



Who Gets (to be) Remembered in *Life*

by Amy Mungur

I began teaching secondary world history in the United States in the early 2000s after nearly two years of teaching and studying in Wuhan, China. I have no recollection of learning about China/East Asia prior to moving to Wuhan, despite the advantage of being educated at a progressive (and well-funded) high school and college in the Southern U.S., where I am from. I do recall adults, mainly family and close friends, warning me of the dangers of living abroad in such a “foreign” place, despite never having been there themselves. My schooling and theirs was one of western civilization, where Asian histories were only present in the context of reacting to the U.S., rarely, if ever, explained in the context of their own histories (Gluck 1997, 200).

In my first few years of secondary teaching, I found myself at odds with the curriculum laid out before me. What I experienced and learned while living in China was fundamentally at odds with educational resources and historical/cultural representations about China. It was in those first years that I began to use my own photographs with students, most of whom were white, like me, and from middle-class families. For those who had experienced international travel, their travels took

About the photo: Resting Place (Memorial Square – The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders). Photo by Amy Mungur.

them to Europe. At the time, I wanted students to see beyond that textbook scope, to see the complexities in the historical and the contemporary. I did not have a language for that then, but my attempts were directed at disruption of what the textbook had determined as official knowledge: China has two histories—Ancient China and Communist China—although both situate China outside the tunnel of our history, where “everything seems to be a rockbound, timeless, changeless tradition” (Blaut 1993, 5). In addition, I did not have language or knowledge to discuss the supremacy the U.S. held over China through representations that upheld structures of oppression, much less to work with students as they grappled with interrogating them.

Now, as a teacher educator, I work alongside preservice teachers navigating the challenges of U.S.-centered representations that extend beyond textbooks and other curricular materials. The students I have worked with for nearly a decade in teacher education come from various racial, ethnic, and religious groups; many are first-generation college students, and most summarize their knowledge about China/East Asia in similar ways [as I would have when I was a student], primarily from TV and film¹. As such, I am moved by this special issue’s attention to death, loss, and remembrance to share methods for how I engage representational practices in popular media and reflect on the sustained impact these mis/understandings have on student learning when not interrogated. My focus on remembrance comes from my experiences living in China and my years teaching world history (and preservice teachers with that focus) with specific attention on the representational imbalance of the “West over East” (Oxley and Morris 2013). How does the East get (to be) remembered? Finally, the use of photography is an access point into the past but also “a starting point for reflecting on our sense of identity” (Morris-Suzuki 2005, 118).

The Pedagogy of Visual Text

A photograph’s complexity is revealed in that it assumes reality. Susan Sontag (1977) argued this complexity gives the photograph authority because not only is it “an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real” (154). This authority is also its pedagogical power, allowing for participation and alienation, remembering and forgetting. Sontag’s image-world was the space created by the photographer with the photographs that they snap. Importantly, while an event/moment is captured in a photograph, the event at some point ends, but through its captured image, it lives on or still exists even after the event has ended (11). Pedagogically, images guide viewers both to remember and forget (certain events) in the presences and absences of the photographs themselves. The image also fixes content as having happened, and thus will forever happen as it did at that moment.

Photographs and the use of photographs to re/present [someone/something] are exercises in power. In one way, power is exercised by the decision to use a particular photograph to create/construct meaning. Thus, photographs are imbued with power, as they can be appropriated to give meaning to an event, or even to bring the past event to the present, to be remembered. In this way, photographs redefine reality, whereby reality becomes more about what we see in an image, (Sontag 1977, 161) than the possibilities of what reality could be captured by the naked eye or beyond what is captured in the picture. To get students to explore the possibilities obscured through images, I frequently use *Life* magazine in my courses to teach (historical) encounters between the U.S. and China. *Life*’s unique style bridged early 20th-century viewing norms—the newspaper and the picture weekly. A *Chicago Tribune* reporter noted, “*Life* photographs were there to savor, a

week at a time; *Life* photographers fanned out over the globe the way that network crews do today, but what *Life* photographers brought back was timeless” (Greene 1986, D1). Now accessible through [Google Books](#), teachers can use *Life* as a source for students not only to analyze and evaluate the American imagination as storied through a popular journal, but also to identify the power of re/presentation and the (historical) assumptions that have been in/formed by their ubiquitous use of image to story China’s hi/story.

