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The Question of Truth and Humanism in Contemporary Photography from China during the Eighties

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Resumen

La fotografía es el medio de la verdad. Desde su inicio, ha sido considerada la herramienta más formidable para documentar la realidad. En este trabajo se analiza cómo esta idea evolucionó durante un período de cambio innegable en China en los años ochenta. A través de un enfoque histórico y teórico, se explora el surgimiento de una nueva generación de fotógrafos que alteraron fundamentalmente el enfoque fotográfico en el país. El objetivo es demostrar cómo se originaron nuevas tendencias durante una década de efervescencia cultural en todos los ámbitos de la producción cultural. Este trabajo ofrece una mirada a este período increíble.

Palabras clave

Fotografía documental, fotografía en China, teoría de la fotografía, Historia de la Fotografía, Exposiciones fotográficas.

Abstract

Photography is the medium of truth. Since its inception, it has been considered the most formidable tool for documenting reality. This paper analyses how this idea evolved in a period of undeniable change in China during the eighties. Through a historical and theoretical approach, it explores the emergence of a new generation of photographers that fundamentally altered the approach to photography in the country. The objective is to demonstrate how new trends originated during a decade of cultural effervescence across all realms of cultural production. This paper offers a glimpse into this incredible period.

Keywords

Documentary Photography, Photography in China, Theory of Photography, History of Photography, Photographic Exhibitions.

THE QUESTION OF TRUTH AND HUMANISM IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY FROM CHINA DURING THE EIGHTIES

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Since its inception, photography has been closely associated with the practice of reportage. As a medium, it has consistently been perceived as a tool capable of capturing reality as it exists, akin to a machine that appears to document the world in all its authenticity. The direct result of this inseparable characteristic was the emergence of the quintessential photographic genre: documentary photography, which remains in its most emblematic form. As Clarke (1997: 145) affirms, as a genre it has been considered "a truthful and objective account (or representation) of what has happened". Or as Wells (1996: 64), referring to the definition of Rossler of documentary as a practice with a past, said:

> "A past we might add, which despite changing technologies, practices and fashions, was always concerned to claim for documentary a special relationship to real life and a singular status with regard to notions of truth and authenticity".

It is a genre rooted in the author's ethical integrity, wherein accuracy in content presentation is paramount, and excessive experimentation with technical and formal aspects is discouraged. Such experimentation may lead to interpretations of the work as "artistic," a designation typically associated with

a personal interpretation of the observed world rather than a faithful representation of it.

These conventions formed the foundation for the genre's evolution throughout the last century. Particularly in the 1930s, photography emerged as the ideal medium for documenting the living conditions of the impoverished classes, serving as a potent tool for progressive reformers advocating for significant societal changes. However, the definition of "documentary photography" as a genre has undergone transformations, with its boundaries becoming less clearly defined. For instance, following theoretical advancements in recent years, it cannot solely be classified as a form of photography directly associated with informational media. This is evidenced by examples of "artistic" photography that effectively narrate stories contributing to social change. Furthermore, there exist instances of "pure" documentary photography that, due to their aesthetic qualities, are showcased in "artistic" venues such as galleries and museums.

In China, the documentary genre emerged during a period when pictorialism dominated the prevailing photographic movement. Amateur photographers viewed themselves as the "modern literati" and heirs to traditional painters, substituting the paintbrush with the camera.

During the 1930s, progressive and left-wing movements provided inspiration for the first generation of documentary photographers. Figures such as Sha Fei 沙飞 (1912-1950), alongside Wu Yinxian 吴印咸 (1900-1994) and Shi Shaohua 石少华 (1918-1998), stood out as emblematic authors of this era. Their works included portraits of workers in Shanghai and documented resistance on the communist side during the war.

With the establishment of the new republic in 1949, photography assumed a significant role as a tool for propaganda, promotion, and dissemination of policies endorsed by the Communist Party, serving as a means of mobilizing the masses. These photographs were disseminated to the masses through exhibitions, publications, and magazines. In 1961, Wu Yinxian authored a textbook for students of the Department of Photography at the Beijing Film Academy. The following excerpt illustrates the conceptualization of photography during the Mao Era:

> "[…] the shaping of photographic art has its own principles and expressive techniques, which revolve closely around real life. […] If a photographic art image does not make people feel that it comes from real life, this will affect its educational usefulness. The photographer must be absolutely sure about what his duty is, keenly proficient in photography's means of expression, and clearly understand his own style. Only in this way can he effectively create a photographic art image." (Wu, 2014)

This article analyzes the developments in documentary photography in China in the 1980s. During this period, young photographers, cognizant of the visual manipulation experienced by their predecessors during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), endeavored to reclaim photography's reputation as an instrument for documenting the "truth."

