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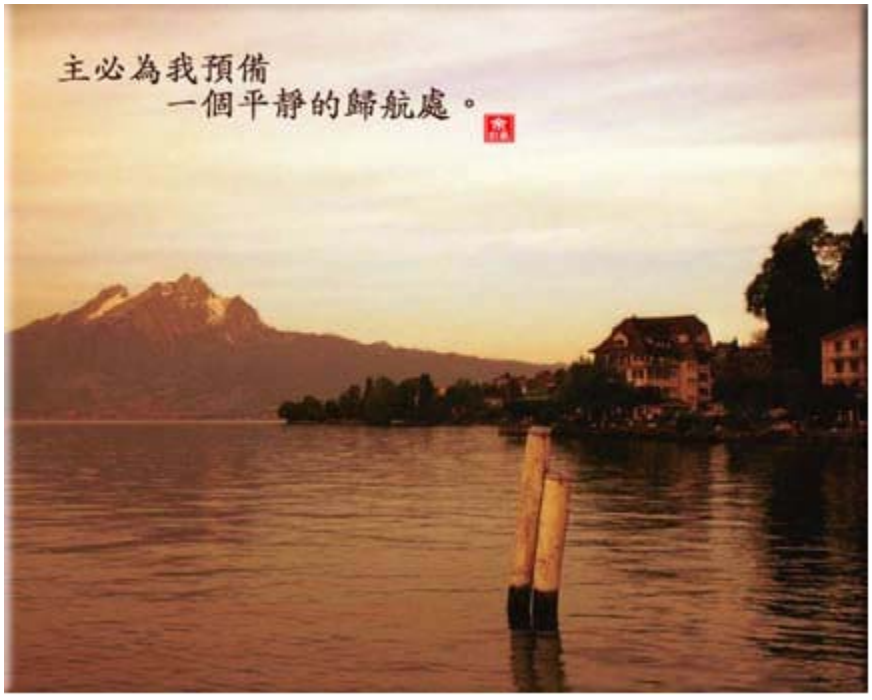
Identity of Chinese photography

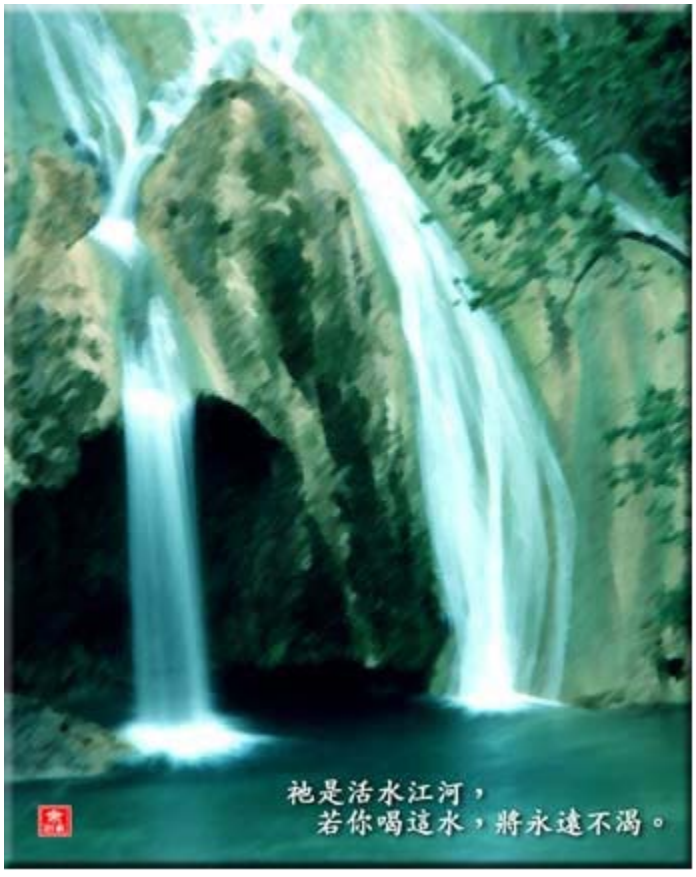
By Chong Ho (Alex) Yu

Chinese art as a form of integrated art

Could you tell that these photos (below) were taken by a Chinese photographer? The answer may be very obvious to you because of the Chinese characters superimposed on the images, which elaborates the theme, and also the stamp depicting the name of the artist.


