The publication of this essay will coincide with the opening of *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China*, an exhibition I am currently co-curating with Christopher Phillips. In addition to presenting a group of carefully selected works, we are seeking to explore new ways to exhibit contemporary Chinese art (or any "regional" contemporary art) in a global context. One of the exhibition's unusual features concerns the formation of the curatorial team itself: although it is now customary to entrust a large biennale or triennale to a group of curators from various countries, it is uncommon to have two curators with very different backgrounds conduct a systematic investigation of a particular visual field. Christopher and I were attracted by this challenge because it allowed us—in fact forced us—to integrate two divergent but equally important perspectives in selecting and interpreting the exhibition contents. Because of his broad knowledge about the history of photography, Christopher views contemporary Chinese photography from a global, comparative perspective. Trained as an historian of Chinese art, I have developed curatorial projects that have emphasized the artists' own experiences and creative impulses, and which connect contemporary Chinese art with the country's social, economic, and intellectual transformation in recent years. These two positions, however, are not contradictory. In fact, the whole project is based on our consensus that by fusing these two perspectives, we could reach a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Chinese photography in both the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue.
Another unusual feature of the exhibition is its multiple organizers and exhibition spaces. Its two main sponsors, the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York and the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, are the home institutions of the two curators and they have been developing programs in similar directions for some time. ICP has been expanding its programs in recent years to exhibit photographic works from different countries and non-Western traditions; since 1999 Smart has organized a number of important exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art. These two institutions soon reached an agreement to co-sponsor the exhibition after Christopher and I submitted our joint proposal. Looking for additional partners, we and the two museums’ leadership further discussed the project with New York’s Asia Society Museum (ASM) and Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), which then joined the project as additional venues. A direct consequence of this four-museum alliance is a much expanded exhibition space. Christopher and I could therefore select many more works, including some large-scale installations, thereby enhancing both the contents and visual impact of the exhibition. No less important, this alliance will also create a much larger and more diverse audience because each museum has its own public and is connected with a particular network in the American system of art exhibition. Significantly, the four institutions represent four different types of exhibition channels: first, a contemporary art museum (MCA); second, a university art museum (Smart); third, a specialized modern and contemporary art museum (ICP); and fourth, an Asian art museum (ASM). The project thus helps explore the rich potential of utilizing different venues to exhibit contemporary Asian art in a global context. After New York and Chicago, the exhibition will travel to Seattle and Santa Barbara on the West Coast, and then to Berlin and Tokyo.

A third noticeable—and possibly controversial—feature of the exhibition is its deliberately vague definition of “photography.” Visitors to the show will find two-dimensional photographs intermingled with photographic and video installations (fig. 1). Some photographers insist on using the conventional camera and the chemical photographic process, but many others favour digital technology and are fascinated by the seemingly infinite possibilities of image-manipulation with the help of the computer. The exhibition, moreover, includes a considerable number of video works; many are created by artists in the “photography” section. Underlying such diversity and ambiguity is the reality of the particular field of contemporary Chinese photography, which this
exhibition takes as its mission to introduce. Known as shiy an sheying or "experimental photography," this field has been especially active not only for photography but also for contemporary Chinese art in general. Experimental Chinese photography has attracted worldwide attention since the mid-1990s and has appeared in numerous international exhibitions. Differing from previous exhibitions, the present project aims to provide a comprehensive investigation and interpretation of this field. My essay in the exhibition catalogue traces the rebirth of independent photography in China in the late 1970s, and analyzes works grouped in the exhibition’s four thematic sections, entitled “History and Memory,” “People and Place,” “Performing the Self,” and “Reimagining the Body.” The rest of this essay provides a general historical definition of “experimental photography” in contemporary Chinese art.