The objective is to establish a starting point for a deeper understanding of a period marked by significant creative activity, and consequently, a period of considerable complexity. An exploration of photographic production in the 1980s would be incomplete without considering the theoretical advancements in other artistic realms such as literature and cinema, as well as the philosophical and ideological developments of the same period.

The article will demonstrate how reportage photography in 1980s China was primarily centered on the representation of the "human," reflecting a broader discourse within intellectual circles on humanism. It will commence by examining the historical evolution of humanist documentary photography, which, propelled by the new generation of photographers during this decade, fostered a novel approach to portraying the Chinese populace. In the subsequent section, emphasis will be placed on a new generation of photographers who, towards the decade's conclusion, departed from the traditional confines of documentary photography by introducing alternative perspectives on both technique and content in their work.

The Chinese Photographic Spring and the Emergence of Humanist Photography

It is worth noting that the 1980s, as a distinct historical era, began in the preceding decade, specifically in 1976. This year proved to be pivotal in Chinese history, as it witnessed unforeseen developments. In January, the passing of Zhou Enlai (1898-1976), a charismatic leader widely beloved by the Chinese people; followed by the death of Mao Zedong (1893-1976) in September, which initiated a power struggle at the apex of the state. Within a month, the members of the 'Gang of Four' were apprehended on the orders of Hua Guofeng (1921-2008), the new party chairman. Their downfall marked the conclusion of the tumultuous Great Cultural Revolution. The spring of 1976 marks a significant moment in the future development of photography in China. Between April 4th and 5th, coinciding with the Qingming Festival—a day dedicated to honoring ancestors—a major public demonstration occurred in Tian'anmen Square. This demonstration was a reaction to the prohibition of commemorating the memory of the national leader Zhou Enlai, who had passed away a few months earlier. That was the first ever to take place outside of the party organization since the beginning of the People's Republic. The popular

participation soon transformed into a strong criticism of the "Gang of Four," which resulted in repression by the authorities. During the demonstrations in Tian'anmen Square many young people decided to bring their own camera in order to eternalize this exceptional event. Like this, a private gaze came out of the walls of people's homes for the first time since the birth of the People's Republic in order to shoot a public event without any mediation of the Party. This was a real appropriation of public space by the young photographers. But the real novelty was that for the first time in the history of the PRC a "private eye" takes pictures of a public space without prior permission of the authorities. Li Shi (2012: 69) uses the term of «citizen photojournalists» that "took up the job of media professionals and become both eyewitnesses and recorders of the unfolding historical events". Some of them became the new generation of photojournalists during the eighties.

After the demonstrations, and with the new political environment favorable, Wang Zhiping 王志平 (1947), a graphic designer of the Chinese Agriculture Publishing House, decided to select more than three hundred pictures to compose a personal album of those days. The album titled *Guo sang* 国丧 (National mourning), circulated through informal channels. Other young photographers that documented the manifestation decided to create an album, between them Li Xiaobin 李晓斌 (1955), Wu Peng 吴鹏 (1948) and Luo Xiaoyun 罗小韵 (1953).

The historical events that followed the demonstration, with the subsequent rise to power of Deng Xiaoping and rehabilitation of the movement, convinced these young photographers to make public the project of a great collection of photographs of the events. In January 1979 was published the book People's Mourning (*Renmin de daonian* 人民的悼念) by the Beijing Publishing House. The official press welcomed these young photographers as heroes of the people and the nation.

However, this publication was met with resistance from young photographers who felt manipulated. They believed that their movement, which had initially arisen spontaneously, had been co-opted and ideologically appropriated by those in power. Consequently, following the purely documentary act of photography witnessed in Tian'anmen Square, these photographers, led by Wang Zhiping, advocated for a shift in focus towards formal elements rather than content. They argued that content was always susceptible to manipulation by a dominant ideology.

