

BEYOND PROPAGANDA,
AESTHETICISM AND
COMMERCIALISM:
THE COMING OF AGE
OF DOCUMENTARY
PHOTOGRAPHY IN CHINA

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Abstract

The paper traces the development of documentary photography in modern China through case studies of photographers and their work in different periods of history. It argues that technological potential, social conditions and cultural values work together to enable and condition the development of specific styles of photography. The coming of age of documentary photography as an independent way of observing society and intervening in social change in China is the result of overcoming three institutional influences of art: propaganda, aestheticism and commercialism. The future development of this art form depends on its continued negotiation with these three institutional forces and its ability to remain relevant to social processes.

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Introduction

Photography and film arrived in China not long after their invention in Europe, photography during the early 1840s (the time of the first opium war) and film in 1896, testifying to the intensity of global connectivity enabled by European imperialism during the nineteenth century. Local practices of photography and film also started shortly after these “western gimmicks” were shown to amazed or scared publics in China, mostly in the port cities. Despite the contemporaneity of introducing their technologies, however, the artistic and social uses of photography and film in China have travelled quite a different route, showing that socio-cultural and political-economic conditions of a given society, rather than the technological nature itself, shape the mode and culture of using new technologies. One peculiar feature of these developments in China is the marginal character of the documentary tradition among other personal, institutional and commercial usages, even though realism as an aesthetic and ideological doctrine was no stranger to Chinese artists and intellectuals since the early twentieth century. Changes began toward the end of the century with a strong surge of documentary practices, theoretical discussions and public awareness of visual media like photography, film, and television. The enabling social conditions and the generated stylistic values by this late development of documentary photography as an emerging social, artistic, and even political force in China will be the main focus of this article.

This is not the place, however, for explicating in some detail the complicated reasons behind the plight of the documentary tradition in China during the first century of the invention of photography. Three social and historical clues may provide a preliminary context for the discussion below. First of all, traditional Chinese visual art leans heavily towards expression rather than imitation. Artistic achievement is usually found in the representation of the “ideal” or “imaginary” rather than the “real.” Thus, even though photography was invented against a background of scientific fever and an urge to capture the absolute reality in Europe, this modernist ambition was mostly lost when it was introduced to China. Most of its early adopters framed its use in the familiar context of Chinese visual expression, on the same continuum with painting. Photography was only more technologically advanced and convenient rather than a sharp break, which had been the key concern in European debates over the nature of photography. Consequently, early photographic practices were mostly for the purposes of decoration, worship, aesthetic expression, sociality, advertising and propaganda. Recording history and representing reality (either scientific or social) were marginal concerns, even though pictures taken then are now considered to have documentary value.

Secondly, China was a society plunged into war, poverty, division and foreign occupation at the time of the encounter with photography. Although a new technology with great aesthetic, social, and economic potential, photography was at the same time expensive to use, produce and distribute. Only a small number of political and cultural elites were able to have access to the technology, skill and capital needed for its continued use and further exploration. The diffusion of photography was limited to a small stratum of Chinese society. The prosperity of photo studios, photo journalism and amateur use of photography in large commercial cities, like Shanghai during the 1920s and 1930s, was the exception rather than the rule. The lack of social familiarity and restricted diffusion of photography also

contributed to limited experimentation with the discursive and artistic potential of the new medium. As a socially concerned way of representing life and the world, documentary photography grew against the background of a new social theory, social movements and social consciousness. Early twentieth century China was no stranger to these new developments in social thought—from conservatism to reformism, and from socialism and communism to anarchism—but the agents of social reform invariably found photography to be a technology too alien and inaccessible to be used effectively in social enlightenment and mobilisation.

Lastly, a strong documentary tradition cannot be the work of a few gifted artists or forward looking social reformers. It takes an interconnected network of social, political and institutional support to make documentary photography a sustainable social and artistic movement. Government support, like in the form of the famed FSA project, that can organise otherwise dispersed energy, educational institutions that teach and propagate the stylistic and social values associated with documentary photography, and pictorial publications that can reach a general public and cultivate a readership sympathetic to the social causes behind the seemingly artless photographic realism, are the necessary conditions for a healthy development of a documentary tradition. Needless to say, these conditions were seriously lacking in China during a large part of the twentieth century.

