

# CONTEMPORARY

顾铮

BY GU ZHENG

# CHINESE

# PHOTOGRAPHY

# 中国当代摄影艺术



中国青年出版社  
CHINA YOUTH PRESS



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本书为“十二五”国家重点图书出版规划项目

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

中国当代摄影艺术 / 顾铮编著. — 北京: 中国青年出版社, 2011.10  
ISBN 978-7-5153-0175-4  
I. ①中… II. ①顾… III. ①摄影艺术 — 中国 — 现代 IV. ①J405.2  
中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2011)第173911号

中国当代摄影艺术

顾 铮 编著

出版发行：  中国青年出版社  
地 址：北京市东四十二条21号  
邮政编码：100708  
电 话：（010）59521188 / 59521189  
传 真：（010）59521111  
编辑制作：北京中青雄狮数码传媒科技有限公司  
中国青年出版社 英国 国际有限公司

主 编：郭 光  
策划编辑：和 威 莽 昱  
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英文翻译：Jeff Crosby  
英文审校：Lee Perkins  
书籍设计：张宇海

印 刷：深圳市精彩印联合印务有限公司  
开 本：889×1194 1/12  
印 张：28  
版 次：2011年10月北京第1版  
印 次：2011年10月第1次印刷  
书 号：ISBN 978-7-5153-0175-4  
定 价：320.00元

本书如有印装质量问题, 请与本社联系:  
电话: (010)59521188 / 59521189 读者来信: reader@cypmedia.com  
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# INTRODUCTION

## 序言

顾 铮

BY GU ZHENG

### 一、中国摄影的现代转型与二次现代性

中国当代摄影发展演进的历史脉络，一直没有得到真正严肃的梳理。如何还原当时的历史情境与摄影生态，对于研究中国当代摄影非常重要。对此的标准包括了当时的艺术调控体制、摄影传播的媒介环境，当时的外来影响、风格追求与手法特征等多方面的内容。

但其中最重要的可能是对中国摄影的现代转型的讨论。只有对这个问题加以深入讨论与研究，才有可能得出对于中国当代摄影的形成与发展（尤其是20世纪80年代摄影）的相对公正的历史结论。

笔者认为，寻获中国摄影的现代性的努力，最晚也已经在20世纪初出现，并且在20世纪20年代与20世纪30年代初具规模。朗静山从新闻摄影、商业摄影，庄学本从民族志摄影，沙飞从报导摄影，金石声、张印泉、刘旭沧等从艺术摄影，敖恩洪、张才等从都市摄影等各个方面，展开了对于摄影语言本体的追究。可惜这代中国摄影人的集体努力因抗日战争的爆发而中断。而后的国内战争以及新中国建国后约三十年时间的保守的政治环境，使实现中国摄影的现代转型成为了一个悬而未决的议题。直到20世纪80年代，日渐开放的时代风潮与思潮，一部分中国摄影人追求摄影的现代转型、追求现代性的自觉与梦想终于成为可能。

从某种意义上说，20世纪80年代处于非主流地位的中国摄影的努力与探索，既是在响应一个大时代的呼唤，也是对中国摄影现代转型中未完成的现代性的第二次追求与实现。如果没有战争与革命，中国摄影的现代性实践与现代转型会不会需要经过这么痛苦的经历？是否要经历分裂的、间隔了四十多年的两次努力才得以完成？中国摄影的现代转型，从哪些方面展开，已经在哪些方面得以实现，哪些方面仍然处于转变之中？从不同的视角及运用不同的理论框架来研究20世纪80年代以来的中国摄影，包括讨论中国现代摄影的二次现代性这个概念，有可能得出相当不同的、丰富开放的结论。一批中国摄影人在20世纪80年代对摄影的各个方面的主体性探索，既构成了20世纪80年代中国摄影的非主流面貌，也为后来的各种摄影实践提供了某种借鉴。从这个意义上说，如果没有20世纪80年代中国非主流摄影人对于摄影本体的自觉追求，就无法书写一部具有连续性的中国当代摄影史。

### 二、中国当代摄影前史（1949年—1976年）

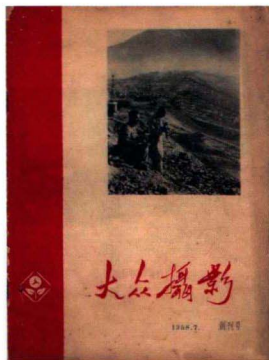
1949年，中国革命取得胜利。整个20世纪50年代与20世纪60年代，中国摄影的生存发展主要被限定在两个方面。一个是受到严格控制的新闻摄影。新闻摄影只能进行正面宣传，而且新闻与宣传混为一谈，而纪实摄影则根本没有存在的可能。另一个则是以国家意识形态为主导的“艺术”摄影。革命后的中国“艺术”摄影的主要任务是表现新社会带来的变化。正如于1958年创刊的《大众摄影》杂志创刊号上的石少华（后来成为新华社社长）的文章所说，

摄影的方向是“为工农兵服务，为社会主义建设服务”。这其实包括了两个方面的意思，一是摄影必须以新的社会主体“工农兵”为主要表现对象，二是强调“社会主义建设”题材的重要性。于是，“艺术”摄影的表现内容就可以概括为三个主要任务：一、塑造新的社会主体形象；二、表现对工业化的憧憬，也就是对现代化的向往；三、宣扬集体主义价值观。而所有这一切，都是与当时国家的发展目标及主流意识形态相一致的。这种有着乌托邦气息的宣传照片，在影响人们对自身社会的理解的同时，有时也会在缺乏历史警惕的人那里形成一种伪历史。此外，代表旧时代文人趣味的吟风弄月的摄影风格在当时也仍然能够以“艺术”摄影的名义延续下来。这是因为歌颂祖国河山的风景摄影有助于激发爱国主义情怀。但因为其并不直接表现革命后的社会变化，因此处于边缘位置。

而在1966年到1976年的“文革”期间，摄影与政治的关系变得更加直接。下文以一例举之。1966年7月16日的毛泽东游长江的那张照片，表现了他身着宽大的浴衣站在船舷上迎风招手，向全世界展示了他那精力充沛的豪迈形象。他的这个视觉形象暗示他有勇气不惜与“党内一小撮走资本主义道路的当权派”决裂。他以对于自己健康的自信传达了政治上的强烈自信，向对手示威，施加心理压力。而浴衣这种属于私人空间里的衣着在公众空间里的展示，正好经过照片的传播暗示了毛泽东不受任何陈规戒律羁绊的奔放性格。这张照片也打破了对于摆动于亲切与严肃这两极之间的领袖形象的单调设计，为人们重新理解已经日趋刻板化的毛泽东形象，增加了新的内容与想象力，也从某种程度上预示了他此后许多出其不意的政治举措的合理性。“文革”初期的摄影，在塑造毛泽东的新形象、重新定位毛泽东形象及担负政治动员工作等方面发挥了重要作用。

“文革”中，摄影更全面地渗透到社会生活的各个方面。这不仅体现在“请宝像”（把毛泽东的摄影照片买来挂在室内）这样的政治仪式中，也体现在摄影的仪式化中。当时的个人肖像照片中，多有手捧《毛主席语录》站在革命历史纪念景点前的留影、借来各种道具与服装模仿革命样板戏中英雄人物的造型与姿势的肖像照片，这都显示出意识形态对于人们的身体与行为的新要求。而在家庭合影照片中，则往往出现全家人都佩戴毛泽东像章及各种革命标志的画面。“文革”中，人们通过在自己身上附加特定的政治符号来表达忠诚与政治选择。在文革前本来多出现于公共场所与公共事件中的毛泽东像，在“文革”中则不可阻挡地从公共空间向私人空间扩张，这反映出“文革”彻底消除公私界限的特点。经由摄影这个视觉媒介，意识形态通过领袖像所投射出来的视线延伸到日常生活的各个角落。人们在日常起居中反复地与照片中的毛泽东的视线相遇，感受到他的巨大的存在感，一种精神上的紧张与激励同时产生。

