

# Telling the Truth: Documentary Photography and Photojournalism as Tool and Art in the Chinese Context

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The invention of photography as the first possibility of the 'fixation of shadows' falls into the year 1839 and soon spread from Europe to the rest of the world. In China people were also engaged in photography, but – as in the rest of the world – it was initially not about art. Due to the fact that the industry in the West with its private companies like Kodak and Leica discovered a mass-market sector, photography was everywhere understood as an expression of modernity, which was within a short time used for their own purposes. From holding on to private moments, using the perpetuation of portraits and scientific accuracy, the medium was since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century also used as a propaganda tool of political interests – from the cover-up of the American depression to the transfiguration of National Socialism to the obeisance of Russian socialism to the propaganda of Maoism.

## Once upon a time ...

Traditional photojournalism is a rather small field in photography, but has formed our modern view of history decisively. "Photography is pretending to just giving you the facts, and in fact, by the choice of the facts, influencing how you understand the world" [Kirby 2007].<sup>2</sup> An extract turns out to be an overall view, a random moment an incident. And this applies even more so if images run through retouching, montage and collage – what is now primarily made possible and commonplace by digital photography and Photoshop techniques and likewise considered an art form, was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century long seen as a political means of supposed truth mediation. Even today we are nowhere free from this kind of influence, which we attribute, however, to know at least theoretically about.

## The time of the Mao era until the 1970s – retouching and propaganda

In 2003 in New York, 27 years after the Cultural Revolution and still unthinkable on home soil, Li Zhensheng 李振声, employed as photographer by the newspaper *Heilongjiang Daily* in Harbin, has released hidden pictures he had taken from the mid-1960s until the early 1980s in his documentary photo book *Red-Color News Soldier*. "History is indeed Li Zhensheng's paramount concern and this book's main purpose: to remember and revisit those haunting and tragic events that were the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" [Pledge 2003, p. 8].<sup>3</sup>

The Mao era is known for its constant use of propaganda for mass mobilization campaigns, to design policy models, as an ideological screen, to make public proclamation and actions to be undertaken, to control the education system and much more. Propaganda can be called the engine of the Mao era. The origins of the propaganda system of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) lead back to Yan'an, the destination of the legendary Long March in 1935 and headquarter of the CCP until 1948. Mao Zedong's talks on literature and arts on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1942 led to the *Yan'an Rectification Movement* (Yan'an Zhengfeng yundong 延安整风运动) and gave propaganda its key political function.

During the whole reign of Mao Zedong "pictures (of him) were preferably published on or in water, only towards the end replaced by photos with a bright sun" [Spence / Chin 1996, p. 160].<sup>4</sup> Systematic retouching, the 'removal' of people from pictures who had become unpopu-

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<sup>1</sup> Based on continuing interviews with Katharina Hesse since 2009, this writing is a short and revised form in English transference of my publication: Dokumentar fotografie und Fotojournalismus in China (Documentary Photography and Photojournalism in China). In: Katharina Schneider-Roos and Stefanie Thiedig (eds.): Chinas Kulturszene ab 2000 (Chinese Cultural Scene Since 2000). Basel: Christoph Merian 2010, pp. 112–117.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Kirby: BBC – The Genius of Photography. How Photography has Changed our Lives. London 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Pledge in: Li Zhensheng: *Red-Color News Soldier*. New York 2003, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan D. Spence / Chin Annping: *Das Jahrhundert Chinas (The Chinese Century)*. Munich 1996, p. 160. Re-translated from the German version.

lar, was a common method. For example on a picture from 1958, Mao sets free the Ming Tombs, to demonstrate the hard work, together with the masses and with the former party secretary of Beijing, Peng Zhen 彭真. After his dismissal in 1966, Peng was retouched from the photo [ebd., p. 186]. Another tactic is the deprivation of images, most evident on “famine and feast: the catastrophic food situation in rural areas during 1959 and 1962 was kept secret not only from abroad but also against the majority of their own people” [ebd., pp.190f]. Instead, the appearances are kept and images of a happy nation are spread continuously – though the leading elite feasting is also not presented to the emaciated people. Relevant works on this subject are available.<sup>5</sup>

