**Premier's Contemporary Art Scholarship**

New Art China - Photo Media Artists: A study of Contemporary Photomedia in China

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Introduction and Study Focus

I teach senior visual arts and photography and I have witnessed a growing interest in photomedia by students. This is evidenced by significant increases in photomedia works for the Higher School Certificate (HSC). An increase in photomedia works by Chinese artists in major international exhibitions such the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art and the Sydney Biennale, also strengthens the position of photomedia as a significant area of contemporary art as a new cross-disciplinary expression for established and emerging artists. It has particular relevance to the study of HSC Visual Arts, providing an understanding of photomedia as a contemporary art practice and enabling students to gain expertise as artist practitioners through their knowledge of materials and techniques. Chinese photomedia works can provide material for the study of historical/cultural perspectives and develop students’ skills as critical writers.

*Visual Arts as a subject provides for various interpretations of the visual arts that are both contemporary and relevant. …* *In art criticism and art history, students can consider how notions of cultural identity can inform the production of artworks.*[[1]](#footnote-2)

The research places some emphasis on the use of traditional photographic techniques (pre-digital) that are combined with contemporary imaging techniques. This has been based on observations of the techniques used by well-known international artists such as Wang Qinsong. Wang uses a large format film camera to produce high quality negatives, which are scanned, and then printed using an inkjet printer, to produce large-scale photographic images (“The History of Monuments”, 2011, is 45 meters). He has made a decision to stay with film even though high-resolution digital cameras are now available to him. He is not isolated in his practice as many other Chinese artists choose to use traditional photographic techniques for a variety of reasons. Alternate photographic processes such as collodion[[2]](#footnote-3), cyanotype[[3]](#footnote-4), ‘Liquid Light’[[4]](#footnote-5), hand-colouring and Polaroid[[5]](#footnote-6) are used to communicate a range of intentions.

Many works communicate political viewpoints or are a commentary of the massive social changes that have taken place in China in recent times. Other works show a Chinese aesthetic through a visual language that has its source in traditional Chinese art and culture.

As part of my Premier’s Contemporary Art Scholarship I travelled to three major centers: Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong over five weeks. During this time I interviewed eighteen artists, mostly in studios. I interviewed seven gallery directors/curators and two art writers about the work of an additional thirteen artists. Galleries/artists’ groups include: Red Gate Gallery, China Art Projects, MEPhoto (Beijing), Ofoto Gallery, Island6 Lui Dao Art Collective, M97 Gallery (Shanghai) and Blindspot Gallery (Hong Kong). I have been in email contact with another three artists who live outside the three major centres. There are a total of 34 artists included in the research.

The major focus of the research was the development of a written discourse on contemporary Chinese photomedia artists, which will be available as a website for students and educators.

Significant learning

Photography is a recent development in China’s relatively young contemporary art history, which in itself is a post–Cultural Revolution phenomenon, emerging in the late 1970s with the relaxation of Communist controls that had been in force since 1949.[[6]](#footnote-7) There has been a Photographers Association in China since 1949, which was controlled by the Communist Party and designed to serve the people and show the construction of a new society in a positive light[[7]](#footnote-8). The images from this time provide some artistic photographic works, predominantly landscape, but the circumstances of the photographs didn’t allow for a true documentary style or commentary on the social conditions of the time.[[8]](#footnote-9) The personal struggles that people endured during the Cultural Revolution contributed to the collective memory of artists who are now reaching a time of artistic maturity and reflection.

To understand contemporary art practice in China today, one must gain an understanding of the impact of rapid change that has been part of post-Mao China since 1976[[9]](#footnote-10). The social and environmental impact of accelerated industrialization and urbanisation with the dislocation of enormous populations from the countryside is reflected in photographic artworks. Many traditions and values have been threatened as part of the changes to society that accompany such periods of rapid economic growth. The freedom to photograph in a documentary style after 1976 produced many works that focussed on the disadvantaged poor of Chinese society. Others artists engage in a struggle of resistance against the alienating effects of urban life as an individual subjective experience. Some artists seek to revisit traditional aesthetics in their works or refer to Chinese history from much earlier times.