祂的憐憫不至斷絕，
每早晨這都是新的。
耶利米哀歌
三：廿二～廿三


主必為我預備
一個平靜的歸航處。



This style can be seen in many of my photos; nonetheless, sometimes this approach is not well-received because adding a few phrases on the photo, according to some critics, degrades it from art to the category of hallmark-like birthday cards. However, those critics do not realize that long before the existence of hallmark cards, Chinese artists treated a

picture as a form of integrated art. To be specific, a painting was not just a painting, but also a form of story-telling; usually the image was accompanied by a poem and a stamp. In other words, it was a combination of visual arts such as calligraphy, stamps, painting, and poetry. Although photography is a very modern medium, I see no reason that this old and well-established Chinese tradition cannot be introduced into photography. To be explicit, my ambition is to create photography with a Chinese identity.

An up-hill battle in the Western-centric culture

However, introducing photography with Chinese attributes is an up-hill battle. It seems that many Western photographers, art critics, aestheticians, and editors do not put too much weight on scaling Chinese photography. For example, in Dr. Rosenblum's well-known book entitled *The History of World Photography*, she illustrated the development of world photography mainly based on the contribution by Western photographers. At the beginning of the 20th century, readers of *National Geographic* were excited by pictures depicting Tibet, which was inaccessible and mysterious to Westerners at that time. Afterwards, although quite a few Chinese photographers created wonderful images of Tibet and other exotic places, they did not appear on the Western's radar screen. It was common for Chinese photographers, following the painters' tradition, to write calligraphy on photos. By the Western standard, this intrusive element upset the composition.

In 1989 *Time* and *Life* magazines published two special editions entitled "150 Years of Photojournalism" and "150 Years of Photography," respectively. Again, almost all photos appearing in the issues are the works of Western photographers. One year later *Life* magazine printed another special edition named "The World's Best Photos 1980-1990." Although two pictures by Japanese photographers are included in the journal, it is surprising that no photos about the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989 were selected. Indeed, the reporters of *Ming Pao Daily* and *Man Wei Po* of Hong Kong had shot many valuable pictures of the Beijing protest. There in arises a controversy: Are the work of Chinese photographers not good enough to compete with that of Western photographers?

Actually this phenomenon does not surprise me at all. When I was majoring in fine art during my undergraduate study, major media were just oil and water color paintings. No courses on Chinese painting or other oriental arts were offered. When I pursued graduate study in philosophy, aesthetics (philosophy of art) was one of my focal points of research. Again, only theories of Western philosophers, such as Langer and Collingwood, were discussed.

This is understandable because not long ago Americans received the same treatment from Europeans. In the 19th century American evangelist Moody preached in England before he could gain wide recognition in his home country. In the early 20th century, American poet T. S. Elliot published *Waste Land* in England, or he would not have been considered a great poet. When American photographer Alfred Stieglitz visited England, he was dismayed by his observation that even second-graded English photographers were considered superior to their first-class American counterparts. To put it bluntly, before the second half of the 20th century, Americans virtually occupied no significant status in Western elitist culture. It took more than a century for Americans to climb up to the top of the ladder. Perhaps Chinese photographers should be patient, too. Indeed, what aesthetical criteria should be adopted remains an unending controversy. There are many artists that will never be known regardless of their nationality.

In the following, I will outline a brief history of Chinese photography. I hope this brief

introduction will draw your attention to the development of Chinese photography in the past two centuries. Please keep in mind this outline is selective; it is impossible to cover every photographer in China in three pages. At the end I will explain why this specific portion of history is emphasized.

A brief overview of the history Chinese photography

According to a book entitled *Imperial China*, between the years 1846 to 1912, there appeared 84 photographers in China. Twenty-four of them were Chinese and sixty of them were Westerners. Among these Chinese photographers, only two of them resided on the Mainland and all the rest were in Hong Kong. Besides that, Western photographers outnumbered their Chinese counterparts, photographers in China who were considered great masters were all Westerners.