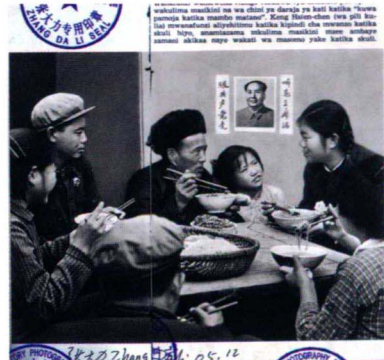
“文革”中发表于媒体的大量摄影“创作”，将斯大林倡导的社会主义现实主义原则发挥到了极端的地步。“文革”中的摄影在内容上图解意识形态，对人物形象的塑造极尽夸张之能事，人物表情简单划一，或莫名严肃与愤怒，或空洞微笑。而视角多用仰视，用光多用侧逆光以造成戏剧性效果，构图具有会聚性，所有人物向画面中某一主要人物集中。为确保画面



1. 1958年《大众摄影》创刊号  
Inaugural issue of *Popular Photography*,  
1958



2. “办学习班是个好办法”，  
原版黑白底片档案号142015，拍摄于1968年7月 选自张大力《第二历史》  
“Organizing a Study Class is a Good Method”original black and white  
negative #142015. Photographed in July 1968, selected from Zhang Dali's  
*Second History*



3. “程庄农业劳动学校”，《人民画报》1969年2月P25  
选自张大力《第二历史》  
“Cheng Zhuang Agricultural Labor School,” *People's  
Pictorial*, February 1969, selected from Zhang Dali's  
*Second History*

效果得到全面控制，摆布拍摄是最可靠的选择。这当然也与技术物质条件的限制有关。高度组织化的照片，正好对应了高度组织化的社会控制一切的需要。这一切所体现的本质就是，即使是对人的活动的视觉呈现，也容不得一丝一毫的视觉失控。当时所谓的“艺术摄影”，就是以这样的方式使政治景观可视化的。

1976年4月期间，伴随悼念周恩来而出现的群众运动的，还有大批民众对于这个运动的自发的摄影记录。这预示人们对于官方宣传摄影的怀疑与摒弃。整个社会不可扭转地向开放倾斜，而文化充当了在思想上走向反思、引领思想解放的重要角色。

### 三、后毛泽东时代的摄影（1976年至今）

1979年出现在北京的“四月影会”，是后毛泽东时代民间摄影组织争取创作自由的最早努力。而20世纪80年代中期出现的摄影群体热（陕西群体、上海“北河盟”沙龙、北京“裂变”群体、厦门“五个一”群体等），更表明追求创作自由的努力已经是全国性现象。这些追求各异、成员身份不同的群体，构成了丰富多元的摄影社群景观。而一些对于摄影有独自看法的摄影家个体，也在那时开始出现，如天津的莫毅，北京的李晓斌、徐勇、袁冬平、吕楠，广州的张海儿，上海的王耀东、顾铮，河南的于德水、姜健等。无论是群体还是个体，这些摄影家们的一个根本的共同追求是作为个体的自主观看的权利。他们的摄影观看不再是为国家主义的宏大叙事而看，而是想要作为一个独立的个体观看社会，对于现实作出个人的评价。他们作为个体来发言，同时也力图改变中国摄影的面貌。

而中国当代纪实摄影，则可说是在这个争取自主自发的观看的基础上，于20世纪80年代末与20世纪90年代初初显端倪并在20世纪90年代中期左右形成规模，成为中国当代摄影的一个重要现象。这些纪实摄影家们在题材上打破以往官方设定的禁忌，将以前得不到关注的社会各方（尤其是底层人民）及他们的生存境遇收入镜头，努力反映社会生活的各个方面。他们的摄影不再为官方的意识形态所左右，而是从个人的感受与立场出发记录巨大的社会变动。同时，也有一些摄影家开始注意寻求发展纪实摄影的个人风格，使纪实摄影出现更丰富的面貌。这当中的代表性人物有吕楠、张新民、侯登科、姜健、杨延康、吴家林、韩磊、周海、陆元敏等。

改革开放以来的中国社会现状，从某种意义上说是一个城乡互动的过程，其中涉及的主要问题包括农村向城市化倾斜、城市如何吸收消化来自农村的劳动力以及城市本身如何把握自身发展走向的过程。而中国的当代纪实摄影不外乎就是以摄影这种观看方式来见证社会变化的过程。无论是展现农村生活还是城市生活，无论是表现直接显现于外部的社会变化还是艺术家通过对个人内在的表现来观照现实，他们的摄影实践最终都为巨大的时代变迁留下了丰富的视觉文献。

### 1. 关注农村的变化

中国至今仍然是一个农业大国。由改革开放引起的中国社会最深刻的变化之一发生在农村。在表现中国农村的社会生活与变化这个方面，有许多中国摄影家主要以纪实摄影的方式，展开了持续的努力。朱宪民、解海龙、侯登科、姜健等人的贡献意义重大。

朱宪民在整个20世纪80年代持续拍摄的《黄河两岸、中原儿女》，可以说是一部最早意义上表现黄河两岸人民的生存姿态的纪实摄影作品。开始于20世纪90年代初的解海龙的“中国希望工程摄影纪实”，是改革开放早期在中国最具社会接受度的，获得公众普遍了解的纪实摄影作品。解海龙的反映失学儿童和贫困地区乡村教育现状的照片甚至促进了整个社会关心这个严重问题并寻找解决办法。

已经去世的侯登科的《麦客》系列，为纪实摄影这个西方摄影样式与观念的本土化提供了意义深远的范例。《麦客》是以黄土高原上的“候鸟”——麦客的特殊生活方式为主要内容，以全景式的叙述方式呈现了麦客这个农民中的特殊群体的生存景象。他以历时十年之久的长期关注，着意于在事物的发展脉络之中呈现麦客们的生存状态与生活细节。他的持续而又深入的关注，为理解什么是纪实摄影，什么是纪实摄影的观看以及中国纪实摄影的特质等问题提供了一份切实而又丰富的材料。

在北京与河南两地生活与工作的姜健，以格式化的肖像摄影的形式辅以大景深的环境细节描写，在为生活在中原大地上的农民造像的同时，也表现了正统意识形态、当代大众文化与传统文化并存与胶着在农民生活空间中的现实景观。姜健照片中的河南农民们的家庭空间成为了这些肖像照片的一个重要内容。他充分利用摄影的细节描写力量，详尽表现了他们生活空间中的种种细节，以此交代他们的生活方式与品质，并以艳俗的色彩表现强化了中原农民的审美趣味。通过一种观念先行的程式化（不应理解为贬义的）的观看方式，姜健为后世留下一份可以据此解读中国某个地区的农民生存状态的视觉文献。

在整个20世纪90年代，广东的张新民在从事一个巨大的影像工程《包围城市——中国农民向城市的远征》。这个作品由《乡镇》、《走向城市》与《城市》这三个部分组成。张新民试图以全景式的规模来呈现当代中国社会结构变动中最具有标志意义的事件：农民离开土地与融入城市的过程。从某种意义上说，张新民的作品更多表现的是农民在城市中如何生存，而不是真正意义上的城市生活本身。但是，在当代中国的城市化进程中，他们的生活现实其实已经构成了当代城市生活的一个重要内容。张新民以他的摄影将农民在城市生活的丰富内容作了精彩而又细腻的呈现。

就侯登科、胡武功、于得水、姜健、张新民等人从事以农村生活为主题的纪实摄影的时间而言，这个时间段正好与中国纪实摄影发展的关键时刻——20世纪90年代重合。经过了长期的争论、思考与实践之后，一批中国摄影家在进入20世纪90年代后终于开始形成一种关注社



