During the past twenty-five years, Chinese artists have reinvented photography as an art form. Before 1979, and especially during the Cultural Revolution mobilized by Mao Zedong to reinvigorate Communism in China between 1966 and 1976, publications and exhibitions of photographs served strict propagandist purposes; unofficial photography remained private. The appearance of the first unofficial photo club and exhibition in Beijing in 1979 changed this situation fundamentally. Since then, many such clubs have emerged and numerous photography exhibitions have been organized by independent curators and artists. In the process, contemporary Chinese artists’ use of the medium has evolved from imitating Western styles to developing an original language and character.
From the 1980s to the 1990s, a host of photography journals and magazines was published in China, introducing the major schools and masters of Western photography to a new audience. Western techniques as well as social and artistic aspirations influenced a generation of young Chinese photographers, who made images for their aesthetic appeal and as authentic records of historical events and human lives. Many artists produced documentary-style photographs during the 1980s and early 1990s, creating works with a strong political agenda, either exploring the dark side of society or glorifying an idealized, timeless Chinese civilization unspoiled by Communist ideology. This period, which Chinese critics described as the Photographic New Wave (sheying xin-chao), laid the groundwork for the next generation of photographers to undertake wide-ranging artistic experiments beyond realism and symbolism.1

The new types of image-making, often referred to collectively by Chinese artists and art critics as experimental photography (sheying sheying),2 became closely linked with an ongoing experimental art movement in the 1990s. Whereas experimental photographers found inspiration in performance, installation, and multimedia art, painters, performers, and installation artists have routinely employed photography in their work, sometimes even reinventing themselves as full-time photographers. As a result of this dynamic exchange, photography has played a central role in recent contemporary Chinese art. Photography’s openness to new visual technology and its ability to challenge the boundaries between fiction and reality, art and commerce, object and subject, have inspired and permeated various kinds of art experimentation in China.

Containing roughly one hundred and thirty works created by sixty artists from 1994 to 2003, the exhibition Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China showcases this most recent chapter of contemporary Chinese photography, the continuous, exciting development of which has, over the past decade, been characterized by nonstop reinvention, abundant production, multifaceted experimentation, and cross-fertilization with other art forms. To provide the exhibition with a historical context, this essay covers a broader period, outlining the major trends, stimuli, and developmental stages of Chinese photography over the past twenty-five years. A review of the period from the late 1970s to 1980s establishes the starting point of this development—a “ground zero” against which documentary and “fine art” photography reemerged with rigor and a sense of mission. The following discussion focuses on two aspects of experimental photography since the 1990s: its relationship with China’s social transformation and the artists’ changing self-identity, and the interaction between experimental Chinese photography and postmodern theories, conceptual art, and other new forms of contemporary art such as performance and installation. Integrated into a single narrative, these two focuses will address the dominant concerns of experimental Chinese photographers and the basic direction of their experiments.

THE RISE OF UNOFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPHY
(1976–1979)

Three consecutive events from 1977 to early 1979 together constituted a turning point in the history of contemporary Chinese photography. First, a group of amateur photographers formed an underground network, compiling their private records of a suppressed political movement into volumes for public circulation. This movement—the mass mourning for Premier Zhou Enlai in 1976—was the first large-scale public demonstration in the capital of the People’s Republic of China. Toward the mid-1970s, Zhou had become the remaining hope for many Chinese, who saw him as the only person able to save China from the disasters that the Cultural Revolution had inflicted upon the country. With Zhou’s death in January 1976, this hope seemed to have vanished. Even worse, the extreme leftist leaders of the Cultural Revolution—the Gang of Four headed by Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing—condemned Zhou and prohibited people from mourning him. All the anxiety, frustration, disillusionment, and anguish that had troubled Beijing residents for more than a decade merged into a shared feeling of grief from which a grassroots movement began to take shape.

On March 23, a single wreath of white paper, the traditional symbol of mourning, was dedicated to Zhou at the foot of the Monument to the People’s Heroes in Tiananmen Square. It was immediately removed by Beijing’s municipal government, which was controlled by the Gang of Four. But the prohibition only brought more wreaths, mourners, and finally the protest on April 4, the day of the Qingming Festival (the traditional day for holding memorial services for the dead). One hundred thousand people gathered in Tiananmen Square on this and the following day. By this point, white wreaths had been covered by red flags and slogans, and weeping had turned into songs, the beating of drums, and poems condemning the Gang of Four’s evil deeds. Then, on the night of April 5, some ten thousand armed police and worker-militia rushed into the square, beating and arresting the demonstrators. Terror continued for months afterward; numerous arrests were made; photos and tapes recording the mass gathering were confiscated; people who refused to surrender these records were threatened with the death penalty.