Like “experimental art,” “experimental photography” in China is a specific historical phenomenon defined by a set of factors, among which the artist’s social and professional identity is a major one. Chronologically, this photography first emerged in the late 1980s, but only became a trend as of beginning in the early to mid-1990s. Before this moment, photography had basically developed within a self-contained field known as “Chinese photography” (Zhongguo sheying), constituted by various art institutions including schools and research institutes, publishers and galleries, as well as various Associations of Chinese Photographers organized on different levels within the state’s administrative system. In their effort to reinvent these institutions, amateur and unofficial photographers who played a leading role in the New Wave Movement (Sheying xinzhao) in the 1980s, eventually had to join them.

This situation underwent a fundamental change in the 1990s, when a different group of young photographers organized communities and activities outside the institutions of “Chinese photography.” To a large extent, they owed their independent status to their educational and professional backgrounds: some of them were self-taught photographers who collaborated with experimental artists working with different mediums; others were initially avant-garde painters and graphic
artists, but later abandoned brushes and pens for cameras. In either case they had few ties with mainstream photography, but constituted a sub-group within the camp of experimental artists. As concrete proof of this identity, these photographers often lived and worked with experimental artists, and showed their works almost exclusively in unofficial experimental art exhibitions. Unlike the amateur photographers of the 1970s and 1980s whose career paths often ended in "professional" institutions, the experimental photographers of the 1990s insisted on their outsider’s position even after they became well known. This was possible because Chinese experimental art was rapidly globalizing during this period, appearing frequently in international exhibitions and also becoming a commodity in the global art market. In this new environment, experimental photographers could claim an independent or “alternative” status domestically, while collaborating with international museums, curators, and dealers abroad.

A landmark event in the development of experimental photography was the establishment of the East Village—a community of experimental painters, performance and installation artists, and photographers on the eastern fringes of Beijing. Most of these artists were immigrants from the provinces who, from 1993 to 1994, moved into this tumble-down village for its cheap housing, but soon discovered their common interests and began to conduct collaborative art projects. They also developed a close relationship with their environment—a polluted place filled with garbage and industrial waste—and considered moving there to be an act of self-exile. The most crucial significance of the East Village community, however, lies in its formation as a close alliance of performing artists and photographers, who inspired each other’s work by serving as each other’s models and audience. Many memorable photographs from this period, such as Xing Danwen and Rong Rong’s records of avant-garde performances by Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Zhu Ming, and Cang Xin, directly resulted from this alliance (fig. 2). Viewed in the general context of experimental Chinese art, this alliance also initiated one of the most important developments from the mid-1990s, when experimental artists working in different mediums increasingly envisioned and designed their works as performances, and when many of these artists were also increasingly attracted by photography, not only deriving inspiration from it but also making photographs themselves.

The appearance of new types of experimental art publications around the mid-1990s further declared the independence of experimental photography at the time. After the June Fourth Movement in 1989, the two most influential journals of avant-garde art in the 1980s—Chinese Fine Arts Weekly (Zhongguo meishu bao) and Trends in Art Theory (Meishu sichao)—were banned by the government; the existing art journals by and large avoided controversial issues for political security. Responding to this situation, some unofficial artists and art critics launched their own publications to facilitate the development of experimental art. Among these publications, the most daring one was an untitled volume known as The Book With a Black Cover (Heipi shu). Privately published by Ai Weiwei, Zeng Xiaojun, Zhuang Hui, and Xu Bing in 1994, it introduced a new generation of experimental Chinese artists to the world. Significantly, the volume featured photography as the
most important medium of experimental art: readers found in it the earliest reproductions of East Village performance photographs, as well as "conceptual" photographic works by Zhang Pelli, Geng Jianyi, Ai Weiwei, Lu Qing, Zhu Fadong, and Zhao Bandi. Avant-garde serials dedicated exclusively to photography appeared in 1996 as represented by *New Photo* (*Xin sheying*). Lacking both the money for printing and a license for public distribution, its two editors, Liu Zheng and Rong Rong, resorted to high quality photocopying to produce only twenty to thirty copies for each issue. The first issue bore a preface entitled "About 'New Photography'," which defined this art not in terms of content or style but of the artist's individuality and "alternative" identity. This definition changed a year later, however, as the two-sentence long introduction to the third issue declared:

> When concept enters Chinese photography, it is as if a window suddenly opens in a room that has been sealed for years. We can now breathe comfortably, and we now reach a new meaning of "new photography." [original boldface]

This statement reflected an important change in 1997, when experimental Chinese photography came to be equaled with Conceptual photography. Until then, experimental photographers had identified their art mainly through "negation": it was by divorcing themselves from mainstream photography that they established their alternative position. But now they also hoped to define experimental photography as an art with its own intrinsic logic, which they found in the theories of Conceptual Art. This theoretical interest prompted them to form a new discussion group—the Every Saturday Photo Salon (*Xingqiliu sheying shalong*)—in September 1997. The exhibition they organized in conjunction with the Salon's first meeting, entitled *New Photographic Image* (*Xin yingxiang*) and held in a theater near the Pan-Asian Sports Village in north Beijing, was the first comprehensive display of Chinese Conceptual photography. Dao Zil, the project's "academic advisor," wrote a highly theoretical treatise for this exhibition, interpreting "new image" photography as a conceptual art advanced by avant-garde Chinese artists under China's post-colonial, postmodern, and post-autocratic conditions.
It would be wrong, however, to conceive of 1990s' experimental photography as comprising two discrete stages separated by this theorization process. In fact, although lacking a clearly articulated self-awareness, the rise of experimental photography in the early and mid-1990s already implied a movement toward Conceptual Art, which gives priority to ideas over representation. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, experimental photographers have also continuously found guidance in postmodern theories, conducting experiments to deconstruct reality, now understood as no more than a commonsensical convention. No longer interested in capturing meaningful moments in life (as earlier documentary photography had attempted), they have instead focused on the manner or vocabulary of artistic expression, and have thought hard to control the situation within which their works are viewed. This emphasis on concept and display has led to a wide range of constructed images; the situation can be compared with American Conceptual photography of the 1970s, described by Corinne Robins in these words:

Photographers concentrated on making up or creating scenes for the camera in terms of their own inner vision. To them, [...] realism belonged to the earlier history of photography and, as seventies artists, they were embarked on a different kind of aesthetic quest. It was not, however, the romantic symbolism of photography of the 1920s and 1930s, with its emphasis on the abstract beauty of the object, that had caught their attention, but rather a new kind of concentration on narrative drama, on the depiction of time changes in the camera's fictional moment. The photograph, instead of being presented as a depiction of reality, was now something created to show us things that were felt rather than necessarily seen.³³

Taking place twenty years later, however, a "replay" of this history in 1990s' China has produced very different results. Backed by postmodern theories and utilizing state-of-the-art technologies, experimental Chinese photography has also more actively interacted with other art forms including performance, installation, sculpture, site-specific art, advertising, and photography itself, trans-

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forming pre-existing images into photographic "re-representations." Again, this tendency first emerged in the early and mid-1990s (although some emerging experimental photographers at the time (such as Rong Rong, Wang Jinsong, and Yin Xiuzhen) seemed to continue the "straight," documentary tradition, their works actually reconfigured fragmentary images and inscriptions into new compositions and narratives (fig. 3). Liu Zheng, on the other hand, photographed manufactured figures including mannequins, statues, wax figures, and live tableaux, and mixed such photographs with images in the conventional documentary style (fig. 4). The layering of representations in this assemblage effectively erased any sense of real existence and experience. While these three artists approached reality as a deposit of "ready-made" photographic materials, towards the late 1990s and early 2000s (and hence encouraged by the definition of experimental photography as Conceptual Art), more and more artists created objects or scenes as the subjects of photographs. Such projects, ranging from Wu Xiaojun's sculpted puppet show to Wang Qingsong's computer-generated monuments (fig. 5), and from Hong Lei's "painted over" images (fig. 6) to Zhao Shaoruo's reconstructed historical photographs (fig. 7), have constituted the majority of experimental photographs since 1997.