4. 上海“北河盟”时期作品, 1987,  
顾铮摄

An artwork from the North River  
Alliance period in Shanghai,  
photographed by Gu Zheng, 1987



5. 我虚拟的城市, 1987, 莫毅摄  
Mo Yi, My Virtual City, 1987



6. 精神病院—被人遗忘的人, 四川, 1990, 吕楠摄  
Lu Nan, Forgotten People in Mental Ward, Sichuan Province, 1990



7. 包围城市—成都人民南路广场,  
1995, 张新民摄  
Zhang Xinmin, Renmin South Street  
Square, Chengdu, 1995

会生活的集体自觉。他们的目光不再停留于寄寓士大夫情趣的山水花草,更不能忍受捏造子虚乌有的美好生活图景的虚伪。他们关注农村、农民生活的摄影实践,为当代中国的社会变迁,尤其是中国当代农村社会所发生的深刻的内在与外在的变化留下了宝贵的记录。而贯穿他们摄影实践的始终不变的特质则是摄影家对于社会变动和人性的积极而又深刻的恒久探索。

## 2. 都市影像的崛起

随着改革开放的启动与深入,一些中国摄影家终于开始注意到了都市生活的复杂性及其魅力。尤其是随着城市化进程的展开与加速,对于都市的关注与影像表述也终于获得了一种可能性与动力。人们终于认识到,城市化对于人的影响既是深入的,也是多方面的。城市化并不仅仅意味着物质生活的现代化。都市社会的复杂结构以及所蕴含的现实问题,在给摄影提供了丰富的题材使其施展身手的同时,也开始检验摄影本身的局限。都市生活的复杂性在都市空间中往往以一种其他地方所无法比拟的戏剧性与荒诞性呈现出来。都市的这种复杂多变的现实,不仅要求摄影家对此作一种“见证”式的记录,同时也要求摄影家在“表现”这个维度上作出应有的回应。都市,是20世纪后期与21世纪的中国摄影家所面临的新的挑战。他们是如何面对都市化对于摄影表现的挑战?他们又是如何展开自己的探索实验?本书中的部分作品也许就是对于这些问题的部分答案。

20世纪80年代中后期,是中国都市摄影的萌芽期。广州的张海儿是最早以自己的性格鲜明的影像呈现个人感受的都市摄影家之一。由都市生活所激发撩拨的欲望在张海儿的摄影中以一个全新的形态呈现。他的影像是一个独立的个体面对都市所作出的即兴反应,是一种具有强烈主观意识的观看。在20世纪80年代中期,张海儿的影像显然是一种异类,但对于中国都市摄影的发展,却具有足够的标志意义。

1986年出现于上海的“北河盟”摄影群体,是一个以都市为精神依托的民间摄影团体。“北河盟”群体从一开始就较为自觉地以都市作为自己的摄影题材,这其中尤其以尤泽宏、王耀东、毛一青、顾铮等人的影像中的取向最为明显。他们公开宣布不为都市的表面亮丽所动,而要以摄影的方式与都市对人的异化作一番抗争,提示都市生活非人性的一面。而在天津,莫毅也正在以其独特的“反摄影”的方式在这个城市的街头展开着有点悲壮的个人探索。他的自拍像系列更多地关涉到了一个孤独的个体在都市中的存在与价值这个事关人类的根本问题。

值得注意的是,以上这些摄影家的摄影探索,都将都市作为一种承载个人主观感受的载体,通过个人与都市的对话来表达对于都市的个人感受。而对于都市社会的现实生活层面的记录则还没有成为他们的摄影议题。这也可能与当时的中国城市生活还没有像农村那样发生激烈的变化有关,因此还没有能够引起足够的关注。

进入20世纪90年代,伴随全球化进程的加速,中国社会的城市化进程以异常的速度迅速展开。在各种社会问题开始凸现化、尖锐化的同时,城市化进程的快速步伐必然会深刻地影响到人们的观念形态、生活方式。而摄影也开始在见证与表现这两个维度上以它所特有的方式来关注、呈现中国的城市化进程。

在20世纪90年代前期,北京的徐勇与上海的陆元敏分别以各自的方式对于即将或者已经到来的都市化大潮做出了自己的回应。在北京,徐勇似乎预感到了古城北京将要面临的巨大的拆迁狂潮。他将自己的镜头对准了传统的北京胡同。他以平静的视线与稳定的画面呈现了处于拆迁“暴风雨”前夜的胡同中的宁静,同时也为这个古老都市的建筑文化保存了一份历史文献。这些充满乡愁的画面成为了后来怀旧热的滥觞,而他有意回避了胡同中的人的生活的影像,则更使胡同成为一个过去的历史化石,一个怀旧恋物的对象。陆元敏的《老洋房里的上海人》,则将一批面临巨大社会变动时仍按照自己惯有的生活逻辑生活着的上海市民群像呈现在我们面前。而陆元敏的《苏州河》则将上海的不同于外滩之“洋气”的另一面展示了出来,给了心怀荣耀的上海人以措手不及的一击。这两位摄影家的摄影实践的重要性在于,他们都以各自的方式给出了个体对于城市的感受与认识。

进入20世纪90年代中后期,上海的王耀东的大量都市影像聚焦于隐身在都市广告图像背后的逐渐膨胀并且越来越表面化的物质欲望。通过他对于这种图像的重新加工与强化呈现,都市本身作为一种欲望装置的特性赫然面世。而周明先是以《国铁一号的末日》和《住房难》对于当时的上海市民生活作了实况报导。

在罗永进于1999年来到上海之前,他就以其《洛阳新民居》获得了广泛的肯定。罗永进的《洛阳新民居》虽然拍摄的并非是典型意义上的现代都市——洛阳,但在他的图像中所表现出来“前现代”的都市形态,在将中国的民居以一种非常坚实有力的造型呈现的同时,也透露了中国人意识深层的建筑空间意识,为了解中国内地城市中建筑与生活的关系提供了一个非常有意义的视觉参照。而到了上海之后,他的格栅状的拼贴形式的作品,则对现代都市的无限扩张性与自我繁殖性作了一个独特的展示。

从目前来看,催生中国都市摄影的外部环境已完全形成。以城市为流通空间的城市资讯类平面媒介需要大量反映包括都市生活在内的社会生活的图片,这应该是一个让摄影家高度关注都市生活的契机,同时也为摄影家关注城市生活创造了获得承认与发表作品的空间。

## 3. “新纪实摄影”的兴起

进入20世纪90年代后期,商业因素对大众传播媒介的高度介入,使一度兴盛的纪实摄影的发表空间受到挤压,纪实摄影没有能够更好地发展下去。许多摄影家开始在更能够体现个人风格的艺术摄影方面展开探索,而传统的纪实摄影也出现了向具有个人视角的“新纪实



8. 主人—河南鹿邑县枣集乡王天一庄, 1995, 姜健摄  
Jiang Jian – Wangtian #1 Village, Zaoji Township, Luyi County,  
Henan Province, 1995



9. 包围城市—四川省德阳县的进城看热闹的农民, 1984, 张新民摄  
Zhang Xinmin, Laying Siege on the City – Villagers  
Coming to Town for a Spectacle, Deyang County,  
Sichuan, 1984



10. 包围城市—深圳的10平方米的10户人家, 1997, 张新民摄  
Zhang Xinmin, Laying Siege on the City – Ten People in Ten  
Square Meters, Shenzhen, 1997

摄影”的转化。“新纪实摄影”的代表性人物有刘铮、荣荣、邵泽农与慕辰、黎朗、颜长江、渠岩、乌头小组等。其中，刘铮的《国人》系列摄影，在不遗余力地表现生活的残酷与现实的荒诞的同时，也强调摄影语言的纯粹性与视觉强度。《国人》中的中国人形象从一种沉闷而又激越、绝望而又眷恋、阴暗而又亢奋的氛围中倔强地徐徐浮现，展现了在这个社会大变动时代中的“沉重的肉身”的无可奈何的沉沦与挣扎。游走于观念与纪实之间的《国人》以其内容与形式两方面的强度，越出了传统纪实摄影的疆界，为当代中国摄影的发展提供了一种新的可能性。