Following these experiences, Li Xiaobin and Wang Zhiping spearheaded the establishment of a photographic society: the "April Photo Society" (*Siyue Jinghui* 四月影会) was founded in 1979 in Beijing. The fundamental principle guiding these young photographers was to distance themselves from the official photography dynamics and party propaganda, enabling them to freely pursue their technical and aesthetic explorations. With this objective in mind, the Society organized the first-ever independent photographic exhibition in China, inaugurated in Zhongshan Park on April 1, 1979. The exhibition served as a manifesto for the emerging photographic trend. Indeed, the title chosen for the exhibition, "Nature, Society, Human" (*Ziran, shehui, ren* 自然 - 社会 - 人), with its succinctness and power, resembled a slogan for a new era. The new photography, which is promoted throughout the exhibition, wanted to distance itself from the official photography of the previous decades, claiming its independence and encouraging the freedom of the artist's aesthetic research.

The photographs showcased at the exhibition exhibited a diverse range of styles: while some adhered to the documentary spirit reminiscent of the events of the spring of 1976, many others explored formal elements and escapist themes. It is important to recognize that the memories of the Cultural Revolution, with its

propagandistic visual imagery, lingered heavily in the minds of the authors. Consequently, numerous photographers sought to break away from that reality and instead focused on formalism, departing from the rigid realism of documentary photography.

These initial disagreements underscored one of the key issues that ultimately led to the downfall of the April Photo Society: the divergence of opinions regarding whether to adopt a documentary or artistic approach. Despite these differences, the exhibition was repeated twice, in 1980 and 1981, each time drawing larger audiences. The final edition of the exhibition held the prestigious honor of being hosted at the National Art Museum of China.

The April Photo Society suddenly inspired others photographers around the country to organize themselves: the *Renren yinghui* (人人影会, Everybody group) was founded in 1979 in Guangzhou; the *Shaanxi qunti* (陕西群体, Shaanxi group) in Xi'an; the *Wu ge yi* (五个一, Five ones) in Xiamen; *Bei he meng* (北河盟, North river union group) in Shanghai; *Liebian qunti* (裂变群体, Fission group) in Beijing (Gu 2009a: 10).

During the 1980s, artists came together to collaborate on organizing exhibitions and publications, pooling resources and sharing expenses. This collaborative spirit played a crucial role in the flourishing of artistic expression and cultural exchange during this period of transition and openness in China. Furthermore, the leading museums of China hosted exhibitions dedicated to the most important international figures of documentary photography, as Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, etc. (Roberts 2013: 144; Gu 2009a: 10). Some of these exhibitions travelled around the country, and it is possible that they had a major influence on the work of young Chinese photographers.

The two prominent figures at the forefront of the April Photo Society were Wang Zhiping and Li Xiaobin. While we've discussed Wang Zhiping's inclination to depart from the realism of documentary photography and embrace new forms of formal experimentation, as he himself later articulated: "At that time, what photography lacked was what surrounded individuals in their daily lives, the expression of the most profound sentiments in people's thoughts, so this exhibition came to be" (as cited in Monohon 2017: 98).

The "Nature, Society, Human" exhibitions encompassed not only technical photographic experiments but also innovations in content. One such example is the inclusion of photographs categorized under the name *xiaopin*, inspired by a secondary genre of traditional literature and painting. These images depict lighter subjects, diverging from the grand narratives promoted by the authorities (Chen 2017).

On the other hand, Li Xiaobin emphasizes the significance of the photographic image as a document: "In my opinion content is also form. With regard to the work, content and form are equally important" (as cited in Roberts 2013: 134). As a worker at the National Museum of the History of the Revolution during the events of Tian'anmen, Li Xiaobin believes that the role of the photographer is to establish a visual legacy that facilitates an understanding of the country's history:

> "Photographs of the past are Culture, are a strong heritance. A photographer should not only possess a strong independent and critical character toward current events, but also emphasize a historical approach" (Awake 2009: 72).

The central concept of the exhibition "Nature, Society, Human" fundamentally revolves around the "individual," directly referencing the universal idea of Humanism. This concept was a

focal point of the significant debates of the "New Era," and it can be argued that ideologically progressive movements during this period were deeply influenced by this concept.