Such extreme repression only hastened the fall of the Gang of Four. After Mao died in October of that year, the new leader Hua Guofeng arrested Jiang Qing and her colleagues. After Deng Xiaoping returned to power in 1978, Mao was openly criticized, and nearly three million

1.

2.
Figure 1
Luo Xiaoyun, Mainstay, black-and-white photograph, 1976.

Figure 2

Figure 3
Figure 4
Sun Yat-sen Park, Beijing.

Figure 5

Figure 6
victims of the Cultural Revolution were rehabilitated. But the political situation remained unstable, and it was by no means certain that Deng's reformist faction would eventually win the battle. Because photographs of the April Fifth Movement—as the mass mourning for Zhou Enlai is called—most effectively evoked people's memories of the event and strengthened their will to pursue a better future, these images played an important role at this critical moment in contemporary Chinese history.

Most of these photographs were taken by amateurs. Some of them, such as Wang Zhiping and Li Xiaobin, would later become the leaders of the Photographic New Wave in the 1980s. But in 1976 they were beginners with little knowledge of the art of photography; what they had were cheap cameras and a burning desire to record the mass demonstration for posterity (Figs. 1, 2). Working individually, each of them took hundreds of photos in the square throughout the April Fifth Movement and preserved the negatives during the subsequent political persecution. They became friends and comrades only later, when they saw each other's April Fifth photos and embarked on a collaborative effort to publicize these private records to represent public memory. Before this, some of them had compiled individual photo albums of the movement and presented them to Deng Xiaoping and Deng Yingchao (the latter was Zhou Enlai's widow and a veteran revolutionary leader in her own right). They decided to compile the most powerful photographs of the movement into a single volume and publish it nationwide. A seven-member editorial committee was established in 1977 to collect and select images. Because the April Fifth Movement was still labeled an anti-government movement, they worked secretly and relied on very limited resources. It remains unclear how many negatives they actually collected, but according to Li Xiaobin, prints they enlarged from these negatives numbered between twenty and thirty thousand. Some five hundred images were selected for the volume, which eventually came out in January 1979 under the title People's Mourning (Renmin de daonian) (Fig. 3).

Published after the rehabilitation of the April Fifth Movement, however, this volume was no longer a private undertaking as the editors had planned, but became an official project endorsed by China's top leaders. While no authorship of the individual photos is explicitly identified, the volume's title page bears a dedication by Hua Guofeng, then the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party. The volume thus helped Hua gain public support and legitimized his mandate. This official patronage also brought unexpected fame to the editors, whose "heroic deeds" were reported in newspapers, and who were invited to join the mainstream association of Chinese Photographers. No longer considering themselves amateurs, they now took photography seriously as a lifelong pursuit; disillusioned by the official hijacking of their project, however, they turned away from political involvement to pursue an artistic photography outside the government's agendas. Li Xiaobin recalled that right before the publication of People's Mourning, he and Wang Zhiping took a trip to the Old Summer Palace (Yuanming Yuan) to photograph the famous ruins there, while Wang suddenly turned to him and said, "Let's stop making a career in politics. Let's just create art and organize our own exhibitions!" This idea soon spread to other members of the group, and in early 1979, they established the April Photo Society. The club's first exhibition, Nature, Society, and Man, opened in April.

Two photographic groups or "salons" in Beijing formed the core of the April Photo Society. One group—most of whom had taken part in the People's Mourning project—met regularly in Wang Zhiping's small apartment in the eastern part of the city. The other group, formed as early as the winter of 1976, had thirty to forty members who gathered every Friday evening in the dorm of the young photographer Chi Xiaoning in the western part of the city (the dorm belonged to the Northern Film Studio). The spiritual leader of this second group, known to its members as Xingqiu shalong—the Every Friday Salon—was Di Cangyuan, a special-effects photographer working in Beijing's Science Film Studio. Di's younger followers admired him for his extensive knowledge of the history of photography, and he served as the main lecturer in the group's meetings. Other photographers, film directors, and artists were also invited as guest speakers, attracting young artists citywide, among whom Wang Keping, Huang Rui, Gu Cheng, and A Cheng soon emerged as representative avant-garde artists and writers of their generation. In addition to these gatherings, the members of the group took photographing trips together to various sites around Beijing, and displayed their works in Chi Xiaoning's dorm.