从20世纪90年代中期以后，处于全球化背景下的中国社会在走向城市化、市场经济化的同时，也迅速地向大众消费社会转型。此时，消费主义作为一种意识形态，成为了日常生活中的主流价值观。在向“社会主义市场经济”的转型中，逐渐发达起来的高度商业化的社会环境，用消费主义价值观塑造了年轻一代的生活态度与行为方式。出生、成长于城市的这代人，彻底暴露在商品经济与消费意识形态面前，并在家庭与社会的种种影响之下，成长为也许可以说是中国历史上前所未有的最为自我中心的一代“新人”。大众传播媒介的发达所带来的信息传播的便利，更给已经视摄影为日常生活之组成部分的许多年轻人带来了与他人分享自己感受的冲动。刘一青等人的摄影实践，在通过摄影获得一种自我表达能力的同时，也使摄影成为了他们这一代人的重要“语言”。将个人生活经验与日常感动溶于一体的“私摄影”成为了“新纪实摄影”的最新倾向之一。

#### 4. “观念摄影”的兴起

伴随着传播媒介的逐渐发达，纪实摄影在20世纪90年代中后期迎来了一个高潮，社会生活的各个方面受到纪实摄影的不同程度的关注。同时，不满足于这种传统手法的探索实践也开始抬头。1996年到1998年间，仅仅出版过四期的由刘铮、荣荣等人创办的《新摄影》杂志，以激进的观念与多变的手法，将摄影探索又向前推进了一步。敏锐的艺术家们以来自现实环境的压力为动力，并将其转化为一种以影像表现与现实对话、对抗的实践。《新摄影》这本地下复印杂志，也是新一代摄影试图开辟摄影作品发表的自主空间，争取自我表达的独立权力的制度性尝试。

在纪实摄影兴起的同时，另有一些人开始了对“观念摄影”的探索。任何艺术表现都是观念的产物。因此，无论是上述的具有纯粹摄影形态的纪实摄影，还是在此提及的“观念摄影”，从某种意义上说，它们可能只存在一个观念隐藏的深或浅的区别。但是，区别于纪实摄影的“观念摄影”，至少是一种放弃了记录与传播信息的目的的摄影实践。

随着摄影的普及，它对于一些以图像创造与观念呈现为目的的艺术家而言，已经不再是一种神秘遥远的事物了。更重要的是，他们不受专业摄影师身份的束缚，将摄影作为一种表

达手段而使其具有了远未枯竭的表现潜力。摄影在他们手中，可能只是一种将观念视觉化的手段。

“观念摄影”一词作为西方后现代艺术的关键词之一，是观念艺术之下的次级概念。但在中国语境下，观念摄影独立出来，成为一个与纪实摄影有抗衡性质的概念。也因此，其内涵相应发生了变化。

从20世纪60年代开始到20世纪70年代中期，观念艺术在西方风行一时。一些艺术家使用照片来表现自身对现实世界的想法，质疑既成的体制化了的艺术制度、艺术市场、艺术与艺术作品的定义，深入探讨语言与图像的关系。一般而言，在观念艺术中引入摄影的方式有两种：一种是摄影本身被有机地组织进观念艺术中去，而另一种则是以摄影介入的方式去记录艺术行为与艺术空间中的艺术事件，也即摄影被作为一种记录方式运用到观念艺术中去。摄影与这些表现方式的结合，既引起了艺术传播方式的变化，同时也引起了对于摄影自身的再思考。在这个过程中，摄影本身的概念当然也受到关注。从这个意义上说，西方所指的观念摄影，也具有一种元摄影的性质。但在中国，有点讽刺的是，“观念摄影”这个提法从问世时，便带上了似乎比纪实摄影或纯粹摄影更高级的势利气息。而一切从表面上看上去无法归入纯粹摄影风格的摄影，结果都得以被列入“观念摄影”之列。其实，关键并不在于“纪实”与“观念”谁高谁低、谁先进谁落后这样的占地为王式的思维，最根本的问题在于摄影与当代现实的关系如何。

20世纪90年代中国观念摄影的两个标志性事件是1997年由岛子策划的《新影像：观念摄影艺术展》和1998年由朱其策划的《影像志异：中国新观念摄影艺术展》。这些展览显示了当代摄影的另外一种倾向，那就是大量作品以摆拍为手法，以摄影来表征“观念”。由数码技术所带来的涂改影像的前景，也无疑令摄影对于以创造图像为目的的艺术家具备了亲和力。无论如何，20世纪90年代“观念摄影”的提法与具体实践的出现，对于促进摄影自身的变化与发展起到了重要作用。它在丰富了当代艺术表现形态的同时，也促进了摄影自身的变化。

这些观念摄影家们从广泛的文化层面介入，通过摄影这个可以与社会生活发生多种联系方式的媒介，对历史与记忆、权力与摄影、社会性别、欲望与身体、对历史的戏仿、空间生产与资本权力等各个方面的议题，展开手法繁多的影像讨论。缪晓春、翁奋、苍鑫、庄辉、张大力、曹斐等人的以摄影为基础的艺术表现，在从多方面探索中国人的精神世界与中国社会变动的同时，也丰富了作为表现形式的摄影语言本身。他们的摄影探索构成了当代艺术繁荣景观的一个重要部分。他们在处理这些问题时所表现出的灵活性，令人觉得摄影简直是一种没有任何底线可言的事物。而正是这种多变的影像策略使得他们得以触及许多社会历史文化问题，但这往往是受摄影的媒质特性所局限的纯粹摄影所无能为力的。从某种意义上说，观念摄影为如何处理上述问题提供了许多启示。

进入21世纪的今天，随着数码技术对于摄影的深刻影响，后摄影时代对虚构的热情被大大激发。一些摄影家尝试以虚构的手法创造自己的世界：有的是通过虚构对于现实问题施加



11. 胡同101像—柳巷胡同, 1989, 徐勇摄  
Xu Yong, 101 Hutong Portraits – Liu Xiang  
Hutong, 1989



12. 寝室中的张怡滨, 广州, 1989, 张海儿摄  
Zhang Hai'er, Zhang Yibin in the Bedroom,  
Guangzhou, 1989



13. 大楼下的证券市场, 1992年, 陆元敏摄  
Lu Yuanmin, Securities Market under a Large Building, 1992

艺术性的质问, 如邢丹文、姚璐、王川等人的探索; 有的倾向于以真实素材营造一个完全虚构的真实世界, 而缪晓春、曹斐等更从摄影发展到三维动画。

## 结语

需要指出的是, 收入本书的摄影作品, 首先考量的是有助于了解中国的社会生活与时代变迁。同时, 这些作品也提供了解摄影这个视觉媒介在中国的近况的途径。因此, 一些著名的作品也许并不是本书所要收录的对象, 而能够反映当下的中国当代摄影现况的作品可能受到更优先的考虑。

随着中国对于世界的日甚一日的开放, 中国摄影已经并正在更深入地融入到世界当代艺术中去。中国摄影将要走向何方, 仍然是一个巨大的谜。笔者相信, 正如社会的发展引起并促进了艺术的变化一样, 艺术的发展也会对于社会的发展带来推动。而笔者也期待中国摄影家们无论在题材的丰富性还是在艺术手法的多样性方面有更多的精彩表现。从某种意义上讲, 目前的中国摄影, 至少在推动社会向着成熟发展的方向前进等层面仍有着许多工作要做。而艺术市场的资本介入也在一定程度上分散了艺术家对于现实问题的关注。不过, 正如这三十多年的中国摄影所展现出的现实一般, 在中国, 当代摄影实践仍然有着巨大的潜力。

## I. Chinese Photography's Modern Transition and Dual Modernity

Contemporary Chinese photography's historical developmental thread has never undergone rigorous sifting and analysis. The question of how to restore the historical circumstances and photographic environment of the time is very important to the research of contemporary Chinese photography. This would include such elements as the artistic control mechanisms, the environment of photographic dissemination mediums, external influences, stylistic pursuits and technical traits of the time.