Photojournalism and the Use of Photography in Social Enlightenment and War: The Twilight of Documentary Consciousness (1920s–1940s)

Press and commercial publishing enjoyed a fast development in China's large cities during three decades after the republican revolution. Visual materials were increasingly favoured by newspaper and magazine publishers with the development of printing technologies and the desire to reach a large readership. As early as the 1880s, *Shenbao*, one of China's earliest mass circulation newspapers, published a free pictorial supplement for distribution with the newspaper. The pictures were hand-drawn at that time. The content ranged from illustrations of news stories, commentary on social issues to lifestyle reports from all over the world. In the early 1920s, photographs became a common feature of newspapers; many continued the *Shenbao* tradition of publishing weekly pictorial supplements. The picture sources varied from foreign news agencies, foreign journalists and commercial photo studio operators to amateur photographers. Increasing demands for news photography helped create the earliest community of Chinese photojournalists and China's own news photo agencies (Ma Yunzeng et al. 1987, 113-155). Some large newspapers even set up their own photo departments.

The social chaos and foreign invasions that plagued China during this period had made Chinese intellectuals see the importance and effectiveness of photography for providing information and social education. One of the world famous news photos from China during this period is perhaps the one depicting a crying and bruised baby sitting on the platform of a wrecked train station (Picture 1). The photographer, Wang Xiaoting (1900-1983), was an American born Chinese photojournalist working for a British-American corporation, the Hearst press, *Shenbao* and some other news agencies in Shanghai. The picture was first published in the October 4, 1937 issue of *Life* magazine's *The Camera Overseas* section, entitled "A Chinese

Baby amid the Wreckage.” It was a still picture taken from Wang Xiaoting’s short newsreel shot on August 13, 1937 at Shanghai’s South Station after Japanese had bombed the area. The July 1937 invasion by Japanese troops and the beginning of China’s War of Resistance was not well noticed by the international community before the outbreak of WWII in Europe and the Pacific Rim. The picture published in *Life* magazine immediately became the quintessential symbol of China’s suffering under Japanese atrocities. As claimed by *Life* magazine, “136,000,000 people see this picture of Shanghai’s South Station,” and the picture aroused a huge international outcry against Japanese invasion and sympathy toward China’s war effort. Chinese politicians were also quick to use this occasion to boost their diplomatic efforts to seek western support and aid. The phenomenal power of the visual image also forced Japan to launch counter propaganda against the authenticity of the picture. The debates continue well into the present. Perhaps the most impressive lesson learned by Chinese intellectuals and visual workers was the power of seeing and power of the image of the “real.” The idea that photography is a unique tool to capture social reality and arouse people’s attention gradually took shape in a culture so used to visual expressionism. The extreme situation of war and the need to expose war atrocities pushed the realism of photography to the forefront of modern communication in China.

Besides the immediate instrumentality of photojournalism, the multiple social problems facing early modern China also encouraged some visually educated intellectuals to use photography in the effort to create more detailed, systematic and accurate knowledge of the nation, its people and society. The endeavours of social education, enlightenment and social research through the combined use of words and visual images were best demonstrated by the activities of the most influential picture magazine of the era, *The Companion Pictorial*. The mass circulation monthly magazine was founded in 1926 and stopped publishing on the Chinese mainland in 1946. Its publisher and editors were progressive intellectuals, who saw publishing as a cultural project to awaken the population and initiate social change. The magazine combines painting, photography, essays, literature, news stories, biographies, and other forms of expression. Its content also far exceeds current affairs to include lifestyle, sports, health, celebrity biography, feature interviews, the introduction of Chinese and foreign cultures, travelogues, new developments in science, technology, arts, literature and social thought. The encyclopaedic ambition of the pictorial is clearly visible. As claimed by its publisher in 1928, *The Companion Pictorial* would “keep on its mission of disseminating education and enhancing culture to the end”, and it would not “retreat from the goal because of difficulties and commercial lure,” nor would it be “controlled by any power group and lose its objectivity and sense of justice” (Ma Guoliang 2002, 299). Most of *The Companion’s* editors were educated in the visual arts or interested in its social impact. As China’s first generation of cosmopolitan intellectuals, they were the first to experience a modern visual culture and were sensitive to the social and emotional impact of the new paradigm of looking brought about by western photographic and film practices. In their encounters with western-made images of China, they were traumatised by the unequal power relationship conveyed and sustained by the new positivist mode of capturing and understanding images. As a passive object of observation by a western gaze, China often appeared odd and static, its people numb and lifeless, and its society corrupt