To commemorate the tenth anniversary of the events of the spring of '76, considered the inception of the photographic new wave in China, an exhibition titled *Shi nian yi shunjian* (十年一瞬间, Flashback: a decade of changes) was organized. The selected works were categorized into six subjects centered on documentary photography. In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, it is stated:

> "Ten years ago, we documented the big troubles of the 5 April 1976 with the help of our cameras. Over the following ten years we tried to use the same instrument in our hands to document, comprehend and interiorize the changes in our country, we have constantly sought to discover new perspectives, to get close to reality and to find a solution to problems." (cited in Hu 2003: 10)

Figure 1. Li Xiaobin, *Shangfangzhe*, 1977.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

In this exhibition, a photographic work by Li Xiaobin, completed in the late seventies but publicly unveiled only ten years later, was presented. Li spent several months at Tian'anmen Square, capturing images of men and women who were victims of injustice, often enduring hardships during the Cultural Revolution, and predominantly hailing from rural areas. These individuals, demonstrating in the corridors of power, were referred to as *Shangfangzhe* 上访者, or "Petitioners seeking justice from higher authorities." The photograph portrays a man with a vacant expression, aimlessly wandering the streets of the capital (Fig. 1). Rather than depicting pain or suffering, the face of the man captured by Li Xiaobin exudes confusion and disillusionment. The representation of the setting is notably absent, with the background blurred, placing the individual as the focal point of the image. This composition of the photograph resonates with ideas and concepts surrounding the individual, which would continue to be explored throughout the entire decade. This work by Li Xiaobin can indeed be viewed as closely aligned with the literary and artistic movement known as "Scar Art." The relationship between photographers and the literary and artistic movements of the era was highly interconnected. It's worth noting that the initial gatherings of these young photographers often took place in domestic settings, attended by writers, poets, and artists from emerging alternative movements of the time (Wu and Phillips 2004: 16). Literature and the "Scar Art" movement serve as a concrete example of this interconnectedness, as does the equally significant trend of "Native Soil Art." These movements had a profound impact on the cultural landscape, igniting a surge of creativity in literature, film, and consequently, the realm of photography. Liu Zaifu sees the rise of the movement of "Native Soil Art" as a consequence or evolution of the trend of "Scars":

> "[…], writers were no longer content to search for the superficial causes of the tragedy but sought rather its deeper causes, and as º

It is precisely this "cultural history" that motivated the new generation of photographers to embark on their photographic explorations. Preferring the Chinese hinterland, the countryside, and its villages, they ventured into the mythical regions associated not only with the origins of Han culture but also with numerous minorities that inhabited those area. This quest for purity led them to the desolate plateaus and vast plains, in stark contrast to the urban environment with its sprawling cityscapes and dense population, where the distinct identity of the Chinese people risks being diluted and ultimately lost.

The documentary photography produced during this period reflects a utopian quest for national identity. Drawing inspiration from ethnology and folklore, photographers such as Wang Miao 王苗 (1951), Wang Zhiping 王志平 (1947), Wu Jialin 吴家林 (1942), Zhu Xianmin 朱宪民 (1943), Yu Deshui 于德水 (1953), and Jiang Jian 姜健 (1953) embarked on journeys to capture every aspect of life in China, employing a typical documentary photography approach. Their photographic subjects ranged from everyday life in the countryside to specific aspects of folk traditions, peasant activities, and festivities.

This "search for roots" led them to photograph locations where tradition appeared to be preserved in the faces, behavior, clothing, and language of the peasants and ethnic minorities. Through their work, these photographers aimed to create a genuine portrait of China and its people, weaving together the threads of ethnographic exploration and documentary photography to unveil the multifaceted layers of the nation's identity.

These emerging trends were championed by new magazines dedicated to photography, which proliferated across the country during the latter half of the decade, spurred by the decentralization of publishing houses. Among these, the pioneering magazine *Xiandai Sheying* (Contemporary Photography) stood out as a leader. Under the guidance of editors such as Li Mei 李媚 (1951), it became the foremost representative of documentary photography during that era.