The most important task, however, and the first one which should be completed, is a discussion of the modern transition of Chinese photography. Only through deeper discussion and research of this question can we reach relatively fair historical conclusions about the formation and development of contemporary Chinese photography, especially that of the 1980s.

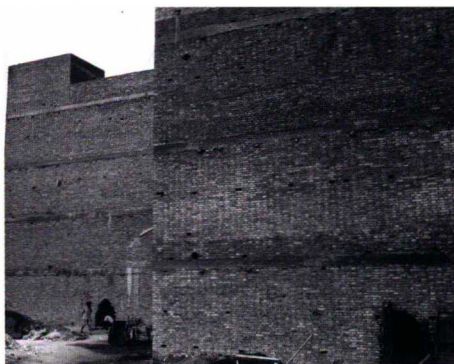
The author personally believes that efforts to achieve modernity in Chinese photography first began in the early 20th century at the latest and reached scale in the 1920s and 30s. Photographers began a pursuit of photographic language in various ways: Lang Jingshan through news

photography and commercial photography, Zhuang Xueben through ethnographic photography, Sha Fei through photojournalism, Jin Shisheng, Zhang Yinquan and Liu Xucang through artistic photography, and Ao Enhong and Zhang Cai through urban photography. Unfortunately, the collective efforts of these Chinese photographers were interrupted by war with the Japanese during World War II and the Civil War which followed. Thirty years of tight political control after the founding of the People's Republic kept the modern transition of Chinese photography in a state of suspension. It wasn't until the new waves of thought in the 1980s that the pursuit of a modern transition in Chinese photography once again became a possibility.

In a sense, the efforts and explorations of Chinese photography outside of the mainstream in the 1980s were a response to the call of the times as well as a pursuit and realization of the unfinished modern transition in Chinese photography. Without war and revolution, would that realization have required such tribulations? Would it have required two series of efforts separated by forty years? On which fronts did the modern transition of Chinese photography unfold? In which aspects has it been achieved, and which aspects are still in the midst of transition? The perspectives and theoretical frameworks, through which we approach Chinese photography since the 1980s, including how we deal with the concept of a second modern transition, will lead us to a rich set of differing, open conclusions, rather than a single, definitive one. The subjective explorations of a group of Chinese photographers in the 1980s formed the face of non-mainstream photography at the time, while also providing experiences for all kinds of photographic practice that would follow. In this sense, without looking at the conscious pursuit of photography-in-itself by these non-mainstream photographers, including in-depth research into rebellious practices against the system of photography, it would be impossible to write an integrated, continuous history of contemporary Chinese photography.

## II. Prehistory of Contemporary Chinese Photography (1949-1976)

In 1949, the Chinese revolution achieved victory. Through the 1950s and 60s, the existence and development of photography was mainly limited to two aspects. One was news photography, which was subject to strict political controls. News photography was only allowed to report things in a positive light, and news was merged with propaganda, while documentary photography was simply not allowed to exist. The other aspect was "artistic" photography under the guidance of state ideology. The main task of "artistic" photography in post-revolutionary China was to depict the changes brought by the new society. As Shi Shaohua (who would later become the



14. 新民居—洛阳, 1997, 罗永进摄  
Luo Yongjin, New Residence—Luoyang, 1997



15. 国人—新年除夕夜里的两个富人, 北京, 1999, 刘铮摄  
Liu Zheng, The Chinese—Two Rich Men on New Year's Eve, Beijing, 1999



16. 午后, 2010, 刘一青摄  
Liu Yiqing, In the Afternoon, 2010

director of Xinhua News Agency) wrote in the first edition of *Popular Photography* back in 1958, that photography's direction was to "serve the workers, farmers and soldiers, and to serve the construction of the new society." This had two implications. First, photography had to take the core of the new society, the "workers, farmers and soldiers," as its main subject of depiction, and second, "construction of the new society" had taken paramount importance. As a result, the depictive content of "artistic" photography could be summed up by three main tasks: to shape the image of the new society, to depict aspirations towards industrialization, i.e. modernization, and thirdly, to promote collectivist values. All of this was in keeping with national development goals and official ideology. While these propaganda photographs, with their utopian airs, influenced people's understandings of their society, they sometimes came to form a sort of false history for those who lacked historical wariness. Oddly, sentimentalist photography styles representative of literati taste were allowed to continue under the name of "artistic" photography. That is because landscape photography that sings the praises of the nation's scenery was useful in arousing patriotic sentiments, but since it did not directly depict the social changes which followed the revolution, it was relegated to the margins.

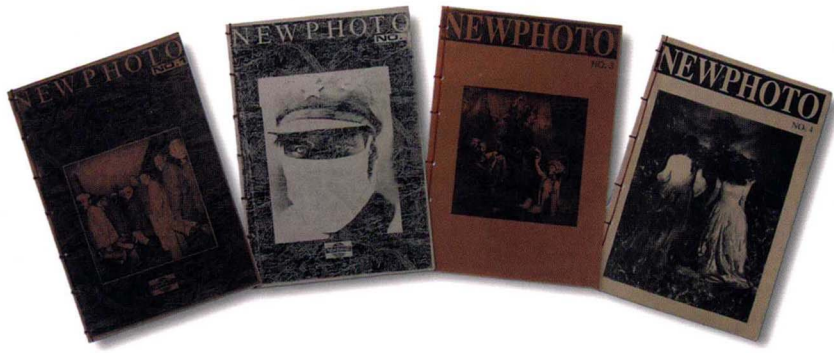
The relationship between photography and politics grew even more direct during the Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976. A case in point is the July 16, 1966 photograph of Mao Zedong swimming the Yangtze River. Standing on the deck of the boat, cloaked in a large bathrobe as he waves his hand to the breeze, he is showing the world an image of energy and vigor. His image hints that he has the courage to break with the "powerful capitalist roader faction within the party." His confidence in his health broadcasts his strong political self-confidence; he is giving his opponents a show of force to apply psychological pressure. The display of the bathrobe, a form of attire usually relegated to private spaces, alludes to Mao's unbridled character. This photograph also destroyed the monotonous design of leader images that had previously wavered between geniality and solemnity, providing a new understanding of what was already becoming an ossified image of Mao, and providing new content and imagination for Mao worship. It also presaged the rationality of his many surprising political moves that were to follow. Early Cultural Revolution photography played an important role in reshaping and redefining Mao's image as well as in political mobilization.

During the Cultural Revolution, photography permeated every aspect of social life. This manifested not only in the political ritual of hanging a Mao Zedong portrait photograph in one's home, but also in the ritualization of photography itself. Many personal portrait photographs featured the subject waving *Quotations from Chairman Mao* in front of a revolutionary historical

site, or using props and costumes to imitate the actions and poses of heroes from the model operas. These showed the new requirements imposed on the body and behavior by ideology. These new requirements and the control of the body were fully affirmed by the ritual nature of photography. In family portraits, family members would wear Mao badges or other marks of the revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, people would express their political loyalties and choices by donning specific cultural symbols. The Mao portrait, which before the Cultural Revolution had mostly been seen in public spaces and events, now relentlessly expanded into the private space. This reflects the Cultural Revolution's total obliteration of any distinctions between public and private. Through the visual medium of photography, ideology followed the gaze of the leader's portrait to be projected into every corner of daily life. In their everyday setting, the people would constantly meet the gaze of Mao Zedong, feeling his massive presence, spiritual tension, terror and reassurance arising simultaneously. When facing the gaze of photography, they could sense the presence of the massive, ubiquitous surveillance system behind the lens.