Organized by the April Photo Society, the Nature, Society, and Man exhibition opened in Beijing's Sun Yat-sen Park on April 1, 1979. Consisting of two hundred eighty works by fifty-one artists (many of whom called themselves amateurs), this unofficial exhibition created a sensation in China's capital. The audience packed the small exhibition hall from morning to night (Fig. 4); enthusiasts visited the show multiple times, copying down every word that accompanied the images. According to a report, two to three thousand people visited each weekday, while more than eight thousand people showed up on a Sunday. Curiously, introductions to contemporary Chinese art rarely mention this exhibition even in passing. Instead, their authors have paid much attention to another unofficial exhibition held the same year in Beijing: the Stars Art Exhibition (Xingxing meizhan) organized by a group of avant-garde painters and sculptors. 
The Stars exhibition openly attacked Mao's dictatorship, while the apolitical, formalist works in Nature, Society, and Man challenged the party's control over visual art mainly in the domain of aesthetics; this difference in focus explains the differing critical attention to these two exhibitions. The exhibition's preface, written by Wang Zhiping, made the focus of Nature, Society, and Man explicit:

News photos cannot replace the art of photography. Content cannot be equaled with form. Photography as an art should have its own language. It is now time to explore art with the language of art, just as economic matters should be dealt with by using the methods of economics. The beauty of photography lies not necessarily in "important subject matter" or in official ideology, but should be found in nature's rhythms, in social reality, and in emotions and ideas.10

Works in the exhibition reflected two main interests in representing nature and society. Many of the images guided the audience to meditate on the beauty and serenity of landscape; other images offered glimpses into people's emotional states and daily lives (fig. 5). None of the works broke new ground in artistic representation, but their mild humanism and aestheticism was extremely fresh and had a tremendous appeal to the public. Only by juxtaposing these works with the Cultural Revolution can one understand their significance and effect: in a country where art had been reduced to political propaganda for an entire decade, any representation of private love, abstract beauty, or social satire was considered revolutionary (fig. 6). When some official critics disparaged this exhibition for its "bourgeois tendency" and lack of "communist spirit," it attracted even more people from all levels of society, who saw it as "an unmistakable sign of the beginning of a cultural Renaissance."11


The April Photo Society organized two more Nature, Society, and Man exhibitions in 1980 and 1981 (fig. 7). On the surface, both exhibitions continued the success of unofficial photography in China: the number of participating artists doubled; each show attracted thousands of visitors, and the 1981 exhibition was even admitted into the National Art Gallery. On a deeper level, however, the two shows no longer retained the provocative edge of the 1979 exhibition. As the Cultural Revolution was gradually becoming past memory, amateur photography could no longer create a big stir by simply filling up a cultural void. In addition, the April Photo Society's advocacy of "art photography" led to formalism and, in the worst cases, to a pretentious, stylized Salon style. Although some works in these two exhibitions dealt with serious social problems and reached a new level of artistic sophistication (fig. 8), many images were overtly sentimental or packed with vague philosophical concepts. The photographers' attempts at abstract patterns and painterly effects often vitiated their spontaneous feelings for their subjects. Looking back, the critics Li Mei and Yang Xiaoian attributed this to the artists' insufficient knowledge of the history of photography and their confusion between art and commercial photography, among other factors.12 Additionally, the changing locations of the three Nature, Society, and Man exhibitions indicate that, by 1981, this series had been accepted by the authorities and that the April Photo Society had largely merged with the mainstream.