### After Mao – art and propaganda

Officially, it was under Mao to promote the revolution and under Deng Xiaoping to disseminate the reform program. Unofficially, but only after Mao, the first photography communities and clubs appeared in Beijing at the end of the 1970s, having emerged from a group of amateur photographers who photographed the protests of 1976 on the occasion of the death of Zhou Enlai.<sup>6</sup> As part of the generally expanding *New Wave Movement* (Xin Langchao yundong 新浪潮运动) in fine arts in the 1980s arose a new wave of enthusiasm for photography, and for the first time for photography as a true art form – but this was abruptly put back in place in 1989. After the Tian’anmen massacre, one either photographed again for official release of the copyright to the State or not at all. However, there are several Chinese photographers who did photograph during the demonstrations and the subsequent massacre at Tian’anmen Square of which many have never shown their pictures. A small selection is offered in the already quoted volume by Spence and Chin.<sup>7</sup>

While artists of any discipline began to absorb Western material in the 1980s and moved to the underground in the 1990s because of the pressure from above, documentary photographers were almost exclusively self-absorbed far into the 1990s. They shot mostly black and white, with themes from the hinterland, which seemed oppressive and depressive. On the outside was the claim of self-discovery, “We are artists!,” inside there was unsureness in search of a unique form language, which had to be reinvented especially in their particular discipline. In addition, photography was used as a supplement and also for documentation of experimental performance and conceptual art in the artist’s suburb of Beijing called East Village, founded in 1993. 1996 Rong Rong 容容, co-founded *New Photo*, the first Chinese journal of conceptual photography.<sup>8</sup> As well as in visual arts it was about shocking and finally screaming out, with methods and themes now depraved to clichés (nudity, foul language, faeces or dead embryos). Many of the few artist-documentary photographers were very successful, particularly in the West. Three very different personalities are Ling Fei 凌飞<sup>9</sup>, Mao 毛 alias Lü Nan 吕楠<sup>10</sup> and Xing Danwen 邢丹文<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Relevant works on propaganda are for example Rawnsley, Gary D. / Rawnsley, Ming-Yeh T. (eds.): *Political Communications in Greater China. The Construction and Reflection of Identity*. London et. al 2003; and Cheek, Timothy: *Propaganda and Culture in Mao’s China*. Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia. Oxford 1997. For the current situation see Brady, Anne-Marie: *Guiding Hand. The Role of the CCP Central Propaganda Department in the Current Era*. Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture 1(3) 2006, pp. 58–77.

<sup>6</sup> Zhou Enlai (1898–1976), Prime Minister of the People’s Republic of China until his death a few months before Mao’s own, was very popular among the people. The spontaneous funeral marches on occasion of his death in April 1976, which soon led into demonstrations were forcefully dissolved by the so-called Gang of Four around Mao’s wife Jiang Qing, commonly referred to as Tian’anmen Incident.

<sup>7</sup> Ebd., pp. 236–241.

<sup>8</sup> Since 2000 Rong Rong works together with inri 映里, who have established the widely re-cognized *Three Shadows Photography Art Centre* in Caochangdi in 2007, the first artistic area in China solely for photography.

<sup>9</sup> One of the few interviews in Chinese can be found at [www.cctv.com/lm/636/42/45637.html](http://www.cctv.com/lm/636/42/45637.html), viewed: January 2012.

<sup>10</sup> [www.beijingtoday.com.cn/center-stage/documenting-%E2%80%98hidden%E2%80%99-subjects-%E2%80%93-photographer-lu-nan-and-his-philosophy](http://www.beijingtoday.com.cn/center-stage/documenting-%E2%80%98hidden%E2%80%99-subjects-%E2%80%93-photographer-lu-nan-and-his-philosophy), on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009 by Han Manman. viewed: January 2012.

<sup>11</sup> [www.danwen.com/web/works/agd/statement.html](http://www.danwen.com/web/works/agd/statement.html), [www.danwen.com/web/works/uf/index.html](http://www.danwen.com/web/works/uf/index.html), viewed: January 2012.

## The 2000s – first exhibitions and approaches

The exhibition *Humanism China: Contemporary Record of Photography* (Zhongguo Renben: Jishi zai Dangdai 中国人本——纪实在当代) in 2003 at Guangdong Museum of Art resembled a new turning point for China's documentary photography and photojournalism. On this first large event, leading into a worldwide traveling exhibition, 250 Chinese documentary photographers presented their works of the past fifty years. As a prominent figure Lu Guang 卢广 shall be mentioned exemplarily here. As late as the 1990s, Lu had earned his living with wedding photos and was only occasionally able to finance one of his sporadic reports. He became known in 2004 as a winner in *World Press Photo* with the first prize in the category 'Contemporary Issues' and his pictures of an AIDS village in Henan province. With the encouragement from abroad, Chinese health authorities interestingly became aware of him and started working with him rather than covering up the events as regularly in cases of controversial issues. Lu Guang received several prestigious awards for the report (e.g. the Eugene Smith Award). His new big issues are environmental reports, and though he is struggling with authorities every once in a while, it will be interesting to see how his influence carries on to the local and national authorities.