The many photographic "creations" that were distributed through the media during the Cultural Revolution pushed Stalin's socialist realism to its logical extreme. In terms of content, Cultural Revolution photography amounted to diagrammatic explanations of ideology. The figures in the images carried out highly exaggerated actions with simple facial expressions, which were inexplicably solemn, indignant or smiling emptily. In terms of visual rhetoric, the perspectives were mostly looking up at the subjects. Lighting was usually cast from the side and the back for increased dramatic effect. The composition mostly consisted of a group of people gathered around one central figure. In order to ensure control over the overall effect of the picture, most were shot using backdrops, a decision that was of course rooted in technical and material limitations. The highly organized photographs were in accord with the highly organized society's need to control everything. The fact that absolutely no loss of control over even the visual presentation of human activity could be tolerated is a manifestation of the essence of uniformity in the aesthetics of the Cultural Revolution. Every single thing was under control. Vision is first and foremost political. The so-called "artistic photography" of the time was the use of these methods to visualize the political spectacle.

In April 1976, the mass folk-based movements mourning the death of Premier Zhou Enlai were accompanied by spontaneous photographic documentation of these movements. This marked the people's loss of faith in official propaganda photography. With the death of Mao Zedong, the people moved inexorably towards openness. Here, culture played a role in spurring conceptual rethinking and the liberation of ideas.



17. 由刘铮、荣荣等人创办的《新摄影》杂志

*New Photo Magazine*, founded by Liu Zheng, Rong Rong and others



18. 骑墙—海口, 2001, 翁奋摄

Weng Fen, *Sitting on the Wall*—Haikou, 2001

### III. Photography in the Post-Mao Era (1976 to the present)

The "April Photography Group," which appeared in Beijing in 1979, was the first folk-based photography group in the post-Mao era to strive for creative freedoms. The photography group craze of the mid 1980s, which saw the emergence of the Shaanxi Group, Shanghai's "North River Alliance" Salon, Beijing's "Fission" Group and Xiamen's "Five Ones" Group, among others, made it clear that this push for creative freedoms had become a nationwide phenomenon. These groups, with their divergent aspirations and diverse memberships, formed a rich and varied landscape of photography groups. At that time, individual photographers with their own independent views on photography also began to emerge, such as Mo Yi of Tianjin, Li Xiaobin, Xu Yong, Yuan Dongping and Lu Nan of Beijing, Zhang Hai'er of Guangzhou, Wang Yaodong and Gu Zheng of Shanghai and Yu Deshui and Jiang Jian of Henan. Whether they were groups or individuals, all of these photographers shared one fundamental pursuit, the right to control their own observation. Their photographic observation was no longer from the perspective of the nationalist grand narrative, but an observation for themselves and for the people who had been romanticized by the times. Most of them were no longer willing to observe things as a "subject of the nation." Instead, they wished to observe society as independent individuals and make individual evaluations of reality. They would speak for themselves while also striving to change the face of Chinese photography.

Working on the foundation of this effort for self-determinant observation, Chinese documentary photography began to emerge in the late 1980s and early 90s, and reached scale in the mid 1990s, becoming an important phenomenon in contemporary Chinese photography.

In terms of subject matter, these documentary photographers broke official taboos, using their lenses to collect the existential circumstances of the various sectors of society which had previously gone unnoticed (especially the lower rungs of society), and striving to reflect every aspect of social life. Their photography would no longer be manipulated by official ideology. Instead, they would follow their own views and perceptions to document the massive changes taking place in society. Meanwhile, others were seeking out the development of individual styles within documentary photography, enriching the field even further. Representative figures of this field include Lü Nan, Zhang Xinmin, Hou Dengke, Jiang Jian, Yang Yankang, Wu Jialin, Han Lei, Zhou Hai and Lu Yuanmin.

The state of Chinese society since reform and opening could be summed up as a process of interaction between cities and the countryside, of the cities absorbing labor from the countryside and of cities striving to gain control over the direction of their own development. Contemporary Chinese

documentary photography basically amounts to the use of photographic methods to bear witness to this process of social change. Whether these photographers focus on rural or urban life, whether they convey external social change or use internal expressions to cast light on reality, they have all preserved important visual documentation of the massive change which has taken place in this era.

#### A. Focusing on Change in the Countryside

China has always been an agrarian nation. Among the changes wrought on Chinese society by the reform and opening, many of the most profound have taken place in the countryside. Many Chinese photographers have been using documentary methods in a sustained effort to present the social life and changes taking place in the countryside. Zhu Xianmin, Xie Hailong, Hou Dengke and Jiang Jian have made profound contributions in this field.

Zhu Xianmin's series *Two Sides of the Yellow River* and *Girls of the Central Plain*, which he shot throughout the 1980s, could be called the earliest significant photographic work focused on documenting the existence of people along the banks of the Yellow River. Xie Hailong's *Photographic Documentation of Project Hope*, which he began in the early 1990s, was the first work of documentary photography to gain wide social recognition and understanding in China. His photographs, which depicted the tragic condition of unschooled children and the state of rural education in impoverished regions, did not only prompt the entire society to focus on this serious issue and work towards a solution.

*The Wheat Hands* by the late Hou Dengke provided a profound example in the question of how to localize the western form and concept in documentary photography. *The Wheat Hands* mostly depicts the unique lifestyles of migrant wheat harvesters in the Loess Plateau, using panoramic narrative methods to provide a glimpse into the existence of this special class of farmer. He spent ten years of observation, presenting the details of their condition and life within the setting of their activities. His deep, sustained observation provided rich material for the understanding and viewing of documentary photography as well as the consideration of the unique traits of Chinese documentary photography.

Jiang Jian, who lives and works both in Beijing and Henan Province, uses a formulaic portrait photography form, capturing details of the environments with a wide depth of field. As he creates portraits of farmers living in China's Central Plains, he also presents the spectacle of orthodox ideology, contemporary mass culture and traditional culture squaring off and coexisting in the living spaces of these farmers. The homes of Henan farmers are the main content in his photographs. He makes ample use of the camera's power to capture detail, thoroughly depicting every little detail of their living

spaces, which he used to present their lifestyles and characters, while using flashy colors to enhance the aesthetic tastes of these Central Plains farmers. With a concept-driven formulaic (this is not meant to be taken in a negative way) observation method, Jiang Jian has provided visual documentation for understanding the lives of Chinese farmers in a certain region.

Throughout the 1990s, Guangdong photographer Zhang Xinmin was engaged in a massive photography project entitled *Laying Siege on the City – the Long March of Chinese Peasants to the Cities*. This project is made up of three parts, *Town and Country*, *To the City* and *The City*. The series panoramically presents the most representative phenomenon of the changes taking place in contemporary Chinese society: peasants leaving their land and entering the cities. In a sense, Zhang Xinmin's work is more about how peasants survive in the city, rather than life in the city itself. In contemporary China's urbanization process, however, their lives in the city have become an important component of contemporary urban life overall. Zhang's photography has made an exquisite and detailed presentation of the rich content surrounding their lives in the city.

The time that photographers such as Hou Dengke, Hu Wugong, Yu Deshui, Jiang Jian and Zhang Xinmin spent documenting life in the countryside perfectly overlaps with the critical formative years of Chinese documentary photography in the 1990s. Through a long period of discussion, thought and practice, a group of Chinese photographers finally entered the late 1990s with a collective awareness of the need to focus on life in society. Never again would their gaze rest on literati-style natural scenery, and never again would they accept the falsehood of constructed scenes of happy, beautiful lives. Their focus on the countryside and their practice of documenting rural life has created a precious record of the changes that have taken place in Chinese society, especially the profound external and internal transformations in rural society. The one unchanging trait that can be found throughout their photographic practice is their eternally positive and profound exploration of social change and human nature.