The second and third Nature, Society, and Man exhibitions, however, had a specific significance in triggering the nationwide movement known as the Photographic New Wave. While the first show was held only in Beijing, these two later exhibitions traveled to cities around the country and inspired photographers in these places to carry out similar projects. Numerous local photography clubs and exhibitions emerged from the early 1980s onward. In Xi'an, for example, a group of young amateur photographers founded the Four Directions Photo Club (Sifang yinghui), and in Guangzhou, Everyone's Photography Exhibition (Renren yingzhuan) attracted a huge crowd. Additional influential local photography clubs appeared around the mid-1980s, including the Shaanxi Group based in Xi'an (Shaanxi quanxi) and Shanghai's North River League (Beihemeng). But Beijing remained the center of this movement. According to a report, more than one hundred photo clubs were founded there in the early and mid-1980s and many unofficial exhibitions were organized on different levels during this period.13 The two most important Beijing groups were the Rupture Group (Liebian quanxi) and the Modern Photo Salon (Xiandai shaling shalong). By organizing three influential exhibitions from 1985 to 1988, the latter became the flagship of the New Wave movement during this period.

Compared with the April Photo Society artists, members of these later groups demonstrated much greater familiarity with Western photography—their exhibitions were populated with images modeled upon almost all major styles of Western photography invented since the turn of the twentieth century. While the pursuit of qualities associated with fine art—pictorialism, abstraction, and technical perfection—continued to motivate many photographers, others, especially those of Beijing's Rupture Group and Shanghai's North River League, embraced symbolism and psychoanalysis. Their bizarre and absurd images, conceived as direct outcomes of intuition and irrationality, betray a sense of alienation from society (fig. 9). Photographers concerned with social issues found their models in the tradition of Western documentary photography. Inspired
Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9
by works of Margaret Bourke-White, Robert Frank, Walker Evans, and Dorothea Lange, to name just a few, they began documenting neglected aspects of Chinese society and started a documentary turn that would dominate the New Wave movement from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s.

Such pluralism—one of the most important features of the 1980s Chinese cultural world—was closely related to an information explosion during the early-to-mid-1980s, when all sorts of so-called decadent Western art, forbidden during the Cultural Revolution, were introduced to China through reproductions and exhibitions. Hundreds of theoretical works by authors such as Heinrich Wölfflin and Jacques Derrida were translated and published in a short period; images by Western photographers from Alfred Stieglitz to Cindy Sherman were reproduced in books and magazines, often accompanied by historical or theoretical discussions. These texts and images aroused enormous interest among younger artists and greatly inspired their work. It was as if a century of Western art had been restaged in China. The chronology and internal logic of this Western tradition was less important than its diverse content as a visual and intellectual stimulus for hungry artists and their audience. Thus, styles and theories that had long become history to Western art critics were regarded as contemporary by Chinese artists and used as their models. In other words, the meaning of these Westernized Chinese works was located not in the original significance of their styles, but in the transference of these styles to a different time and place.

Major vehicles for such reproductions and translations were popular photo journals and magazines, which increased rapidly in number and kind throughout the 1980s. Among these, InPhotography (Xian dai sheying) started in 1984 and soon became the most popular reading material of younger photographers. Published not in a political center such as Beijing but in the new economic zone of Shenzhen, InPhotography was under less scrutiny from official censorship and its editors enjoyed greater freedom to determine its content. Indeed, the journal’s two major goals, announced in the “Words From the Editors” in the first issue, were “to introduce exemplary works of foreign ‘photographers’ and ‘promote experimentation and invention in domestic photography.’”

This dual direction set a model for similar publications, which mushroomed in the following years. When another new journal, Chinese Photographers (Zhongguo sheyingjia), was founded in 1988, its foreword included this humorous survey of the field:

Speaking about today’s photography, it is really as hot as this month’s (July) weather. Its speedy expansion, enforced by a growing crowd of “feverish friends,” has led to an increasing number of publications on photography. In addition to the two leading photo weeklies in Shanxi and Beijing (People’s Photography and Photo Newspaper), there are journals and magazines of every orientation and style. For the popular audience, there is Mass (Mass Photography); for the elite, China (China Photography). For the avant-garde, Modern (Modern Photography, or InPhotography) is the pioneer; for the experimental type, Youth (Youth Photography) leads the pack. On the conservative, leftist side you have International (International Photography); on the more liberal, rightist side there is World (The World of Photography). Looking at this extensive list, one would be crazy to add another new title to it.