Emerging artists are working in a time post–Tiananmen Square and reflect in their artwork the modernisation that has taken place since that event in 1989 and the adoption of a market economy in the late 1990s. With the introduction of digital photography and high-tech printing facilities, this new generation of artists, though often trained in traditional painting and sculpture in art academies, embraced photomedia as the most expedient means for expressing the changes taking place around them.

I have placed artists into three groupings that show a similarity of intention in their works, bearing in mind that artistic practice evolves and intentions overlap and change in time. I have focussed on the work of one artist with an example in each grouping to provide an overview.

1. Challenging the system– a search for personal and collective freedoms of expression

**Shaokun Sun**

Censorship and government control is always a concern in China. Recently galleries in the 798 Art District, Beijing, were informed that all exhibitions will be subject to government scrutiny before the hanging of the works. Shaokun Sun had work removed from her exhibition at MEPhoto in 2010 by government officials. The work used the stars and colour of the Chinese flag against the partly draped body of Shaokun Sun and was a protest against the government’s illegal acquisition of land.

Shaokun Sun is an emerging artist. She works with film-based cameras in a studio setting to stage her works that are self-portraits. She is posed and costumed to represent her ideas, which are strongly motivated by the injustice of government control and the lack of personal freedoms. In the work, “No Land II”, 2010, Shoakun Sun’s face is shown with her eyes closed, partly covered by black rice grains. The black rice is used as a symbol of fertility, wealth and luck and in this case symbolizes hope for the future. On the grains there are words, which have been scratched onto the negative before printing. The words state why people have died, how they died, why they burnt themselves and the responses by government authorities. The details reveal a powerful statement from the artist about the desperation experienced when people must leave their land due to forced urban re-development. Shoakun Sun states,

“When can we have rights? People have no rights to be in Beijing if they come from somewhere else. Everyone needs rights as a people … The government can take land, they even take babies.”[[10]](#footnote-11)

The meticulous line work is derived from the artist’s academy training, using ink to render very fine detail. She describes Chinese art as “how we use line”.[[11]](#footnote-12) Traditional painting is not colourful and the starting point for works is the line work. Shaokun Sun is applying the same theory to her photographic works and the art making process is integral to the artist’s expression. Her works have the feel of fashion and the message is subtle, almost disguised in the fine detail of the script, however, the forcefulness of her statement is undeniable.

“Art can open your mind and you can think about the truth.”[[12]](#footnote-13)

Shaokun Sun bravely addresses a range of issues in her work: the illegal taking of land, the freedom to choose where you live and work, the discrimination of women who have relationships with foreigners and the banning of social networks such as Facebook. She uses her own naked body to make visual statements in these staged works. The Chinese authorities are critical of any nudity and she risks her work being withdrawn or banned. She also risks being [arrested](http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/nov/18/ai-weiwei-investigation-nude-art).

“When you try to avoid censorship, it may become self-censorship, which is even more dangerous[[13]](#footnote-14).”

I have interviewed other artists who comment on government, social and political events:

* + Wang Qinsong stages his works as a photographic tableau using a cast of extras to take designated roles. He satirises and makes comment on many different aspects of contemporary life: the 2008 Chinese milk scandal, migrant workers, the Chinese Olympics, political corruption, consumer culture and the re-development of China.
  + Wang Guofeng photographs the grandiose Communist architecture that signifies the power of the Communist state. The scale of these film-based digitally scanned works is enormous (6-10 metres). Wang digitally alters the works to remove the people with the exception of himself, dressed in a Mao suit, doing Tai Chi.
  + Zhang Dali was one of first political artists using photomedia to be recognised outside China. His recent work shows the shadows of people and bikes made as cyanotype prints. His work is a reaction against the over-use of Photoshop to change reality. His work challenges many aspects of the modernisation of China.
  + Kai Yu Wong (Blues Wong) has produces black and white film-based works that have been manipulated (burnt, scratched, stained) to produce personal expressions based on his reaction to events such as Tiananmen Square.