## B. The Rise of Urban Photography

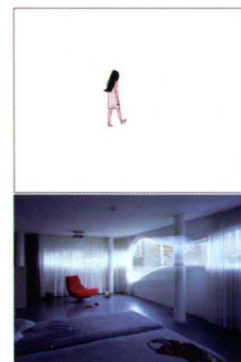
As the reform and opening began to pick up steam, some Chinese photographers finally began to notice the complexity and charm of urban life. As the urbanization process gained momentum, photographic expression of the cities became a real possibility. People finally realized that the effects of urbanization on people were profound and multifaceted. Urbanization implies much more than a modernization of material life. While the complex structures of urban societies and the real problems they entail provided photographers with rich material on which to apply their skills, it also tested the limits of photography itself. The complexity of urban life often presents itself with drama and absurdity that cannot be replicated in other places. This complex, ever-changing reality of the city requires that the photographer do more than just document it as a "witness"; he must also respond accordingly in the dimension of "expression." The city was the new challenge that photographers faced at the turn of the 21st century. How have they faced the challenges that urbanization poses on photographic expression? How have they engaged in their exploration and experimentation? Perhaps some of the artworks presented in this book will provide some answers to these questions.

The mid to late 1980s were the formative period for Chinese urban photography. Guangzhou photographer Zhang Hai'er was one of the first urban photographers to present the individual experience of urban life in highly individualized images. Desire stimulated and provoked by urban life, found prominent display in Zhang Hai'er's photography. His photography was an extemporaneous reaction of the individual to the city, a form of observation with a strongly subjective consciousness. In the mid 1980s, Zhang Hai'er's photography was an outlier, but it turned out to be a significant hallmark in the development of Chinese urban photography.

The "North River Alliance" photography group that emerged in Shanghai in 1986 was a folk-based photography group that viewed the city as its spiritual wellspring. From the beginning, the "North River



19. 玉门, 2006-2009, 庄辉、旦二合作  
Zhuang Hui and Dan'er, Yumen, 2006-2009



20. Wall House, 摄影+动画影像, 2007, 邢丹文作  
Xing Danwen, Wall House, photography and animation still, 2007

Alliance" consciously chose the city as its subject matter, with the images of the city created by You Zehong, Wang Yaodong, Mao Yiqing, and Gu Zheng standing out in particular. They openly declared that they were unmoved by the city's flashy surface, and that they intended to use photographic methods to engage in a struggle of resistance against the alienating effects of the city on the people, pointing out the side of urban life that was contrary to human nature. Meanwhile in Tianjin, Mo Yi was using his unique "anti-photography" techniques to engage in a somewhat tragic individual exploration on that city's streets. His series of self portraits touched on the fundamental human problem of the values and existence of the lonely individual in the city.

It is worth noting that the explorations of the abovementioned photographers all turned the city into a carrier for individual subjective experience, using a dialogue between the individual and the city to express the individual experience in the city. Documentation of real life in urban society, however, had yet to become a topic for their photography. This may be because Chinese urban life at the time had yet to be transformed as radically as that of the countryside, and had consequently failed to sufficiently attract their attention.

Into the 1990s, as the process of globalization began to accelerate, the urbanization of Chinese society began to unfold at an extraordinary speed. As all kinds of social problems began to intensify, the rapid pace of urbanization began to affect people's mindsets and ways of life, and photography began to use its unique methods to observe, witness and present Chinese urbanization on these levels.

In the early 1990s, Xu Yong in Beijing and Lu Yuanmin in Shanghai both began using their own methods to come up with their own answers to the coming waves of urbanization. In Beijing, Xu Yong seems to have had a premonition that the ancient city of Beijing was about to enter into a fierce frenzy of demolition and construction. He aimed his camera at the *hutong* alleys of Beijing filled with their traditional architecture. With calm vision and a steady hand, he captured the *hutongs* in their calm before the "storm" of demolition, preserving a historical and cultural document of the architecture in this ancient city. These images became a rallying point for the nostalgia craze that followed, and his intentional avoidance of the marks of human activity made them more of an historical fossil of the old *hutongs*, now a subject of material longing. Lu Yuanmin's *Shanghaianders* presented us with a group of Shanghai denizens who continued to live life according to their set logic in the midst of dramatic social change. Lu's *Suzhou Creek* presented a "foreign atmosphere" in Shanghai that differed from that of the Bund, catching those who still pined after Shanghai's glory days off guard. The importance of the photographic practices of these two photographers is in that they each used their own methods to provide individual perceptions and understandings of the city.



21. 中国景观—溪山秋霭图, 2007, 姚璐作  
Yao Lu, Chinese Landscape - Mountains and  
Streams through the Autumn Mist, 2007

In the mid to late 1990s, Shanghai-based Wang Yaodong's prolific urban photography focused on the growing and increasingly superficial material desire that lay concealed behind advertising images. Through his alteration and highlighting of these images, the city was shown in a terrifying light as a place for the installation of desires. Zhou Mingxian used *The Last Days of China Rail One and Housing Difficulties* to create a realistic report on the lives of Shanghai residents.

Before Luo Yongjin arrived in Shanghai in 1999, he had already received broad recognition for his *New Residence - Luoyang* series. Though the series was shot in Luoyang, which isn't exactly a modern metropolis in the typical sense, the "pre-modern" urban forms he conveyed in these images powerfully presented Chinese residences while also revealing the Chinese people's deeper awareness of architectural space. This provides a very meaningful reference for the understanding of the relationships between architecture and life in Chinese interior cities. After he arrived in Shanghai, the dislocated grid collage pieces he created rendered the infinite expansiveness and self-replication of the modern metropolis in a unique way.

Today, the external environment that catalyzed Chinese urban photography has already taken shape. The two-dimensional information media forms that flow through the urban space require much reflection, and images of urban life and society are an opportunity for people, especially photographers, to take a closer look at life in the city. They also provide a space for photographers' observations of urban life to gain recognition and dissemination.

### C. The Rise of "New Documentary Photography"

By the late 1990s, the increasing pervasiveness of commercial forces in mass media began to exert pressure on the dissemination space for the once-flourishing documentary photography, and the field found itself unable to develop further. Many people then began to explore artistic photography, which allowed for the expression of more individual style, while documentary photography began a transformation into "new documentary photography" which leaned towards more individual perspectives. Representative figures of "new documentary photography" include Liu Zheng, Rong Rong, Shao Yinong, Mu Chen, Li Lang, Yan Changjiang, Qu Yan and the Birdhead Group. Liu Zheng's series, *The Chinese*, while utterly exposing the brutality of life and the absurdity of reality, also emphasized the purity and visual power of photographic language. In *The Chinese*, images of Chinese people doggedly emerge from an atmosphere that is depressing yet intense, hopeless yet sentimental, dark yet exciting, presenting the degradation and struggles of the "heavy corporeal body" in an era of drastic social change. *The Chinese*, which drifts between the conceptual and the documentary, uses its twin

strengths of form and content to transcend the traditional boundaries of documentary photography, creating new possibilities for contemporary Chinese photography.

Since the mid 1990s, as the globalizing Chinese society has shifted towards urbanization and the market economy, it has also rapidly moved towards the transition to a mass consumer society. One major change that has come as a result of this process is that consumerism as an ideology has become the mainstream values system in everyday life. In the transformation into a "socialist market economy," the highly commercialized social environment that has gradually developed has come to reshape the attitudes, values and behavior of a generation of youth. This generation, born and raised in the cities, has been completely exposed to the consumer market and consumerist ideology, and under various family and social influences, it has grown into a new type of person that is the most self centered in the entirety of Chinese history. The convenience of disseminating information provided by the highly developed mass media has given many young people, who already view photography as a part of their daily lives, an impulse to share their experiences with others. While the photography of such people as Liu Yiqing has provided them with the ability to express themselves, it has also turned photography into an important "language" for this generation. "Private photography," which melds individual experiences with everyday feelings, has become one of the new strains in "new documentary photography."

