow treatment on Tiananmen Square so the events of 1989 take up just four pages in a 529 page textbook. And what's really astounding is that even those four pages contain a false account. It's really an account that one French academic said was a monumental historical untruth. So basically there are lies contained in textbooks. That's what those who do learn about Tiananmen Square learn about. So there's been this real effort to stop people from remembering. And that's been backed up by punitive means. We saw that this year when, in the run up to the 25th anniversary, police had a very extensive crackdown, the worst in many years, and more than a hundred people ended up under house arrest or in detention for trying to talk about June the 4th or to remember it. Even acts of private commemoration in private apartments behind closed doors were punished this year. Some people that took part in commemorations like that in private homes were accused of creating a public disturbance and detained by police. So there's a very real cost talking about Tiananmen Square and the events of 1989 or to remembering it.

David Taylor:

In that regard, was it difficult to find people in China who would be willing to speak with you about it?

Louisa Lim:

Well, the people who I spoke to were surprisingly willing to tell their stories. And I think it's because they, too, had this sense that 25 years had passed, a quarter century, and they've been unable to tell their stories themselves because of the limitations placed on them. And I think many of them are becoming elderly now, particularly those who were quite major players at the time, political figures, or those who are parents of children who were killed in 1989. And I think many of them decided to tell their stories because they feared perhaps they would not get told otherwise. But I was very nervous about whether it would be risky for people to tell their stories to me because really no one knows what kind of consequences there might be. A political environment is very changeable and it is very difficult to know, you know, if I talk to someone now will there be consequences two or three years down the line, so I really thought it was an act of courage that people were willing to talk to me and that they were willing for me to use their real names.

David Taylor:

Yes. Would you tell us a little about some of the stories you relayed in your book?

Louisa Lim:

Yes, absolutely. So, one of the people who I spoke to who was very interesting was an artist who, back in 1989 had been a 17 year-old

soldier, one of the martial law troops deployed to clear the students from Tiananmen Square. And I found it was just fascinating listening to his account because we really saw all of those events anew from completely different eyes. You know, he spoke of the soldiers and how really how young they were and how they had been shipped in from the countryside and really had no idea what they were doing. They'd been subject to weeks and weeks of ideological training, being told that those in the square were enemy of the state, were hostile to China, this kind of thing, and they were very nervous and very scared. And he described the moment when they were deployed into the Square and they were given just word of mouth order, a verbal order that they could open fire if they came across difficulty. And he said, well, we didn't really know what that meant. No one told us could we open fire in the air, were we meant to shoot people, we had no idea what was going on. So it was really instructive to see it from the other side. And for him, he is someone whose life has really been dominated by the events of that one night.

Later he became an artist and he started to paint over and over again those scenes that he had seen that night and he really is almost reliving it through this artwork. So his story was very fascinating for me. And another person whose story I just felt was so powerful and instructive was a woman called Dun Shian Ning [phonetic sp] who is the mother of a 19 year-old boy who was shot dead by the troops in 1989. Her son died from one bullet to the head and she later, together with another brave mother, set up a group called the Tiananmen Mothers. And they started to try to track down the names of those who had died and they started to also become a political lobby group. Really China's first grassroots political lobbying group. So they were lobbying for, and they still are, lobbying for truth, accountability, and compensation in connection with the deaths in 1989. And really what is sort of astounding about her story is the length that the state has taken to try to keep her quiet.

So even to the extent of preventing her from mourning her son's death, so she discovered the exact spot where her son had died by a roadside where he had bled to death. And one year she slipped out and she made offerings, traditional offerings for him at that site. And the next year, when she wanted to go and mourn him again, she discovered she was under house arrest and she could not leave her important. And even today, if you go to the place where her son died, you will notice there is actually a closed-circuit camera, which is trained on the exact spot where her son died. And she sees it as a camera for her waiting for her alone, if she should try to go back and mark his death there. And the words that she said to me that I thought was so powerful was that, she said, the state -- it shows how powerful we are, this group of old people, and the state is afraid of us, we are not afraid of them because we represent righteousness.

David Taylor:

Very powerful indeed. You spoke about the possible consequences of people sharing their stories with you. What are the consequences on you of having written this book with regard to the future of your reporting in China?

Louisa Lim:

I'm not sure that there will be consequences at the moment. I'm, at the moment, based in Michigan and I have no plans to go back to report in China in the near future. I do know that the -- when my book was reviewed in "The Economist" magazine, the pages containing the book review were ripped out when the magazine arrived in China. So no one inside China has read any copies of "The Economist" -- any reviews of my book. And I also know that people who tried to send my book to China have not been successful; the book has been stopped at customs at the entry point and not being delivered. So, I don't know whether there will be consequences for me but I, at the moment, am more concerned about whether there will be -- the consequences for those I spoke to.

David Taylor:

Yes, yes. Overall, what do you think is the importance of reporting on government's attempts to induce amnesia about a major social protest in this government of any other government?

Louisa Lim:

Having been a reporter in China, having been based there for the past 10 years, I almost feel like it's my duty, was in a way my duty to write this book, to write the things that cannot be written within China, because I do think these stories risk being lost if they are not told now. And I think the way in which the Chinese government operates, particularly within China, for those who it deems a threat to stability, it is so very -- it's just so extreme, and I think that it's difficult for us outside to understand where those impulses are coming from. And I, when I wrote this book, I was surprised at the power of history, the fact that it -- these events of a quarter century ago inspire such fear in a government, particularly, you know, the second richest government in the world, I think it says a lot about the Chinese government. The fact that it tries so very, very hard to stop, you know, an old woman from mourning her son really shows how vulnerable it is on historical matters. And as journalists, it is our duty to shine a light on attempts to impose amnesia on an entire population.

David Taylor:

Well thank you very much for your comments today on your book, "The People's Republic of Amnesia." I wanted to ask you about something a bit different. As you know, the theme of this year's book festival is, stay up with a good book. Is there a book you've read recently that you enjoyed staying up to read?

Louisa Lim:

A book that I really enjoyed immensely and I was surprised at just how good it was, is a book by a Kenyan author, and I'm not sure exactly how to pronounce his name, but the book is called "The Wizard of the Crow," and it's by Ngugi wa Thiongo. And it's political satire about a nameless African country, which is run by a dictator whose name is simply the Dictator. And all the sort of various orders he gives and how he maintains control. And it's surprisingly humorous as well as being very, very perceptive. It was a wonderful read and I was surprised that I hadn't actually heard more about it anywhere. So, I would thoroughly recommend that.

David Taylor:
What's the title again?

Louisa Lim:
"The Wizard of the Crow."

David Taylor:
Okay, we'll look for that. We've been hearing from Louisa Lim, author of *The People's Republic of Amnesia*, she'll be appearing on Saturday, August 30th, in the History and Biography Pavilion of the National Book Festival at the Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C, where she'll be talking more about her book and responding to questions from the audience. We hope you can join us then.

Thank you very much, Louisa.

Louisa Lim:
Thank you so much.

Female Speaker:
This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov.

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