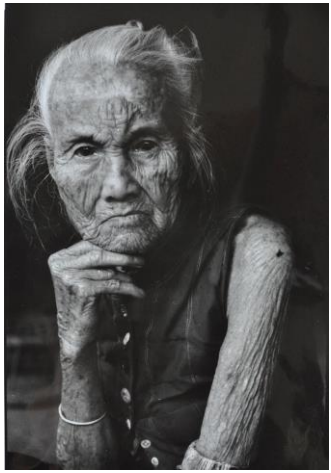

Figure 2. Wu Jialin, *Wa woman*, 1984.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

The third issue of the magazine analyzed photographs by Wu Jialin, who dedicated most of his career to depicting the ethnic minorities of Yunnan province. In the introductory text titled *Ren zhi ge* (人之歌, The song of human), signed by Da Mao 大毛 (1984:51), the author refers to Wu's ability to represent the true spirit and character of the people of the Wa minority, who are described as if they were archetypes, whereby the titles of the pictures do not personalize the subject, but instead tell us about generic old and young women and children of this specific minority (Fig.2). Both the artists and the magazine promoted a

perspective of local people that, on one hand, depersonalized the subject by distancing them, and on the other hand, idealized them as examples of specific typologies. This perspective echoes the visual culture propagated by ethnographic photography during the colonial period, when Westerners traversed the globe capturing images of indigenous peoples. In this instance, however, the viewer is the ethnically Han Chinese individual turning their camera lens toward the ethnic minorities within their own country.

In the second issue of the magazine, Wang Zhiping and Wang Miao, two founding members of the April Photo Society, showcased a selection of photographs captured during an extensive journey through the western regions of the country. This collection, which the authors asserted reflected a profound understanding of the people and places they encountered, was exhibited in various provincial capitals and left a lasting impact on photography enthusiasts (Wang & Wang 1984: 33).

These examples illustrate how documentary photography in 1980s China had already assimilated lessons from leading international trends in the genre, which can be linked to the tradition of humanistic documentary photography. In the words of Hu Wugong 胡武功 (1949), we find a sort of romanticism regarding the role of the documentary photographer:

> "In the photographic practice of those years there was a strong will both for change and reflection. On the one hand, we used a neutral point of view, paying more attention to the life of the common people; on the other hand, we used the technique of reportage, to show pictures of society" (Awake 2009: 72).

Although Hu began his career as a photojournalist, and his earliest reportages received various prestigious national

journalism prizes, his form of photography developed towards an innocent representation of "the life of the common people".

Figure 3. Hu Wugong, *Posing for a souvenir photo in a rural studio, Baoji, Shaanxi*, 1987.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

Hu, together with Hou Dengke 侯登科 (1950-2003), who devoted his life to photographing the daily work of the country people, are the two leading figures of the "Shaanxi Group," who organized the *Jianju licheng* (艰巨历程, An arduous passage) exhibition, that was conceived in 1987 as a contest, and after one year evolved into a national exhibition hosted by the National Art Gallery of China in Beijing. The selected pictures were divided into two categories, documentary and artistic. Photographs from the Maoist Era were also included, so the exhibition was seen as a historic view of photography in China from the founding of the Republic. We can sense the romantic spirit that permeated the environment during these decisive months in the intentions of the curators, who affirmed that the

exhibition "[…] looks inside the depths of the hearts of the common people" (Hu 2003: 10).

The spontaneity witnessed during the Chinese spring of '76 was primarily channeled into a documentary style of photography that emphasized a positivist vision of the Chinese population. This marked the beginning of photojournalism in China and the inception of a new generation of documentary photographers that irrevocably changed the role of the medium in the country. However, by the end of the decade, new trends had begun to emerge, exploring the medium and pushing the boundaries of documentary photography through experimentation.

New Paths to Document Reality

The photographers, who will be discussed further, wander through the modern cities of China, breaking away from the tradition of the "decisive moment" to adopt a fresher approach. The pursuit of the "event" itself is no longer prominent; every moment of life, regardless of its importance, becomes relevant. Technical research follows the same trajectory as they abandon the quest for a "perfect" formal result, which is typical for photography intended to document reality as it is, and instead, they experiment with the medium to express various states of reality.