After the Opium War in 1842, China was forced to open her door to the West. A British photographer named Felix Beato utilized this opportunity to create the first comprehensive photographic view of China. Moreover, he set a standard against which all subsequent photography in China would be judged. The beauty of his pictures is embodied in his wise use of cover shot and overview, which always demonstrates a multi-level composition. In the historical sense, his most valuable picture is “The Yuan Ming Yuan” (the Summer Palace). After Anglo-French forces burned down the palace in the Second Opium War (1860), Beato's photo of the palace became the only artifact to show how the palace looked. However, in the Chinese perspective Beato’s work is very disturbing because of his colonial mentality. During the Second Opium War, Beato photographed the bodies of dead Chinese soldiers, but none of his photos showed any British or French corpses. Once Beato saw thirteen dead Chinese soldiers scattered around a cannon. With great excitement, he described the scene as “beautiful” and asked others not to interfere with the composition until he captured the image.

Close to the same time, another British photographer, John Thomson, devoted efforts in recording the image of China with a wide variety of subject matter. In order to obtain an accurate depiction of China, Thomson decided to pierce through the surface to reach the interior area of China. Since he explored remote regions of China, his tours were often dangerous. Most of the Chinese people he encountered had never seen a Westerner or a camera before, and thus their reactions could be unpredictable. Thomson left his foot print all over China, ranging from the southern part of China, Hong Kong, to the Northern part, Beijing. His subject matter includes figures such as beggars, street people, Mandarins and Princes, and places such as Imperial Palaces, monasteries, rural villages, and the Gorges. Although his pictures are journalistic and historical in nature, the remoteness and the uniqueness of the Chinese culture portrayed in the pictures are judged as artistic by many viewers.

After the Nationalist Government overthrew the Ching dynasty and defeated warlords in the north, China tried to speed up her pace of modernization. This rapid change of China attracted many Westerners. In the 1930's, Dutch photographer Ellen Thorbecke took a series of photos in China with the use of many experimental techniques. Her portraits covered a wide range of people, including an industrialist, a peddler, a student, a country woman, a soldier and so on. Accompanied with every portrait, there was a brief biography about the person. Like her photos, those "micro stories" composed a "macro view" of the Chinese society. While most Westerners were interested in “typical scenes” of China, Thorbecke went beyond producing stock photography by telling the story behind each photo and thus

depicting the deeper layer of the Chinese society.

From 1937-1949 China sunk into a chaotic situation caused by World War II and the Civil War. After the Communists took over the Mainland in 1949, China shut her door to the West, and as a result, art became the propaganda of the government. For example, at the peak of the Great Cultural Revolution only five official dramas glorifying "revolutionary themes" were retained as "model dramas" in China. The development of all forms of art, including photography, was frozen. During the Great Cultural revolution, possessing photos depicting the past was considered a crime. A Chinese writer Chan Yo Chi said that to avoid getting troubles, she flushed all her photos into the toilet. Needless to say, under this political climate photographers hardly produced any meaningful work. During this period some photographers were bold enough to preserve their work, but the motivation was to record history in a journalistic sense rather than to express aesthetics. For example, Li Zhenshen, whose works are compiled into an album entitled *Red-color news soldier: A Chinese odyssey through the Cultural Revolution*, contended that he was inspired by his former teacher, Wu Yinxian, who had taken photographs of Mao in Yanan in the 1930s. Wu told Li that the task of a photographer was to be a witness to history. In front of the preface of *Red-color news soldier*, a banner of Chinese calligraphy shows the theme of Li's photographic work: "Let history inform the future." Another seminal work during that period is *Forbidden memory: Tibet during the Cultural Revolution*, in which photographs recalling the painful memory of the revolution are presented as a reminder of that terrible era.

The dark isolation was cracked after the end of the Great Cultural Revolution in 1976. Since 1980, China has been increasing her interactions with the rest of the world, and thus photography was revived. In 1985, the China Photographic Publishing House introduced the China Modern Photo Salon to the world by the book entitled *Contemporary Chinese Photographs*. The salon declared,

> As we are young and inexperienced, there is still much we must learn. But it is our intention to keep in tune with the march of our time and we are filled with confidence. ... We are aware, however, that this is only the beginning.

It is a late beginning, but what a great beginning! With regard to visual effects, those works are competitive to that of Western photographers. Those Chinese photographers, led by Yu Shing-tak and Yang Shaoming, exhibit a wide variety of styles and techniques, such as selective focus, double exposure, and many more. Considering that they had been suppressed and isolated for a long time, and did not have a huge budget for high quality equipment as what their Western counterparts have, their technical variety is no doubt amazingly successful.