Picture 1:
A Chinese Baby
amid the Wreckage of
Shanghai's South
Station

Photographer:
Wang Xiaoting

Source:
<http://post.baidu.com/f?kz=209613318>



Picture 2:
Pages from *China As She Is:
A Comprehensive Album*

Source:
http://trade.artron.net/buy/showpic.jsp?strpath=MB00061423/2_2005_07_25_03_55_03.jpg&collectionname=1934

Original in colour



Picture 3:
Educated Youth Working
Together with the Peasants

Photographer Unknown

Source:
http://219.139.58.195/lzqzj/forum_view.asp?forum_id=28&view_id=25489

Original in colour





Picture 4:
A Young Man Showing
to the Crowd a Banner
Written by His Blood

Photographer
Unknown

Source: <http://post.baidu.com/f?kz=17197605>
<http://post.baidu.com/f?kz=17197605>



Picture 5:
The Internationale;
A Group of People
Marching on the
Tiananmen Square
Hand in Hand Singing
the Internationale

Photographer:
Wu Peng

Source: <http://www.gg-art.com/ggact/auktion/detail.php?did=170218&bid=134>



Picture 6:
Don't Forget the Children
(A criticism of the social
degeneration caused by the
Cultural Revolution)

Photographer:
Li Jinghong;
exhibited in the second
"Nature·Society·People"
photo exhibition

Source:
<http://www.bluh.cn/html/dazhongsheyin/2007niandi1qi/20070723/557.html>

and oppressive. By operating a pictorial, these intellectuals wanted very much to create their own counter-images of China to reverse the negative impression and enhance national consciousness in the Chinese population. Lack or ignorance of modern realist visual knowledge of landscape and society was considered an important reason for the lack of national awareness among the Chinese people. In 1932, *The Companion* organised a group of four photographers and an editor to travel the country for eight months. They took more than 10,000 pictures. The results of this unprecedented project were published in the magazine as feature photo-essays, shown to the public in exhibitions in several large cities, and finally compiled into several photo books, like *China As She Is: A Comprehensive Album* (Picture 2), *The Beauty of Chinese Architecture*, *The Beauty of Chinese Landscape*, *The Beauty of Chinese Carving*, and brochures, like *The View of Guilin*, or *The Summer Palace*. This proto-documentary mission aroused much enthusiasm among progressive intellectuals and the middle-class public and was appreciated as the first effort to use western visual technology for enlightenment and as a boost of Chinese national pride. The philosopher and educator, Cai Yuanpei, then president of China's Central Academy of Research, praised the magazine as the forerunner of social research and national cultural promotion in China:

The greatness of our land and the length of our history have drawn the attention of the world for a long time. After the opening up of the nation, countless people from many countries came to our hinterland for expedition and research. It is such a pity that we ourselves haven't organised any such research endeavours so far. Ever since its publication, The Companion has been using pictures to introduce to the nation and the world China's social and cultural conditions ... Now that they plan to organise a photographic trip all over the nation, capturing the splendour of our landscape, the beauty of our culture and the achievements of our national construction, the ambition is indeed high and adorable (Ma Guoliang 2002, 76).

The minister of transportation, Ye Gongcuo, was fascinated by the project for reasons of national defence and because he appreciated the relationship between visuality and national sovereignty,

In the world, there are a lot of people who don't know much about other cultures, but there are few who don't know about their own. China is a rare exception here. Even if we have four thousand years of history, we still don't know exactly how big is our territory and population... A careless mistake in mapping costs us thousands of acres of land in Heilongjiang Province, and a deaf ear to the situation in Taiwan allowed Japan to occupy it... Countless muddle-headed people in our country think since we ourselves are in the dark and cannot see clearly, others are also in the dark. They don't know that others have used X-ray to see through us for many times (Ma Guoliang 2002, 77-78).