Life Magazine

Life was a magazine of pictures. Tied not subtly to profit, in a 1936 proposal to advertisers, editor Henry R. Luce stated, “Pictures are faster than words...Pictures invite a look, where long texts repel. Pictures dramatize where text narrates and describes. Pictures sell” (in Kozol 1994, 36). Believing in *Life*’s power to shape popular opinion (Doss 2001, 11), the magazine aimed to tell the story of the U.S. (America), American life, and the “sure belief that the American way was the way of the world” (Doss 2001). Born in China to missionary parents, Luce hoped that China would embrace the American Way by adopting Christianity and democracy (Jespersen 1996). China moving away from that hope drives much of the coverage during the Cold War era.

The photographs in *Life* were meant to be revealing and, at times, graphic to its subscriber base—primarily “white, middle-class Americans, most of whom shared Luce’s fundamental assumptions about God and the Republican Party” (Baughman 2001, 48). In contrast to a journal like *National Geographic*, which features images idealizing the non-western world while downplaying poverty and violence (Lutz and Collins 1993), *Life*’s photojournalism was meant as “witness [to] the extraordinary events—catastrophes, victories, pioneering expeditions—that determine the flavor of an era” (Korn 1971, 20).

With preservice teachers, I try to carve space for them to consider the various points of view conveyed in photographs (of China) from the same period re/presented in different journals. For example, an image from a 1964 *National Geographic* article describes “Shadow boxers greet sunrise in Shanghai Square” (629). I will juxtapose this small color image with an image from 1966 in *Life*, “[Boxer Uprising: Inside the Besieged Legions](#).” I use these because students are drawn to the word “Boxer.” It becomes an access point to the Boxer Rebellion, which they will have to teach, but it also gives them an opportunity to consider how Boxers and the Boxer Rebellion are represented in curricular resources. At the same time, it gives me an opportunity to *hear* what they see and how/if they see variation in representation based on these two journals. What I know, and I share this with them as we work our way through the discussion, is that during the Cold War, writers, photographers, and editors at *National Geographic* had to work to represent nations like China, and the Soviet Union, in a way that positioned the representation somewhere between favorable and evil because “favorable portrayals [in *National Geographic*] of Eastern Bloc nations would have been unpatriotic; yet to dwell on their evils would violate editorial policy” (Lutz and Collins 1993, 96). Once students have thought about that driving factor, we return to the images and note what elements may be evidence of that practice.

Sometimes I work with students on advertisement/feature story juxtapositions and the meaning (that can be) made through deconstruction. I model this for them, letting them now *hear what I see*. For example, *Life*’s September 23, 1966, feature story, [is juxtaposed](#) with a telephone

advertisement. The full-page black and white AT&T advertisement (left) shows a young child seemingly playing hide and seek. Their mother, meanwhile, packs up dishes, an expression on her face corresponding to the text, “Moving can be madness. Maybe we can help a little.” Moving our gaze just slightly to the right is the feature [story](#), “100 Violent Years.” For me, it is difficult to miss the use of language and color—the **madness** of moving and the **turmoil** of Mao’s rule, CHINA in all caps and red, the only color used on both pages. As the young child in the AT&T advertisement hides in a box, the introduction to the feature photo essay, itself blocked in the shape of the Qianmen Gate, noted that China has been “a prisoner of her own history” (61). Thus, while the reader is being sold a telephone company subscription, the reader is also being sold (a version of) China.

I share my thinking with students but also note that the positioning of the advertisements in proximity to the photo-essays and editorials was often unplanned. Hales (2001) explained

In the office of the managing editor, each week the walls became vertical mock-up boards for the final version, and as the week went on, the editorial and advertising sales staffs arranged and rearranged the sequence, the size of ads and articles, the scale of individual pictures, and all the other elements that made up the finished product. (116)

What Hales meant by unplanned is that the advertisements were not selected based on the stories and photo essays. However, the arranging and rearranging suggests a system of curating, whereby decisions were intentionally and carefully made not only to present a newsworthy story but also to reinforce consumer and domestic ideologies (Kozol 1994, 36), a point of discussion that often leads into discussions of pop-up ads when scrolling through social media.

Despite *Life*’s dependence on advertising, and the juxtaposition of photo essays like “China: 100 Violent Years” with an AT&T advertisement, the photo essay was *Life*’s most prominent feature, and thus a primary representational and pedagogical practice. The combination of photographs and narratives, and the framing of each into a photo essay, worked to construct a story around the news event. The focus on photographs to tell this story aligned with Luce’s belief that photographs would be a selling point. In the context of this essay, *Life* was selling a story of China, which arguably became *the* story of China in the U.S. collective imagination, the story to remember.