Photojournalism is still a new medium in China. The number of exhibitions in the field of documentary photography, but also in fine arts photography increased since 2006, this medium was finally regarded as a serious possibility of expression in China, and participation in competitions of the photographers for photo journalists is rising. Thus, we find the traveling exhibition *Between Past and Future – New Photography and Video from China* and the Stuttgart Festival 2008 *Photography from China 1934-2008* in the West, China itself created photo galleries such as *Paris-Beijing* in 798 art district and *Three Shadows Photography Art Centre* in Caochangdi.

## Network of Chinese photographers

That hardly a Chinese photojournalist and documentary photographer has his own website and that there are also only few Chinese photo agencies are possible reasons why there is no extensive network in China for documentary photographers, and that they are primarily on their own. There are apart from *News* no platforms, no scenes, no places as in other artistic disciplines, where the participants could exchange their ideas. Many documentary photographers do not even know each other. After all, in China there are some photography festivals now, the oldest is the *Pingyao International Photography Festival* (Pingyao Guoji Sheying Dazhan 平遥国际摄影大展), co-founded in 2001 by Alain Jullien. Since 2005 there is the South China *Lianzhou International Photo Festival* (Lianzhou Guoji Sheying Nianzhan 连州国际摄影年展), also raised by Jullien. For the first time in April 2010, the *Caochangdi Photospring* (Caochangdi Sheyingji 草场地摄影季) was held under the direction of Bérénice Angremy, Rong Rong and inri, which was pursued with great interest – and might have its last run this spring because of financial difficulties.

On the other hand, there are again the developments of the decelerating, traditional photographers association and the veterans of the news agency *Xinhua* who do not let anyone close. As in other disciplines, the inclusion of artists in the association of their profession has traditionally been the only funding option. However, the boundaries between amateur and professional photography, as well as between photojournalism on the one and art photography on the other hand, are getting more and more permeable.

## Independent photographers and commerce

The debate is old and belongs probably mainly to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, probably even more to the West: Is art allowed to be sold? Or should art be created solely for its beauty, its aesthetics, which is in no way to be associated with value? Avant-garde as a denial of commerce. Even if the relevant positions have moved closer together over time, as far as this division exists, it is carried on in photography even more than in other art forms.

Documentary photographers are either depending on orders and exhibitions, or on a second job. This is also due to the state funding opportunities that are largely available in Europe but missing in China. The only support is given through the associations in China, in which the artist then are no longer free, but incorporated into the system, such as contract photographers for *China Daily Youth* (Zhongguo Qingnianbao 中国青年报) or for the official news agency *Xinhua*. This has nothing to do with independence, so the artists have to find their own ways – and this path often leads to advertising.

### Staged documentary photography

'Staged photography' has long established itself as a discipline, since a few years a form also emerged that could be named 'staged documentary photography'. Does reality no longer provide enough material? "In many ways, these images are in their aesthetic sense truer than the images that just pretend as if they were true. The highest truth lays in the purest fantasy," writes Klaus Honnef on the works of staged photography by Sinje Dillenkofer.<sup>12</sup> From advertising photography, which arranges its images with a similar amount of effort and who highly estimate the artificial production, staged photography and even more in their explanatory power staged documentary photography differ especially through their volitional subjectivity.

Staged documentary photography is as a mixture of fiction and reality a new genre that prevails slowly and in which for example Yang Yi 杨怡 is a true master. The fiction in the pictures is very obvious and obviously intended. The emergence of this genre must also be understood as a new attitude towards history, which is more and more read as an interplay between truth and fiction. The personal sense of the present is distributed to an own historiography through subjectivity. In the case of China one may ask whether staged photography might be a possible escape from the censored reality. But the credo still often remains that photojournalism is exclusively committed to mapping reality, that nothing subjective should be included in the process. This claim was never true, because images are always a snapshot in a fraction of a second. There is nothing more subjective than photos, in which so much is imputed, focused, exposed, and staged. Due to the changes brought by digital photography and even more so by image processing, new colours for example were generated, which did not even exist before – a new world is being formed. Staged documentary photography is another chance to open the viewer's eyes to the environment he lives in, and at the same time to reflect reality, to change it or even to create it.

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<sup>12</sup> [www.sinje-dillenkofer.de/texte/klaus-honnef](http://www.sinje-dillenkofer.de/texte/klaus-honnef), translated from German, viewed: January 2012.

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