Because of the urgency of national survival during this era, photographic realism was mostly appreciated for its scientific and propagandist functions. Yet thanks to its lack of institutional and political organisation, the new visual practices were mostly experimentations by progressive intellectuals with humanist and nationalist concerns. In their own exploration, they had approached documentary photography and a realistic camera as a new and fruitful way of seeing the world

and society, even though their practices were not aided by theoretical discussions. As a result, the twilight of documentary tradition in China has created two contradictory influences on its later development. On the one hand, photography was a new attempt to experience the world and communicate social messages. An initial understanding of the relationship of seeing and its social impact took shape among China's visual workers. Photography as a social force was then widely accepted, and it is one of the key features of the documentary tradition. On the other hand, however, lack of theoretical reflection on the use of visual technology, the subject-object relationship created by it, and the narrow social goal to which it was directed, produced a tendency to see documentary photography instrumentally, as a means toward other goals, rather than as having social and aesthetic meanings in itself. This influence may be seen in later official expressions of visual realism: basic principles of documentary photography could easily be broken by fulfilling the task of propaganda.

Breaking through the Propaganda Tradition in the Reform Era (Late 1970s–1980s)

After the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the official doctrine for all forms of art is socialist realism and the worker-peasant-soldier perspective. In name, documentary photography may have a better time in a new culture, stressing realism in the production of art. However, significant differences caused the stagnation of a documentary tradition in China for several decades. Socialist realism is a rigid official framework that only recognises politically endorsed visions of people and society as real, such as the happy life of the working people, the glorious development of national industry, or love of the party by all strata of society (Picture 3). Documentary photography on the other hand, stresses individualised and critical ways of revealing the complexity and multiple meanings of social life. This constant questioning of the status quo and the uncovering of a previously unknown knowledge of society, always run the risk of contradicting an officially sanctioned vision of the new society. This may be why documentary photography was even less tolerated than the political escapism of landscape photography in the socialist cultural regime of China. The rigid institutionalisation of government provisions of the means of cultural production, distribution and exhibition, has meant a fast growth of cultural workers on all levels of society and strict limitation of cultural expressions and communication outside the boundary of the official doctrine. As the means of production, the camera was widely available among city dwellers and the young generation until the 1970s, the critical developments in a new and creative visuality only needed a social movement to announce itself on the stage of history.

Art historians in China mostly agree that the April 5 movement in 1976 marked the beginning of a self-conscious documentary tradition in Chinese photography (Wu Hung 2005, 119-160). In late March of that year, voluntary memorials took place on Tiananmen Square commemorating the late Zhou Enlai, who was the symbol of a rational and humane leadership to the people during the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution and public mourning was forbidden by the regime. Tens of thousands of people, without systematic organisation, went to the square in silent protest. People put wreaths and banners around the memorial to the people's heroes,