Before analyzing any photographic collection in *Life* I task students with independent (or small group) work investigating Henry Luce. While I can certainly present a mini lecture on Henry Luce, having them learn on their own, taking notes and gathering information sets them up for inference making prior to engaging with the photographs. Once students have gathered some information, they share their findings, and I clear up any misconceptions or fill in any necessary gaps. I then prompt: Based on your gathered evidence of Henry Luce, what do you expect to see, know, and learn in *Life* magazine? Students write down responses, which they will return to at the end of the class or lesson.

The collection I typically use is a three-part special series *Life* published beginning with the September 23, 1966, issue on the history of China. I find this collection particularly significant

because most students I work with will encounter this content as practitioners—either directly in world history or indirectly in U.S. history discussions of immigration, exclusion, and the impact of geopolitical issues on the treatment of non-white immigrants in the U.S. My decision to use this collection is intentional and I am transparent with students why *this* content has been selected. On September 16, 1966, a week before its publication, *Life* previewed the series:

As political convulsions shake Communist China today, LIFE begins a three-part series to illuminate what is going on there. Using rare pictures, the series documents the massive events of the past 100 years, which broke up an ancient empire and brought Communist rule to the largest nation on earth—a nation imprisoned by its own history. (37)

This quote minimizes the intention and agency of *Life* editors in photograph selection. The photographs used to re/present the past 100 years were taken from a series of sources. In the [Table of Contents](#) for Part 1, the editor noted that *Life* “undertook a worldwide search for photographs which unearthed many rare pictures. Some of them have never been published” (September 23, 1966, 5). Photographic credits listed range from private personal collections like the Baroness Giovannella Grenier Collection to the Board of Missions of the United Methodist Church. Significantly, these photographs, now published in *Life*, were **collected** from a variety of sources, and pieced together, **curated**, to re/present the past 100 years of China’s history. Although the search for photographs to help cover this story was launched worldwide, the selections came from westerners (5).

The editor selected the images in the special three-part series to give the reader an experience and a chance to learn about Chinese history. This experience focused on what life was like in China, *for the westerner*, as the narrative and images center western people and perspectives. For example, in ["Boxer Uprising: inside the besieged legions"](#) (66-67) the largest image captures a group of western missionaries, a commonly assumed primary target of the Boxers². However, the focus on the missionaries also foregrounds Luce’s own experience growing up the son of missionaries.

The following section is a sample of two images that I use with students to begin their engagement with photographic analysis toward understanding who/what gets (to be) remembered. Recognizing the limits of applying compositional interpretation alone, students with limited experience in photographic analysis may benefit at first from “looking carefully at the content, form, and experiencing of the images” (Rose 2016, 60). Drawing further upon Rose (2016), students are prompted to identify and name content, color, spatial organization, light, and expressive content, defined for students as “affective characteristics” (79).

A Tale of Two Photographs

Part I of the series begins with the ["Boxer Uprising: inside the besieged legions."](#) Of particular interest is the page-length image, which I have entitled ["Old Glory"](#) (69). This image captures two Chinese men killed during the “rescue” mission, which was made up of people from six countries³. As a documentary photograph, it reveals “a hidden reality, that is, a reality hidden from [the photographer]” (Sontag 1977, 55). The reality, however, is also suppressed from the audience. Drawing on the familiar, the connection between the photograph and the assumed

western/American subscriber, is the American flag, described in the caption as “Old Glory floated above Japanese infantrymen at the gate of [Tianjin]” (68).

The dead Chinese men in “Old Glory” are in the foreground but not acknowledged in the caption—they are there to gaze at, but not relate to, just as the photographer gazes “on other people’s reality with curiosity, with detachment, with professionalism” (Sontag 1977, 55). The camera angle makes this point. From the vantage point of the photographer, positioned slightly above the dead Chinese men, the lighting draws the eye along the incline and fixes on the flag. In the context of the photo essay, this image was the largest on the page, yet the bodies of the dead Chinese men were not acknowledged. While the photograph brings the viewer into presence with death, looking up at the flag is a reminder of the history of the U.S., which in this case is distinctly influenced by the angles and framing of the photograph. Thus, the reader/looker is reminded not of destruction caused by war, but the strength of the U.S. The Chinese men are not honored in (their) death, and thus not remembered.