Nevertheless, the writer of this foreword tried to justify the launching of Chinese Photographers. According to him, there was still much room for new publications, especially if they offered more concentrated studies of individual photographers. This agenda, adopted as the mandate of this new journal, indicated a shift of interest from acquiring general knowledge in world photography to developing close analyses of individual styles. Other Chinese photography journals published in 1988 reveal similar tendencies. The straightforwardly titled Photography (Sheying), published in Shenzhen that year, organized its first issue around six foreign photographers and seven experimental Chinese photographers. Even the veteran InPhotography subtly changed direction. No longer offering short introductory essays on such general topics as abstract photography or surrealist photography, its 1988 issues focused on cutting-edge photographers and their works.

This shift, in turn, indicated that by the late 1980s, photography in China had basically “caught up” with the rest of the world. A considerable number of photographers had been practicing for a decade, and had established track records that showed continuous artistic development. The intensive introduction to the history of photography, conducted by a host of popular journals and magazines over several years, had much improved the public understanding of this art. Several large-scale conferences on photography, taking place in Hangzhou, Wuhu, Xi’an, and other cities from 1986 to 1988, helped bring the study of photography and photographic theory to a new level. These meetings included discussions of such issues as the subjectivity of photography, the return to realism, and the relationship between photographic theory and general aesthetics. While most papers presented at these conferences dealt with theoretical matters, some scholars and critics began to summarize recent experiences of Chinese photography in the form of historical surveys.

A DOCUMENTARY TURN

Documentary photography came to dominate the New Wave movement in the second half of the 1980s. Like those of the documentary movement in the 1930s
in the United States, Chinese documentary works were closely related to the social and political context of their time; their content, form, and tropes served the social programs that the photographers aspired to undertake. Generally speaking, these works followed two main directions, both reacting against the party’s propaganda art during and after the Cultural Revolution. The first developed as a branch of native soil art (xiangtu meishu), an important artistic genre in the 1980s that advocated representations of ordinary people and what the photographers saw as the timelessness of Chinese civilization. The second direction echoed scar art (shangben meishu) and scar literature (shangben wenxue), focusing on human tragedies in Chinese society.

Both trends started in the late 1970s. One of the earliest native soil photographic projects was conducted by Zhu Xianmin, who made eight trips to his hometown on the Yellow River (commonly considered the cradle of Chinese civilization) from 1979 to 1984 to photograph local people and their lives. When photo clubs emerged in the provinces in the early-to-mid-1980s, many of them took as their mission “the search for the roots of our national culture.” Among these clubs, the earliest and most famous was the Shaanxi Group (also known as Xibei Feng or the Northwest Wind), whose motto “back to the real” (fugui xianshi) provided an explicit counter to Mao’s futurist revolutionary realism (Fig. 10). This approach was also accepted by photographers in major cities. Wang Zhiping and Wang Miao, veterans of unofficial photography in Beijing, joined this trend and conducted a prolonged field survey in rural west China. When their photographs appeared in a 1983 issue of InPhotography, the accompanying text was welcomed by fellow photographers as a manifesto for this type of documentary photography.

They wrote, “We believe that genuine beauty, greatness, and eternity can only exist in the depth of ordinariness. . . . We try to portray you (i.e., China) with our response to your real appearance, not to give you a smiling face found on every fashion magazine’s cover.” At this point, however, what were imagined to be records of real people began to take on overarching symbolic significance, and the photographers, driven by idealism, adapted a rhetoric that verged on nationalist propaganda.

Although both kinds of documentary photography emphasized a plain, down-to-earth style and played down the photographer’s mediation between reality and representation, the native soil type produced ahistorical, romantic images with a strong ethnographic interest, while the scar type was by nature historical and critical, visualizing recent Chinese history as a series of discrete images that spoke of human experience during social or natural disasters. In many cases, images of this second type recorded historical events that would otherwise have been lost. This is why some writers have traced this type to the April Fifth Movement in 1976. Made by amateurs, these unpolished images nevertheless preserved traces of a distinct moment in modern Chinese history; the memory clinging to them gave them an almost talismanic quality (see Figs. 11, 12). These April Fifth photographs also initiated another important tradition associated with this type of documentary photography: the rhetoric of an emotional language that has come to regulate the perception and evaluation of documentary images. According to this rhetoric, visual records of historical events or social phenomena are expected to be direct, powerful, and moving, evoking strong emotional responses from viewers.