Picture 7:
Wheat Hand
Working

Photographer:
Hou Dengke

Source:
<http://club.cat898.com/newbbs/print-page.asp?BoardID=33&ID=502986>



Picture 8:
Wheat-hands
Going to Another
Working Place

Photographer:
Hou Dengke

Source:
<http://club.cat898.com/newbbs/print-page.asp?BoardID=33&ID=502986>



Picture 9:
Project Hope:
A School Teacher
Takes Her Baby
to Class

Photographer:
Xie Hailong

Source:
<http://www.cpanet.cn/sysyl/xie-hl/xie-hlzp.htm>





Picture 10:
Project Hope: A Boy Reading in Class

Photographer:
Xie Hailong

Source:
<http://www.cpanet.cn/sysyl/xie-hl/xiehlzp.htm>



Picture 11:
Project Hope: The Big-eyed Girl,
the Brand-name Image

Photographer:
Xie Hailong

Source:
<http://www.cpanet.cn/sysyl/xie-hl/xiehlzp.htm>



Picture 12:
Ten Families Crowded
in One Small Room

Photographer:
Zhang Xinmin

Source:
<http://gb.cri.cn/3821/2005/01/18/501@426198.htm>

published their poetry on posters or recited them in public. Many brought their cameras and recorded scenes of the first voluntary mass protest in the history of the People's Republic. A clamp down by the regime came on the evening of April 5, and in the coming months, many photographers took pains to protect their films as historical record. In 1977, through personal connection, a secret editorial board consisting of seven people was founded to collect and select pictures taken of the event and prepare for publication. Most of them were amateur photographers at that time, who took the pictures instinctively to preserve history. Yet during the process of communication and organisation among like-minded people, they decided to pursue photography as a career outside the rigid stylistic constraints of an official visual philosophy (Wu Hung 2005, 123). Realism, in the sense of capturing the moment without authorial manipulation according to pre-determined themes, and deep emotion, in the sense of projecting individual observation and feeling onto the images, were two major features of the newly emerging photographic style. These pictures have since then become the symbol of a people's collective struggle against evil forces in history. They help create and preserve historical memory of public protest, which was constantly evoked in later social movements (Pictures 4 and 5).

A photo album called *The People's Memorial* was finally published in January, 1979. By this time, however, the new reform government had already reversed the verdict against the April 5 movement and called it a revolutionary act. The publication turned from an underground project to one fully supported by the government. The names of authors were removed from published pictures to indicate a mass movement, but the new president associated himself with the movement that gained wide public support with an epigraph on the first page of the album. Instead of accepting the invitation to join the official association of Chinese photographers, key members of the movement formed an unofficial artistic group, called April Photographic Association, and started organising exchanges, salons, exhibitions, and publications under its name. After an exhibition on the April 5 movement, the association held three "nature society people" photo exhibitions during the early 1980s. The exhibitions showcased the expressive potential of photography to reveal personal feelings, subcultures, unusual behaviours, and other aberrant topics (Picture 6). This and other similar associations became one important force in the cultural enlightenment and modernist fever of China's artistic scene throughout the first decade of the national reform. By forming private associations and salons, and by using the language of western modernism, the artistic community tried to create an autonomous realm of academic art separated from the hegemony of official culture production. Official doctrines were mostly criticised by the de-politicised discourse of professionalism and aesthetic standards.

However, in the strong mood to quickly modernise Chinese art and catch up with the so-called international trend, documentary photography, with its name connected to official realism and its seemingly plain and artless composition, again was considered outdated and not artistic enough by the art establishment. Formalism and aestheticism were the key concerns of the day. Theoretical and public discussions about photography mostly set the beautiful against the true, and, therefore, realism against art.

In this critical environment, only two themes of documentary photography were mostly recognised by the photographic establishment and by the mainstream

publishing market. One was an ethnographic interest in remote and minority regions of China, with images of their exotic and ancient landscape, rituals, and cultural life. This was part of the “returning to the cultural root of China” movement that influenced Chinese art and literature during the 1980s. Quite similar to *The Companion’s* effort during the 1930s, the so called “returning to the root” movement was an effort to reconcile Chinese tradition and modern ideologies, alleviating the anxiety caused by the sharp incongruence between the two, and to create a nationalist discourse that could combine China’s purity of tradition and openness to modernisation. The second theme was political criticism of the social tragedies caused by the Cultural Revolution. Pictures of the political rituals and scenes of everyday life from the era, originally illegal and probably preserved with risks, were exhibited publicly in the 1980s for deploring and criticising an aberrant and crazy movement. Both themes were well within the ideological boundary of the reform regime. When an international market for Chinese *avant-garde* art developed in the 1990s, they were also welcomed by a western art market for their exotic quality. More individualised, independent, self-reflective and devoted documentary work would come of age in another decade with increasing societal tolerance for non-conforming viewpoints and a more developed publishing and art market to provide non-official channels of communication.