Turning the page, there is another image of death. The caption for this image, ["Fallen Soldier,"](#) explains a scene from battle:

In the gloom of the great [Qian] Men gate on the [Beijing] wall lay the flag-draped body of Capt. Henry Joseph Reily, U.S. Army, surrounded by the men of his battery. While directing fire in support of a futile, bloody American attack on the Forbidden City, he was killed by Imperial troops the day after the allies entered [Beijing] to lift the Boxer siege. (70)

We are reminded of death in both the caption and the image. Death in this image is linked with honor and sacrifice of a fallen U.S. Soldier and the U.S. flag signifying this honor and sacrifice. The camera angle puts the viewer at eye level, almost to allow participation in mourning of the fallen soldier. It is worth noting how the viewer is directed to relate to both these images, with only one prompting empathy with the dead. Through the practices of looking, when a viewer looks down on something, like on the dead Chinese soldiers in “Old Glory,” the angle gives the viewer power over what is looked down upon. When the viewer looks up at something, like up at the flag in the same image, the angle suggests a reverence, positioning viewers in some way inferior to the object they look up to (Rose 2016, 70). “Old Glory” and “Fallen Soldier” both capture scenes of death, yet death is only acknowledged for the U.S. fallen soldier, the flag-draped-coffin signifying that sacrifice. The distance between the dead Chinese soldiers and the flag itself, hovering from both above and afar, teaches and reminds us of the power that the U.S. presumes over China.

That images can work both to detach from, and connect the viewer to, what is photographed is a very important aspect in the practices of looking. The viewer only sees a fragment of what the photographer sees. The photographer is always present if only “to carry his camera and react quickly when the moment comes” (Rose 2016, 31). However, photographers are perceived absent from images because they are rarely, if ever, seen. *Life’s* images work to remove that presence, but in so doing establish the viewer as “distant and somewhat superior to what the image shows us” (31) and, most significantly, position the viewer “from the same hidden vantage point” as the

photographer. Thus, positioning the viewer to gaze upon/over the subject—to become the spectator—is a tool specifically employed by *Life* magazine (Morgan 2001, 140).

Interrogating the Imbalance

The emphasis and significance that *Life* placed on their photo essays to report history positions *Life* as a particularly compelling, and powerfully instructive, source for learning about how China has been storied in this country. But it is not enough to analyze and evaluate photographs, although the skills employed to take up those tasks are necessary for building critical skills. Using the images of the past (in *Life*), I like to give students the opportunity to create works aimed at re/story telling. Framed as an attempt to correct the west/east imbalance and make room for the “possibilities beyond what is captured in the picture” (Sontag 1977), the creative work is solely determined by the student. In the past, students have built WikiSpaces (now discontinued), crafted their own photo essays that reframe *Life*’s China narrative, written songs that lay bare systems of power, and most recently used a [Netflix PowerPoint template](#) to articulate their vision of history teaching despite a [spate of bills](#) set to prevent them from enacting their visions.

As students taking my courses have engaged in the process of assessing, evaluating, and reflecting on the image and how it can be used to remember/forget hi/stories, I have them write an artist statement to accompany their creative works. The artist statement requires students to name the process by which they made sense of the past, including image/text selection, modality, and (where applicable) sound. Because students are preservice teachers in a teacher preparation program, they are further prompted to make recommendations for integrating in grades 6-12. The hope, from my end, is that they will implement similar student-driven creative works into their own classrooms aimed at interrogating and correcting the imbalance so evident in the curriculum, standards, and policies intent on sustaining that power.

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Want more Visual Literacy activities?

- The Library of Congress’ Analyzing Primary Sources page includes a worksheet for photos/images: <https://www.loc.gov/programs/teachers/getting-started-with-primary-sources/guides>.
- Falk, Lisa. 2014. Expressing and Reading Identity through Photographs. *Journal of Folklore and Education*. 1:4-9, <https://jfepublications.org/article/expressing-and-reading-identity-through-photographs>.
- A hub for death related photo-essays: <https://www.talkdeath.com/the-best-photo-documentaries-on-death>

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Endnotes

1. When I begin my lessons on Asia, I first ask students to define it using words and phrases. Students often ask which countries “belong in” or make up the Asian continent. Students overwhelmingly describe Asia as China first, followed by overpopulated, traditional, authoritarian, and “other side of the world.” Importantly, what follows are conversations of how we have accessed this “other side of the world” when nearly all students I have asked over my 20 years in teaching have never traveled to Asia.
2. The Boxers were demanding an end to the special privileges awarded to Chinese Christian converts. Their attacks soon included western missionaries, who fell into the category of “anything foreign.” When the Boxers advanced to Beijing, the Empress Dowager allied with the Boxers to keep their loyalty (Spence 1990, 231-33).
3. Great Britain, United States, Germany, Japan, Italy, and Austria.

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