2. Urbanisation and Environmental Degradation – the effects of accelerated development

**Chen Nong**

Chen Nong is a self-taught photomedia artist. He is able to meld different ideas and themes into a single piece, a mixture of historic reference and commentary on China’s massive environmental changes. In his work “Three Gorges I”, Chen Nong creates a hand-coloured panorama of black and white photography that includes eight single images of the ‘Three Gorges Dam’. Chen has costumed men and women, who originally lived in the now drowned town, as an ‘army’ of terracotta warriors from the ancient site of Xian. The costumes are not armour but fragile paper constructions made by the artist. The artist could be suggesting impermanence of historical artefacts in the face of environmental change. This is a very mortal army of ordinary people faced with extreme loss (approximately 1.5 million people have be displaced). The pale green blue wash over the work gives the work a disquieting eeriness.

In another work, “Yellow River”, 2007-2008, Chen Nong makes a similar panoramic work based on farmers’ rebellions from Chinese history against a backdrop of a major waterfall on the Yellow River, considered to be the mother river of China. The future of the river is in jeopardy due to environmental damage. The vibrant brushwork adds an emotional content to this expressive work, suggesting that a contemporary rebellion is taking place.

Chen Nong photographs his staged works with an 8 x 10 inch camera using black and white film. He uses ‘Liquid Light’, a brushed on light-sensitive emulsion, applied to watercolour paper, which is exposed in a darkroom to produce the image. The image is then hand-painted. Other works are made by exposing the negative onto fibre-based photographic paper in the darkroom to produce a photograph that is hand-coloured with photo inks. The panoramic format recalls the classical style of Chinese scrolls that are read as a narrative.