Having a Name of Its Own: The Coming of Age of Documentary Photography (1990s–Now)

Easily confused by people with photo-journalism, propaganda images and institutional documents constitute another difficulty of documentary photography in China, which concerns its anonymity. The first recorded use of the term as a proper name and a style of photography appeared in a translated article, “Documentary Photography” in a 1981 issue of *International Photography*. The article stressed “objectivity” and no intervention by the author in the process of taking pictures, which was against a wide-spread practice of asking subjects to pose for specific effects in news and propaganda photography. As late as 1988, a more detailed and theoretically informative introduction to documentary photography was written by a journalism professor after his academic visit to the United States of America. The article, “On Western Documentary Photography,” was published in three consecutive issues of *Popular Photography*. The concept started to have an autonomous meaning separate from news and institutional photography (Bao Kun and Liu Hui 2007, 13).

One significant feature of documentary photography is its relationship to time and subject matter. Unlike news pictures that stress eventfulness, movement and shock effect, a documentary project takes much longer for the author to study, as well as experience and understanding of the interrelations of social conditions, cultural values, and people’s life. In the process, the author develops a close connection with subjects, while trying to convey, through a series of visual narratives, a particular way of understanding social life in time and space. Often a documentary photographer is not merely a traditional artist seeking the means of personal expression, but a social reformer hoping to use visual means for social research, to communicate social awareness of previously ignored social facts, and to intervene in the historical process.

Before the 1990s, when documentary photography started to enjoy a noticeable recognition in the publishing market, official institutions and among the middle class, several photographers spent years doing social research and taking pictures anonymously and with minimal social support. Their work, mostly published during the 1990s, helped preserve and develop an existing documentary tradition in China. Li Xiaobin, a veteran from the April Photographic Association, continued his documentary approach when most of his colleagues were fascinated with formalism and expressionism. He was sensitive to the vast social changes in China during the reform era and felt responsible to keep images of the shifting social life for the historical record. Zhu Xianmin, a member of the official Association of Chinese Photographers, devoted his time to the recording of everyday life of peasants in the heartland of China. The work was published in the photo album, *People of the Yellow River*. Two other photographers, Hou Dengke from Shanxi Province and An Ge from Guangdong, also used cameras to record ordinary life and social change in their local environments, peasant life in Shanxi, and culture, society, and urbanisation in Guangdong, a province neighbouring Hong Kong and a frontier of the opening-up reform policy. Hou Denke's photo album, *The Wheat-hands*, depicting the life of migrant farm workers in Shanxi, was published in 2000 and has since become one of the classics of Chinese documentary photography (Pictures 7 and 8).

A common feature of their work is their calm and equalitarian attitude toward their subjects in front of their cameras. Unlike the overrun of exoticism and romanticism in mainstream photography, their work has the air of a dispassionate academic study. However, because of their much deeper engagement with the life they photographed and their strong empathy with the people depicted, they refused to freeze the meaning of their images with inflated authorial manipulation. They tried their best to protect the subjectivity of their subjects and help them communicate directly to their readers. This attitude, to some extent, contributed to the incomprehensibility of their work felt by the mainstream market. Another photographer--whose work is stylistically less sophisticated and whose images are more straightforward and easy to understand -- helped raise social awareness with the force of documentary photography to make a difference in social life, and claim legitimacy for its continued development in China.

Xie Hailong, an amateur photographer, who attended contests since the early 1980s, discovered the poverty of China's countryside and its miserable condition of primary education during chance visits in the late 1980s. He started research on education in China's poor areas and took pictures in an effort to warn people about the seriousness of the situation. In 1991, he began an extended documentary project in twelve provinces at his own expense. His photographs were often rejected by the press mostly for reasons of showing the negative side of society. In despair, he approached a semi-official charity project, Project Hope, launched by China's Youth Development Foundation. The project's main purpose is to help build new schools in poor villages and provide basic educational services for children of poor families. As a newly founded charity organisation, Project Hope recognised the power of visual images to communicate a clear message to the public and help publicise the cause. With an endowment of the foundation, Xie's pictures began to be widely published in domestic and foreign mass media. The social effect could be called sensational. Shocked and deeply moved by the poverty and perseverance of

school children and teachers in poor villages of China, donations poured in from the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the overseas Chinese community. The first public exhibition of the Project Hope pictures was in 1992 followed by countless others. In a few years, Xie's pictures were canonised by official institutions and the art establishment as important social and artistic work. The success of the Project Hope Pictures helped overcome the ideological and aesthetic bias that plagued documentary photography in China (Gu Zheng and Xie Hailong 2006).