We may consider this type of constructed photography itself a "performance," not only because it involves actual performances and displays elaborate technical showmanship, but also because it takes "theatricality" as a major point of departure. The interest in visual effect became increasingly strong after 1997. If earlier Conceptual photographers, such as Geng Jianyi and Zhang Peili, enhanced the conceptual quality of their works through repressing visual attractiveness, visitors to today's exhibitions of Chinese photography are often overpowered by the works' startling size and bold images, which not only rely on new imaging technologies but, more importantly, reveal the photographers' penchant for such technologies (fig. 8). To students of experimental Chinese photography (and experimental Chinese art in general), this two-fold interest in performance and technology is extremely important, because it reveals an obsessive pursuit of dangdaixing or "contemporaneity."

Here contemporaneity does not simply pertain to what is here and now, but is an intentional artistic construct that asserts a particular historicity for itself. It may be said this construct is the ultimate goal of experimental Chinese art. To make their works "contemporary," experimental artists have most critically reflected upon the conditions and limitations of the present, and have
conducted numerous experiments to transform the present—a commonsensical time and place—into individualized references, languages, and points of view. It is easy to see how their pursuit of contemporaneity underlies their fascination with postmodern theories, startling visual effect, and state-of-the-art technologies. The same pursuit also explains the content of their works, which deliver unambiguous social and political messages, and express strong assertions of individuality and self-identity. In fact, these works can be properly understood only when we associate them with China's current transformation, the ongoing process of globalization, and the artists' visions for themselves in a changing world. The four sections of this exhibition, focusing on history, self, the body, and the city, encapsulate some major themes of these works. The rest of this essay outlines how experimental photographers have articulated their art styles and languages around these themes.

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As a branch of independent photography in contemporary China, experimental photography ultimately originated in 1979, when a group of amateur photographers formed the April Photo Society (Siyou Yinghui) and organized Nature, Society and Man (Ziran, Shehui, Ren)—the first unofficial photo club and exhibition in post-Cultural Revolution China. The exhibition was conceived as a new beginning in an unofficial history of Chinese photography—a historical vision expressed in the opening sentences of the exhibition's introduction:

In April 1976, on the bingchen day of the Qingming Festival, a group of young men and women took up their simple cameras and joined the masses in Tiananmen Square. A sense of mission motivated them to record the scenes they saw; the photographs they took there have become an invaluable testimony to a life-and-death struggle that the Chinese people waged against the evil Gang of Four. In April 1979, the same group of young men and women is again playing a central role in organizing this exhibition, advancing their exploration into a new territory.

This new territory was simply photography freed from politics, allowing the camera to pursue a visual language for individual expression. As commonplace as it is in art history, this idea was revolutionary in China at that moment. It laid a foundation for the New Wave Movement from the 1980s to the early 1990s, and has guided the development of experimental photography throughout the past decade. The result, as seen in Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China, both confirms and challenges the original intentions of the Nature, Society and Man exhibition. On the one hand, the current exhibition demonstrates that the development of photography in today's China is still driven by the desire for new visual forms as vehicles of individual expression. On the other hand, these forms and expressions can never escape their political and social context. To the contrary, this exhibition shows how political and social issues have re-entered contemporary Chinese photography and stimulated artists' experimentation with visual forms.

Many works in the exhibition address problems concerning society and the artist's identity. But even a work that does not directly deal with such problems still internalizes China's social transformation and economic development in its representation and production. Most works in this exhibition do not reflect prolonged, inward contemplation or systematic articulation of a personal style. Instead, they index explosive moments of creative impulse and energy. The lack of technical finesse in some of these images is compensated for by their unusually rich visual
stimuli and bold imagination. The key to understanding these works, therefore, is not a gradual transformation of forms and perception, but the artists' sensitivity to new technology and popular culture, their fast-track experimentation with new forms and techniques, and their ease in selecting and changing visual modes. All these factors are inherent aspects of China's explosive economic development and rapid globalization. But this also implies that it is difficult, if not impossible, to predict the future development of this art: because the primary goal of experimental Chinese photography is to capture the excitement of its own time, it is a self-conscious contemporary art concerned with its own contemporaneity, and belongs to a suspended moment between past and future.