Various photographers bring a breath of fresh air to Chinese photographic production of this period: Xu Yong 徐勇 (1954), Gu Zheng 顾铮 (1959), Mo Yi 莫毅 (1958) and Zhang Hai'er 张海儿 (1957). Each of them depicts a different city: Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Guangzhou, creating a kind of symbiosis with the spaces in which they move. Gu Zheng reflects on this:

> "Street photography in China came alive during the middle and late 1980s as a direct challenge to staged propaganda photography. […] These non-documentary

> techniques enriched the language of Chinese photography, which had been dormant for years" (Gu 2009b: 42).

In a continually changing landscape, such as that of the Chinese cities, the artist focuses on questioning their own individuality: "the cameras in their hands were symbols of their own changing identities" (Gu 2009b: 42). This questioning of the artist's identity, whether their own "I" or that of the anonymous individual, appears to be a common theme among these photographers. Mo Yi prefers to eliminate the intervention of his own "I" from the control over the photographic act itself, aiming to portray the loneliness of individuals in the contemporary city. In Zhang Hai'er's work, we perceive both the "inability" of a fragmented "I" within a harsh society and its commodification in the new urban environment. Gu Zheng endeavors to depict a portrait of a lost "I" amidst the chaotic flow of the urban crowd, highlighting its loneliness and uncertainty. Meanwhile, Xu Yong contemplates and photographs the alleys of the hutongs, devoid of the usual inhabitants, thus creating a phantasmagorical portrayal of places in the process of disappearing.

The technique used by these photographers is a direct result of their research, as Gu Zheng (2009b: 42) states: "Artists began to search for different ways of photographic expressions, such as the use of flashing light by Zhang Hai'er in Guangzhou, the super fish-eye photography I used in Shanghai, and the non-compositional photography of Mo Yi in Tianjing".

In this section of the paper, we will focus on one of them, Mo Yi, who, through various series realized during the decade, sought to push the limits of the visual medium. Furthermore, he employed a personal perspective to photographically present the modern urban space of a country undergoing irrevocable changes.

With his gaze, Mo Yi was trying to "discover" the spaces of the city of Tianjin. Wu Hung (2016:253) defined him an "urban ethnographer". In his first series *Fengying* (风景, Landscapes) or *Fuqin* (父亲, Fathers), he already was looking for new modalities to represent reality. He used a telephoto lens to photograph the people on the streets from a large distance. The results are spontaneous pictures without using formal constructions. We can also perceive his interest in examining possibilities of the medium in his next work, realized in 1987 and titled *Wo de xuhuan de chengshi* (我的虚幻的城市, My illusory city), or also known as *Saodong* (骚动, Riot), where his experimentation of the photographic medium begins[1].

Figure 4. Mo Yi, *My illusory city*, 1987.

Source: Courtesy of Mo Yi and Zen Foto Gallery.

[1] In an interview released to the author Mo Yi affirms that in 1987 he started to conceive his own photographic series and to be aware of the final outcome.

In these pictures, he used multiple exposures to depict the city streets, creating an estranging effect (Fig. 4). Although the formal aspect of the work might suggest a "pictorialism" approach to the use of the photographic instrument, this work actually encompasses a conceptual reflection: "That is the trace of my feelings and the scenery merging together in the film" (Mo Yi 2016: n.p.)

In other early works, Mo Yi embarks on a utopian quest for pure photography without the mediation of the photographer. This endeavor involves a search for images capturing the essence of people and streets that form the city (Fig. 5). Mo Yi titled his project, initiated in 1988, *1m, Wo shenhou de fengjing* (1m, 我身后的风景, 1m, the scenery behind me) or *Jiedao de biaoqing* (街道的表情, Expressions of the street), connected to a performance titled *Xingzou de fangshi* (行走的方式, The manner of walking). The author explains the origin of this project following the exhibition of a previous work that received unfavorable judgments:

> "I was scared by such thoughts and decided to undertake an experiment, separating the camera lens from my gaze and employing the camera behind my neck or to hang it behind my waist. Using an extension cord I took a picture every five steps when walking on the street. I wanted to see what people and their city look like when they were not selected by my eyes." (as cited in Wu 2005: 63)

Mo Yi decides to liberate himself from the photographer's power of decision. He transforms his camera into an external extension of his body. Rejecting rules of composition and the selection of the exact moment of shooting, these pictures are decidedly anti-artistic. Mo Yi abandons rules and embraces randomness. The element of time, always intimately linked with photography, becomes the arbiter of the objectivity of the artist's work. Mo Yi

resolves to capture a shot every five steps, and the result is unforeseen: without the artist's intervention, reality emerges in its "purity":

> "Every picture reveals the status of society before the Tianan'men Square accident, which was depressing and lonely, extremely shadowy (Yin) yet bright (Yang)" (Mo Yi 2016: n.p.).