**Other artists include:**

* + Zhang Kerchun and Zhang Xiao both use water as the subject matter of their works. Zhang Kerchun journeys down the Yellow River to record the environmental degradation of the river system. His large format colour works record every detail of a bizarre world that has been destroyed by human intervention, droughts and flooding, veiled in an unworldly haze. Zhang Xiao photographs the crowds of people at the beach. There is a similar strangeness in these images.
  + Xu Zhe constructs a set with toy animals as props to create a personal version of George Orwell’s “Animal Farm”[[14]](#footnote-15). When he read this book he felt that its brutality and corruption was an analogy of China today. The photographs are all rendered as dark shadows, with minimal lighting, blur and movement. Silhouettes of animals and urban symbols such as a shopping trolley emerge from the darkness. Huang Xiaoliang also uses shadows and the darkness of the city to make his works. Traditional paper cuts are an aspect of his ‘shadow plays’ acted out in an urban setting.
  + Huang Xu creates beautiful works from scans of plastic bags and other discarded waste. The bags seem to float like silk in a darkened space.
  + Luo Dan uses a very old photographic process called ‘collodion’. A liquid light-sensitive material is pored over a glass plate that is exposed in an ancient box camera to make a photographic image. He photographs peasant farmers from a remote Christian village using this technique. The plates are scanned and printed to make the final works that reveal the detail and accidental marks caused by the process and the subjects as a nostalgic reminder of what has been lost from modern China.
  + Luo Yongjin combines numerous views of cityscape in black and white, with variable focus to scrutinise the built environment. He comments on the process of rapid urbanisation by making multiple images over time. Zhou Jun also photographs architecture using black and white large format film, focussing on scaffolding where he adds emphasis with overlays in red. The colour red has cultural significance and is a symbolic reminder of the turmoil of the recent past.
  + Ma Kang titles his recent series “Uncertain Times” which describes not only the visual effect of his works but his trepidation about the future. He makes multiple exposures using old colour negative film, producing extremely over-exposed images, which are scanned, digitally corrected and printed large. He uses the architecture of the past and present to create softly blurred ‘Pointillist’[[15]](#footnote-16) worlds that lack rigid definition. Xin Gang photographs in a similar way and intention with multiple exposures. He prints his images on rice paper and breaks down the surface with water to alter the image. He calls these works his “wavering buildings”.[[16]](#footnote-17)
  + Shi Guorui creates large ‘camera obscura’[[17]](#footnote-18) prints of varying subject matter, from images of the Great Wall to the skyscrapers of Shanghai. The unique negative prints are the result of the artist making long exposures in a darkened space through a lens placed to reveal the outside world. This old technique is used to comment on the rapid changes to the built and natural environment in China.
  + Miao Xiaochun works with 3D digital animation in large installations, as well as using traditional photographic methods. Using film-based panning cameras he has created the works, “Beijing Hand Scroll” and “Beijing Index” that objectively show the city of Beijing and combine digital and analogue technologies.
  + **Ho Siu Nam South,** Lai Lon Hin, Ng Sai Kit, So Hing Keung and Wong Wo Bik **are all photomedia artists based in Hong Kong. All photograph aspects of the built environment, influenced by how the intensity of this densely populated city affects perception, producing both objective and subjective responses. Ho Siu Nam South makes time exposures in black and white at night of the tunnels and overpasses in the city. The over exposure of the normally dark entrance ways, devoid of people, gives a feeling of emptiness.** Lai Lon Hin photographs the ‘contrived’ gardens in the city at night using the distorting colour effects of artificial lighting. These become strange, bizarre, unearthly places. Ng Sai Kit photographs in black and white the skyscrapers within the cityscape in vertical sections that deliberately attempt to remove spatial relationships, using a format reminiscent of traditional hanging scrolls. So Hing Keung works reveal a subjective response to the crowding and rampant modernisation of the city using manipulated Polaroid and multiple images. A recent series of Wong Wo Bik documents the interiors of the older colonial-style buildings marked for demolition.

3. A state of flux – a complex tangle of history and tradition

**Yan Kai**

Yan Kai’s work relates directly to traditional Chinese ideology. He photographs highly textured, ancient cypress trees that have been growing since the days of the emperors of China. They will continue to grow beyond the turbulent times that have been part of China’s recent history. Yan Kai sees these trees as the vessels of power of the ancients. He takes many, thousands, of digital images of the trees, which he combines using Photoshop to create his abstracted interpretation. His compositional style derives from traditional Chinese ink painting, ‘shan shui’,[[18]](#footnote-19) and from his experience as an oil painter. The works have strong graphic qualities and are of similar scale and format of traditional hanging scrolls. Some use the ‘fan painting’ format[[19]](#footnote-20).

He takes the textures, the bark and knots of the tree surface, and remakes sections to resemble mountains, rivers, smoke and natural elements. The works have a very detailed surface and a quiet power, with rhythmic waves of line-work that are expressive of natural forces. Yan Kai uses the qualities of the negative print (white lines on black) to create a visual distance from the original subject matter. His aim is to create a connection between ancient times and his art.

Yan Kai’s Taoist beliefs influence his art making. Since earliest times, Chinese thought has been characterised by an awareness of man’s close relationship with nature and the universe, a cyclical view of time and the veneration of ancestors. The work reflects the Taoist belief that nature and humanity are held in a ‘yin/yang’ balance. According to this philosophy, painting and in this case photography, expresses the elements of the universe in microcosm. ‘Yin’ energies are traditionally seen as foliage and water, while ‘yang’ energies are rocks and trees.[[20]](#footnote-21)