Within two decades China had emerged as a new superpower in terms of economic performance. In order to achieve the status of a cultural global power, the Chinese Cultural Ministry has devoted efforts to promote China's image abroad using all forms of art, including photography. One obvious result is the active involvement of the Chinese government sponsoring large-scale contemporary art exhibitions in Europe. However, many independent Chinese photographers who take the role of social critic do not want to be viewed as "official artists," and thus they look for funding from foreign or commercial revenues rather than governmental sponsorships. Several independent Chinese photography shows have been organized abroad. For example, in 2001 a group of Chinese photographers participated in an exhibition entitled *Dream 2001* held in England. Those Chinese photographers displayed socially-driven art that reflects the political upheavals in China

throughout the past few decades.

A recent traveling exhibit across America entitled *Documenting China: Contemporary photographs and social change*, which is sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution, is another example of how some Chinese photographers are pre-occupied with social and political themes. In the series "Besiege the city by the country," Zhang Xinmin demonstrates how Chinese cities are ill-prepared to deal with migrant workers from the rural areas. Through the series "Heaviness of industry," Zhou Hai debunks the myth that Communism created a classless society, in which workers and intellectuals share the same social rank. Instead, the existence of the working class is marginalized. In the series "Village," Liu Xiaodi conveys the message that the lifestyle of peasants is still bound by the social structure of the Maoist era. Also, rapid changes of Shanghai, the frontier of China's modernization, are photographically documented by Lu Yuanmin and Zhou Ming. I have no intention to claim that the preceding samples are representative of the entire population of Chinese photography. Nonetheless, Chinese photography that catches the eyes of Westerners tends to be social and political oriented.

It seems that history repeats itself in a subtle fashion. According to the prominent art critic Christopher Phillips, the commercial opportunities for Chinese photographers are very limited. The local market for contemporary art, including photography, is very small and even almost nonexistent. Wealthy Chinese people tend to collect traditional Chinese art and antiques, whose values are confirmed and guaranteed, instead of experimental art by young and virtually unknown photographers. Most of the interest for modern art, including photography, comes from foreigners, such as members of the diplomatic community in China, businesspeople and overseas collectors from Europe, the US, and Japan. For example, Artur Walther and Howard Stein in New York, and Eloisa and Chris Hausenschild in San Diego have assembled rich collections of Chinese photo and video works. Facing this trend, a Chinese artist named Wu Hun asked, "Are these photographers viewed—indeed, do they view themselves—as agents of Westernization?" In Phillips's view, the rapid pace of Chinese artists is outrunning the abilities of critics and art historians to accurately describe what's happening in this community.

Conclusion

The above account of the history of Chinese photography is highly selective. The purpose of citing the above examples is to highlight the following points:

First, China had been isolated for over forty years. From mid 1980s on Chinese photographers have been trying to rejoin the world community of art. Owing to such a long period of isolation, no wonder Chinese photography could not be taken seriously by Rosenblum, the editors of *Time* and *Life*. Nevertheless, it's not a matter of if but of when Chinese photographers will catch up with the rest of the world. As Phillips said, it is still premature to judge whether Chinese photographers are nothing more than agents of Westernization or if they are gradually developing their identity.

Second, photography was used by Westerners, such as Beato, Thompson, and Thorbecke, as a medium of journalism rather than a medium of art. This orientation was reinforced during the Cultural Revolution when art was suppressed and preservation of authentic historical archives was threatened. Nonetheless, photography as a witness of social, political, and cultural changes has become an important thread of Chinese photography. Today this tradition is carried on by many Chinese photographers, such as Lui Xiaodi, Zhang Xinmin, and

Zhou Hai.

However, political events come and go. Instead of using photography as a documentary tool, a historical archive, or a social protest, I believe that it is more fruitful to fuse this modern medium with the Chinese tradition of integrated art. To end this essay with a hopeful closure, let me borrow the phrases from the China Modern Photo Salon in 1985: “There is still much we must learn. But it is my intention to keep in tune with the march of our time and we are filled with confidence. ... We are aware, however, that this is only the beginning.”