Many of the pictures' series include his own face, in those cases he uses a stick to catch his expression too:

> "The fact that I include myself in the pictures shows that I was also one of those who were in the depressive atmosphere" (Mo Yi 2016: n.p.).

Mo Yi began to utilize the medium in a highly personal manner for the first time in recent photographic production. Phenomena such as alienation, solitude, and dislocation represent the initial "residues" of the rapid development experienced by the city and the wider Chinese society throughout this decade. As states a character of Xu Xing's short story *Wu zhuti bianzou* (无主题变奏, Variations without a theme): "I casually strolled out into the street. It was extremely busy, a boundless universe crowded with cars and people. But I felt terribly lonely" (as cited in Lin and Galikowski 1999: 106).

We can observe that Mo Yi's artistic process has transitioned from documentary photography to a more experimental use of the medium, as exemplified in the analysed work, where he endeavors to entirely eradicate his presence as a photographer.

This instinctive act of Mo Yi likely represents one of the most profound reflections on the photographic medium ever undertaken in China up to that time. Considering the inherent characteristics of photography, such as notions of truthfulness or time, and especially contemplating the camera as a "machine" capable of reproducing images without the intervention of the artist, are aspects that render Mo Yi's photographic work remarkably relevant.

Figure 5. Mo Yi, *1m, the scenery behind me*, 1988.
Source: Courtesy of Mo Yi and Zen Foto Gallery.

This attitude foreshadowed the work of photographers and artists who, in the following decade, approached photography in novel ways. The dominance of the "idea" in Chinese photography began to emerge with the reflections and experiments of this generation of photographers who worked at the end of the decade.

Conclusion

The perfect epilogue for Chinese photography from the eighties was the invitation of some of the most representative photographers of that decade to the photographic festival of Arles in 1988. Regarded as the first international exhibition of Chinese photographers of the post-Mao era, it included, besides the historical figure of Wu Yinxian, two other photographers who solidified their careers in the eighties, Chen Baosheng 陈宝生 (1939) and Xia Yonglie 夏永烈 (1935), as well as other authors from the latest generation of photographers, such as Ling Fei 凌飞 (1953), Gao Yuan, and Zhang Hai'er. This chapter in the recent history of photography in China is considered to be of capital importance for the successive developments of the medium in the country.

Another exhibition paid significant homage to the generation of documentary photographers who commenced their work in the eighties: in 2003 the Guangzhou Museum of Art hosted an exhibition titled *Zhonguo renben – Jishi zai dangdai* (中國人本 - 紀實在當代, Humanism in China – A contemporary record of photography). This major curatorial project included 600 pictures by more than 250 photographers between 1953 and 2003. According to Hu Wugong (2003: 11), humans were at the center of the project, with the motto of the exhibition being "China humanized, China individualized." For the generation of photographers that emerged in the eighties, this exhibition marked one of the peaks in the history of Chinese photography. Alongside the two exhibitions from the eighties, "Flashback: a decade of changes" and "An arduous passage," it provided an important opportunity to reflect on late twentieth-century Chinese photographic production. The peculiarity of this exhibition lay in its emphasis on reportage photography, with little mention of developments in experimental photography,

which had been represented by a new generation of photographers since the nineties.

In a country where documenting a specific series of events could be deemed politically sensitive, photographers developed certain methods for undertaking documentary work. Many authors favored a didactic approach to portraying people and their daily lives, where any overt condemnation was latent or absent. Consequently, as we have observed, numerous documentary projects from the eighties depicted events and people through generic situations and contexts: the men and women of an ethnic minority, the rural population, the urban population, new trends of the Deng Era, and so forth. The reality of this period was presented from a generalized perspective, often without deliberate or programmed reportage, wherein concrete facts and situations could be presented or questions analyzed in an elliptical yet more complex manner, akin to how experimental photographers operated in the nineties. The authors of the eighties consistently emphasized the importance of portraying the authentic face of the Chinese people, particularly the common folk, as they aimed solely to serve as "witnesses" to a period of transformation. In the captions of their photographs, they frequently referred to generic situations and individuals, thereby connecting us to an idealized representation that closely aligns with a generalized notion of Chinese society during that era. As Currie (1999: 289) affirms: "…a photograph can also have another representing role: a role imposed on it by its association with some narrative." The main narrative promoted in China during the decade was centered on reevaluating the concept of Humanism. A narrative like the one promoted during the fifties by Edward Steichen in the "The Family of Man" exhibition, which Sekula (2013: 95) considers an attempt "to universalize photographic discourse".