**Other artists include:**

* Li Gang experiments with the effects of light and chemicals on film using a range of cameras that have been modified to suit his purpose. Accidental effects caused by chemistry or exposure creates blacks in the photographs that he likens to “ink melting into a painting”[[21]](#footnote-22). The results are soft, greyed works that reveal glimpses of Li’s world through a veiled and distorted lens. Cindy Ng works as a painter, video artist and photographer and also experiments with the physical properties of the materials. Her photographs are derived from her experiments with different everyday materials; coffee, ink, milk, wine, moving and mixing on a smooth surface and photographed. Her aesthetic is based on traditional landscape works when creating these abstract images.
* Maleonn is a master of a constructed world where he invents a ‘stage’ to play out his narrative. Traditional Chinese symbols are used in the series, “Second Hand Tang Poems”, in order to reaffirm knowledge and cultural values that are being lost in the new China.
* Zheng Hui and Wang Tong both look back at Chinese history in order to construct their work. Zheng creates cyanotypes based on ancient tomb sculptures so that these artefacts may be preserved. Wang Tong creates hand-coloured photographs of the disintegrating images of Mao that were stencilled on walls in poor rural villages all over China during the Cultural Revolution.
* Yang Yongliang incorporates traditional formats and stamps in his creation of detailed and intriguing digital works that look like traditional Chinese painting. The works are made up of urban and industrial motifs (construction cranes and high-rise buildings) in fantasy landscapes.

Conclusion

I am hopeful that the teaching resources from this research will help teachers and students to be inspired by the photomedia work of Chinese artists. I have gained valuable insights into the practice of these artists especially through interviews held in artists’ studios.

The research will be available as a website. It will provide visual and written material on all of the artists who have been a part of the project using the conceptual framework of the visual arts syllabus (artist-artwork-world-audience). There will be links to additional information on the history of photography, different cameras, processes and techniques. Relevant cultural information including traditional Chinese arts and history will also be included.

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1. Extract from the Visual Arts HSC syllabus, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Collodion is a photographic process from the beginnings of photography that uses light sensitive coating on a glass plate. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Cyanotype or ‘blue print’ is a contact non-silver photographic process. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. This is a silver-based sensitised emulsion that can be applied to any surface, exposed by an enlarger, and processed in conventional photographic chemistry. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. A Polaroid camera produces a print that is processed as soon as the exposure is made by releasing chemicals directly onto the print. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Barbara Pollack 2012 Art News [Chinese Photography: Beyond Stereotypes](http://www.artnews.com/2004/02/01/chinese-photography-beyond-stereotypes/) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Tagg, John, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, University of Minnesota Press, 1988. Tagg's critique discusses how photography can be used, “the power of the apparatuses of the local state which deploy it and guarantee the authority of the images it constructs to stand as evidence or register as truth.” p 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Mitchell, William, note adherence of the referent, p24, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1992 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Gu Zeng, *Contemporary Chinese Photography*, China Youth Press, 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Interview with Shaokun Sun in her studio, May 17, 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Pollack, Barbara, Chinese Photography: Beyond Stereotypes, ARTnews, vol. 103, 2006, p. 102 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Published in 1945, the novella portrays corrupt leadership as the flaw in revolution and how wickedness, indifference, ignorance and greed are the sources of corruption. It reflects events leading up to and during the Stalin era. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Pointillism is a technique of painting in which small, distinct dots of pure colour are applied in patterns to form an image. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Interview with Xin Gang, 22 May 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Camera obscura consists of a box or room with a hole in one side. Light from an external scene passes through the hole and strikes a surface inside where it is reproduced, upside-down. The image can be projected onto paper (including photographic paper to produce a negative print), and can then be traced to produce a highly accurate representation. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Shan shui (mountain-water) refers to a style of Chinese landscape painting that uses ink and brush. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. ## The British Museum, *Chinese painting and calligraphy: formats*, http://www.britishmuseum.org

    [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Art Institute of Chicago,*Taoism and the Arts of China: The sacred landscape* http://www.artic.edu/taoism/renaissance/introl.php [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Interview with Li Gang and Kevin Deluca and Sun Ye, Beijing June 2, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)