It was not an accident that among many other efforts, Xie Hailong's documentary on education gained public recognition and official support. The photographic project was launched with a very straight-forward humanistic concern: to expose the dire conditions of education in rural and poor China and arouse attention from the urban and rich China. The simple relationship between the desperate school children and the sympathetic middle class was never questioned or problematised in the composition and content of the pictures. Viewers could easily maintain a safe distance from the images and feel sadness and sympathy at the same time. The photographer, for example, never appeared in the publicised images, and his existence was carefully concealed to avoid capturing any responses from children to the camera. Only some unnoticeable details offer traces of the presence of a cameraman in an otherwise "natural" scene at class time: in some pictures, children in the background cannot help but look in the direction of the camera, when they were obviously told to go on with their class work as if no outsider was present (Pictures 9 and 10).

More importantly, the subjects in these pictures never showed signs of resentment to their unjust situation. Instead, they all demonstrated perseverance and industriousness, which made them deserve help from mainstream society. Content and form of the pictures are well within the official boundaries of helping promote the cause of charity and the concern over primary education in China, without raising questions at the same time about the social causes of the situation. Moreover, this was also a time when the mainstream political discourse was trying a transformation away from the legacy of revolution and class struggle to the more apolitical paradigm of humanism and nationalism. The outpouring of donations was understood as a sign of patriotism among the Chinese middle class, and the passionate responses from overseas Chinese communities were easily incorporated in the narrative of nation, blood-ties, and love of motherland. The mainstream media were also quick with commercialising the pictures by selecting several "brand name" images (Picture 11) for the purpose of further promotion. Although social and stylistic meanings of Xie's documentary work were limited because of official participation, it nonetheless was the most significant opportunity for the legitimisation of documentary photography in important social institutions, which helped create a social influence of this art form.

During the 1990s, it was no longer rare for pictorial publications, professional or popular, to use and discuss the concept of documentary photography. For several years, it was even the main focus of some influential magazines, such as *China Photography*, to introduce documentary theory and history as well as to publish and promote documentary photographers in China. China's social changes during the 1990s have taken a truly radical route, creating social scenes unthinkable only a few years ago. With rapid economic development and industrialisation, the gap between rich and poor is widening almost overnight. In less than ten years, China

Picture 13:
The Window Cleaner

Photographer:
Zhang Xinmin

Source:
<http://gb.cri.cn/3821/2005/01/18/501@426198.htm>



Picture 14:
"Suspicious Vagabonds"
Round up by Police

Photographer:
Zhang Xinmin

Source:
<http://gb.cri.cn/3821/2005/01/18/501@426198.htm>



Picture 15:
Pushing a Cart
up the Bridge

Photographer:
Zhang Xinmin

Source:
<http://gb.cri.cn/3821/2005/01/18/501@426198.htm>



has turned from a nation with relatively equal distribution of wealth in the world to one of the most polarised societies. Inequality, manifest in multiple dimensions, took various forms – regional imbalance, class differentiation, gender gap, even division among different professions. Social problems and human conditions that caught the attention of socially concerned photographers became varied and localised. Documentary photography in this era gradually moved away from residual constraints or from the “meta-narrative” of national themes to more individualised and more critical explorations of the nature and meaning of these vast social changes. In 2003, the Guangdong Museum of Art held a large exhibition called “Chinese Humanism: Contemporary Documentary Photography.” It provided a comprehensive introduction of the development of documentary photography in China and started the now regular practice of collecting documentary photographs in art museums. Many themes and photographers were represented. There were those who turned their camera to the most marginal and invisible groups in cities—sex workers, asylum dwellers and drug users; there were observers of rural and minority life and changes under the pressure of urbanisation and globalisation; there were pictures that reminded people of the intersection between past and present in the daily life of ordinary people; there were also others, who turned their camera to the vast changes of China’s landscape, because of industrialisation, urbanisation and environmental destruction.