### D. The Rise of "Conceptual Photography"

As disseminative mediums grew more developed, documentary photography reached a climax in the mid to late 1990s as every facet of social life received varying levels of attention from documentary photography. Meanwhile, those unsatisfied with these traditional techniques began engaging in exploratory practices. New Photo Magazine, which published only four issues in its two year run under Liu Zheng and Rong Rong, pushed photographic exploration another step forward with its radical concepts and ever-changing techniques. Sensitive artists, motivated by pressure from their environment, transformed that pressure into photographic expression for engaging in dialogue with and resistance against reality. This underground, photocopied magazine was a systematic attempt by a new generation of photographers to open up a self-controlled space for the dissemination of their works and the power of self-expression.

Just as documentary photography was on the rise, another group of people began explorations in conceptual photography. All artistic expression is the product of concepts. For this reason, no matter whether it was the abovementioned pure form of documentary photography, or this conceptual photography, in a certain sense, it was only a matter of how deeply or shallowly those concepts were concealed. It is not the intention of this article to form a definition of conceptual photography. Conceptual photography, however, is at the very least different from documentary in that it discards with efforts to document and disseminate information in its expression.

Because of the spread of photography, it is no longer an exotic affair for artists who aim to create images and present concepts. More importantly, artists are not fettered by identities as professional photographers. They recognize that photography's latent potential as a means of expression is far from being fully exploited. In their hands, photography may be nothing more than a means for visualizing concepts.

The phrase conceptual photography has been a key term in western postmodern art, and it is viewed as a secondary concept to conceptual art. In the Chinese context, however, conceptual photography emerged independently to become a concept that is in competition with documentary photography. This has changed the term's connotations accordingly.

Conceptual art flourished in the West from the 1960s to the mid 1970s. Some artists used photographs to express their ideas about the real world, to cast doubt on the established, systemic

definitions of the art system, the art market and artworks and to engage in deep exploration of the relationships between language and images. The use of photography in conceptual art usually fell under one of two categories: the first was the organic incorporation photography into conceptual art, and the second was the use of photography to document artistic behavior and events within artistic space, which is to say that photography was used in conceptual art as a means for documentation. The merging of photography with these means of expression both brought about changes in artistic disseminative methods and elicited a reconsideration of photography itself. In this process, attention was of course also drawn to the question of what photography actually is. In this light, conceptual photography in the western sense took on qualities of a sort of primordial photography. In China on the other hand, the somewhat satirical tone of the proposition of conceptual photography seemed to lend it an air of assumed superiority over documentary photography or straight photography, and every style of photography that on the surface didn't appear to fit with straight or pure photography became lumped together into the category of conceptual photography. The real question isn't if either "documentary" or "conceptual" is better than the other, or which one is more advanced or more backwards. The fundamental question is about the relationship between photography and contemporary reality.

Two landmark events for Chinese conceptual photography in the 1990s were the New Image: Conceptual Photography Art Exhibition curated by Daozi in 1997, and Strange Tales of Photography: Exhibition of New Chinese Conceptual Photography curated by Zhu Qi in 1998. These exhibitions revealed a different trend in contemporary photography concerning that the majority of the works were staged photographs used to indicate "concepts." While using photography to "document" their concepts, the photographers were also using photographic methods to dissolve the medium of photography itself. For artists, who were always seeking ways to more freely express themselves, the prospect of being able to freely change images raised by digital technology surely also aroused a sense of affinity. Regardless, the proposal of the term "conceptual photography" and the emergence of its specific practice in the 1990s played an important role in promoting changes and development within photography. It went both ways. Just as it was enriching the expressive forms of contemporary art, it was also promoting change within photography itself. The thing in and of itself was not always what really mattered.

Approaching from the broad level of culture, these conceptual photographers used this medium, which can connect with society in many ways, to engage in a multifaceted discussion of many different topics including history and memory, power and images, society and gender, the manipulation of history, the production of space and the power of capital. People such as Miao Xiaochun, Weng Fen, Cang Xin, Zhuang Hui, Zhang Dali and Cao Fei used artistic expression rooted in photography to explore the Chinese spiritual world and social change while



22. 中国翠西的时尚, 2009, 曹斐作  
Cao Fei, The Fashions of China Tracy, 2009



23. 虚拟最后审判, 2006, 缪晓春作  
Miao Xiaochun, Virtual Last Judgment, 2006

also enriching photographic language as an expressive form. Their photographic explorations became an important component of the flourishing spectacle of contemporary art. The agility they showed in dealing with these issues led many people to think that photography had no lower limits. But it was just this kind of shifting image strategy that led them to touch on many social, historic and cultural issues, and these were often things that straight photography, limited by the characteristics of the medium, had often been powerless against. In a sense, conceptual photography provided many insights into how to deal with the problems mentioned above.

Today, as we enter the 21st century, the profound effect of digital technology on photography has ignited a passion for fabrication in a post-photographic era. Some photographers are attempting to use fabrication methods to create their own worlds. Some are using the virtual to cast artistic doubt on issues in reality, as is seen in the explorations of Xing Danwen, Yao Lu and Wang Chuan; some are leaning towards using real materials to create completely fabricated real worlds. Some, such as Miao Xiaochun and Cao Fei, are moving from photography to 3D animation.

## Conclusion

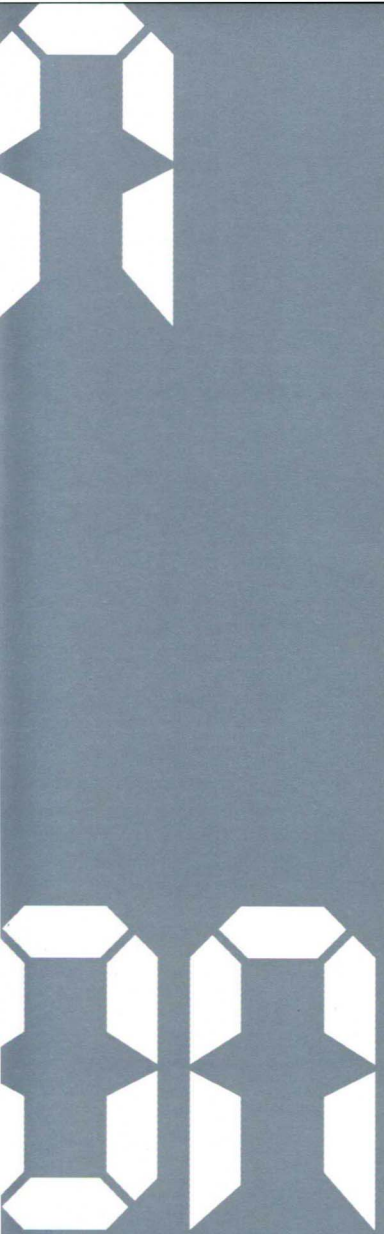
It must be noted that the photographic works collected in this book were selected primarily on the basis of their ability to provide insight into the changes taking place in Chinese society and the times. Also, these photographs should provide an understanding of the recent trajectory of photography as a digital medium in China. Works which could reflect the current state of contemporary Chinese photography received preferential consideration over some more famous works that did not fall under the auspices of this book.

As China increasingly opens up to the world, Chinese photography is in a process of converging with world contemporary art on a profound level. What direction Chinese photography will take, just as what direction Chinese social developments will take, remains a great mystery. I do believe, however, that just as social development promoted change in art, artistic development will promote social change. I am also looking forward to even more and better expressions from Chinese photographers in terms of the variety of subject matter and diversity of techniques. At the very least, Chinese photography is continuing to play many important roles in pushing society towards mature development. And though the entry of capital into the art market has served an important function in the disintegration of ideology, it has also distracted artists from their focus on reality to a certain degree. However, as has been shown by these past thirty years of Chinese photography, there is still vast potential for contemporary photography in China.

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