In the case of China, it represented an endeavor to reconstruct a new photographic narrative on a national scale. This generation romantically discovered a universal language in photography that conveyed a message of presumed truthfulness, following the years of visual manipulation during the Cultural Revolution. The humanist discourse, with its positive and gratifying nature, did not show division between the general public and the authorities. Instead, it satisfied them by not emphasizing the discordant aspects of reality.

In paraphrasing the title of the renowned photographic exhibition, it appears that the objective of these photographers was to create a portrait of "The Family of China."

The rupture occurred when the authors began representing a more tangible world, providing names for the people depicted or appearing themselves within the picture as active participants. Mo Yi appears to discern the falsehood concealed behind photographic ideals, viewing photography as an instrument of non-freedom because it is beholden to reality. "Photography is not art," he asserts in an interview with the author. In his photographs, there is none of the idealism and positivism characteristic of documentary photography in the eighties; his approach is simply personal and devoid of ideological references. The subjects of his images are not accomplished individuals; instead, they are scattered within a rapidly changing urban society. This shift commenced with a different technical approach to the medium, eschewing formal perfection: his photographs are as rudimentary and impure as reality itself. It's a form of documentary that transcends the formal representation of the photographic image to uncover the intrinsic contradiction of the medium, the genre, and consequently, of reality.

Documentary photography in China underwent a dramatic transformation in the nineties. The boundaries were blurred as experimental photographers started to expose the complex

situations of the new China, including the extensive urban reforms, the plight of women, the lives of migrant workers, and the contentious construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Experimental photographers refused to limit themselves to using straight photography, which seeks to objectively represent the world. Instead, they began to create constructed or staged photographs to critique and challenge the unambiguous and hegemonic interpretation of reality. The photography by Xing Danwen 邢丹文 (1967), Rong Rong 榮榮 (1968), Song Yongping 宋永平 (1961), Wang Jinsong 王劲松 (1963), Zhang Dali 张大力 (1963), Chen Shaoxiong 陈劭雄 (1962), Liu Zheng 劉錚 (1969) and many others is created across the thin line between a personal, artificial world and social and political critique of the contemporary. This generation of photographers introduced topics of documentary photography to the world of artistic photography.

In the last decade, Lu Guang 卢广 (1961) is probably the most international Chinese documentary photographer, being the winner of the most important international prize in the genre. Lu has recently been advancing his personal evolution in the realm of humanist documentary photography, injecting originality and heterodoxy into the field. Simultaneously, he remains the inheritor of a tradition cultivated in China during the eighties.

A school of photography that lies somewhere between the documentary and the artistic is represented by the work of Zhang Kechun 张克纯 (1980) and Zhang Xiao 张晓 (1981). Their visions are not asserted to be objective; rather, in a personal and sometimes introspective manner, they have impeccably captured the essence of recent Chinese reality. Their work unfolds as documentary reportages but eschews adherence to the genre's conventions. Instead, they navigate the liminal space between the real and the fictional, the absurd and the rational. This innovative utilization of photography may indeed be the most

accurate representation of the constantly evolving "Chinese world."

The experience of the April Photo Society contributed to the new developments in photography in China, providing a breath of fresh air in the context of post-Mao China. As in other realms of the cultural world, the parenthesis of the Mao era was surpassed, allowing artists to reconnect their production with the trajectory initiated during the first decades of the century. The role of photographers and those who promoted photography through various channels during the eighties is immeasurable for the subsequent generations of photographers. The entire decade witnessed an incredible explosion of cultural production that inevitably left its mark on the following decades. With this paper, we have attempted to offer a small glimpse into this exceptional era.

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