One photographer’s work is worth mentioning in some detail, as it demonstrates the degree of social engagement, self-reflection and stylistic maturity of contemporary documentary photography in China. Zhang Xinmin, a photographer from the southern city of Shenzhen, has been studying and taking pictures of migrant rural workers in large cities since the early 1990s. Towards the turn of the twentieth century, one salient but contradictory social change took place in China. Tens of millions of farmers left their land when fast urbanisation forced them to give up agriculture for industrial or service jobs in cities, while failing to obtain equal rights and protection for migrant workers. Their life in the strange urban landscape can be best described as uncertain, risky and subaltern. They were the major builders of the miraculous cosmopolitan areas that were sprouting like grass in China, but least possible to enjoy the offerings of a modern life. Zhang Xinmin turned his camera on this group of people, presenting the most familiar but invisible scenes of city life—a city dotted with images of migrant workers and their working and living conditions.

His photo album, *Encircling the City—Chinese Farmers’ Long March to the City* (2004), provides a panoramic view of this historical process and its social consequences. The title alludes to the history of the Chinese socialist revolution, when an army of peasants finally took national power away from urban capitalists. This time, however, although the city seems to be occupied by peasants visually, they are actually encircled and crushed by the city (Picture 12). The city, with its overwhelming scale and poor welfare services as the basic safety net for migrant workers, is a place of danger, coldness and abyss as seen from their position (Picture 13). Not only are they unable to find a proper home and a well paying and respectable job, migrant workers are often seen as alien and potential criminals by city dwellers (Picture 14).

Unlike Project Hope pictures, these images are directly in the face of city

dweller without the luxury of a safe distance. They form a sharp contrast to daily mainstream commercial images of the city before our eyes and force us to realise the existence of what we encounter but do not see in our daily life. It is, indeed, a difficult choice for the photographer in an effort to create a productive relationship between his subjects and mainstream viewers in the city. The first question he must deal with is his own relationship to people in front of his camera. In many interviews he repeats that he felt like these migrant workers:

These are some photos of country and city life in China of the 1990s. I experienced and saw them, and had some feelings. So I shoot them with my camera. They record not only what I saw, but also my own self—how I was looking, my motivation, my position, my attitude and my relationship to the people ... I almost fell into the trap of humanism, hoping to take pictures that would have my name stamped in history ... I didn't think of humanism or recording history when I took the pictures, I just wanted to go back to life around me, and understand the struggles and changes that were going on (Zhang Xinmin 2005).

Viewers are forced to think about their relationship to the images and their attitudes towards them, since they are not given a comfortably safe position to see people in these pictures as alien and different. They always seem to be by our side and working together with us (Picture 15). To some extent, they offer a virtual reality in which we can physically experience the life of rural migrant workers, because Zhang Xinmin thrust himself into the life circle of the migrant population and only pressed the shutter when he felt accepted.

Concluding Remarks

Coming into the new millennium, the institutional structure of the Chinese art scene gradually develops into an interconnected triangle of official, academic, and commercial art. Official art is torn between the need to remain relevant as a propaganda force in Chinese society and the desire to create an economic powerhouse and to secure a lion's share of China's growing cultural market, which has long been courted by international capital. In reality, official and commercial art share many commonalities and their tension may best be described as temporary and sporadic. The weakest angle is academic art, as its professional and aesthetic autonomy is constantly threatened by ideological censorship or economic dependency, while it is also an establishment that limits the expressive, stylistic and communicative possibilities of cultural practices. Documentary photography, as a form of communication that tries to create social and aesthetic meanings, is not a perfect fit for any of these three institutional structures. It grows out of and is heavily dependent on an active third sector: civil society. As Chinese society is becoming more complex and moving out of the range of state monopoly, a rudimentary civil society is in sight. According to history, this is the site where documentary photography grows and develops and is able to negotiate with the three dominant structures its position as a social force. With the development of new technologies, especially the internet and digitalisation, it is now also possible for documentary photography to bypass the threshold of infrastructure, institutional support, and capital to intervene directly in social processes within civil society.

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