Sophisticated works from this historical, critical tradition of documentary photography began to emerge in the late 1970s. Continuing the April Fifth legacy, some photographers developed projects to depict aspects of Chinese society that had eluded artistic and media representations. One such project was Li Xiaobin’s Shangfangzhe—People Pleading for Justice from the Higher Authorities. It dealt with an important social phenomenon ignored by most artists and reporters: tens of thousands of such shangfangzhe, often victims of the Cultural Revolution in remote areas, flooded Beijing’s streets from 1977 to 1980. Unable to find justice through the local judiciary systems, they went to the Chinese capital to present their cases directly to the central government. Traumatized and exhausted, they waited for weeks and even months outside the Justice Department, Ministry of Internal Affairs, or Department of Public Security, hoping to receive a response to their appeals. Few of them succeeded in achieving even this most rudimentary goal, however, so they continued to wait, often until they were forced to return home. Li Xiaobin took about one thousand photographs of these homeless and hopeless people. One of his pictures—arguably the most poignant work of Chinese documentary photography from this period—captures the image of a haggard shangfangzhe wandering next to Tiananmen Square (Fig. 11). Eyes unfocused, he seems disoriented and in a trance. Yet he still has several large Mao buttons—symbols of loyalty to the Chairman during the Cultural Revolution—pinned on his tattered clothes. This image aroused strong reactions—both sympathy and reflection—after its publication. Many viewers sensed in it an implicit criticism of Communist rule, which had ruined millions of people’s lives and abused their hopes for a better China. Once again, a documentary image became a visual symbol with a meaning extending far beyond the photograph’s specific content.
Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12
These two types of documentary photography developed in concert and were featured abundantly in photography publications and exhibitions after 1985.23 What followed was an intense search for new documentary subjects by individual artists. A specific subject often came to distinguish a particular photographer.24 Wu Jialin became known for his ethnographic images of the Wa people in Yunnan (FIG. 12); Yu Deshui won several prizes for recording lives along the Yellow River (FIG. 13); and Lii Nan and Yuan Dongping spent years photographing mental patients in asylums around the country (FIG. 14). Later Lii discovered a new subject in underground, rural Catholic churches, while Yuan embarked on a large project entitled People of Poverty (Qiongren). Works by the last two photographers synthesized scar and native soil traditions, and therefore also departed from both. Their subjects—mental patients, blind and retarded children, dysfunctional elderly people, and the homeless—are ordinary, but they are also wounded and ignored. Their problems are not caused by particular political or social events; in fact the reasons for their injuries are relatively unimportant in these works. One can no longer find in them the tension-ridden scenes of confrontation in Li Xiaobin’s social images, while the romantic aestheticization of the ordinary in native soil art is also avoided. The artists have moved away from the earlier narrative or poetic modes and have relied instead on a less impassioned mode of presentation that allows the images to speak for themselves.

Responding to the search for new documentary subjects but also to the rapid transformation of the Chinese city, an increasing number of photographers were attracted to urban scenes—the changing cityscape, the ruins of traditional buildings and lifestyles, the invasion of Western culture and the market economy, and the new urban population and occupations. Their initial works, however, immediately exposed the limitations of the conventional documentary style, which was supposed to be naturalistic and objective, and at odds with the transient nature of the contemporary city and the photographers’ self-involvement in urban lives. Consequently, some photographers, such as Gu Zheng, Mo Yi, and Zhang Haier, began to develop new concepts and languages that allowed them not only to represent an external reality but also to respond to reality.25 Among them, Zhang Haier most successfully made the transition from documentary to conceptual photography. Combining a flash with slow shutter speed, his images of Guangzhou’s street scenes seem both real and artificial; from the dark background his distorted and blurry face emerges, screaming toward the camera (FIG. 15). Zhang’s portraits of Guangzhou prostitutes were the earliest such images, which later became a subgenre in urban representations (FIG. 16). Instead of detaching himself from his subjects as a typical documentary photographer would do, he made his communication with these young women the real point of representation. Looking at these images is to look into the prostitutes’ eyes, and there we find the photographer’s silent existence.26

At this point, toward the end of the 1980s, the New Wave movement had largely accomplished its mission of restoring photography’s status as an art in China. A new kind of photography was emerging that allied itself with the burgeoning avant-garde art.27 Almost instantly, it caught the attention of the international art world, as Zhang Haier and four other young photographers were invited to participate in the 1988 Arles Photography Festival in France. Such interest from abroad encouraged other Chinese photographers to explore new territories beyond documentary photography and art photography. While Chinese photography seemed to be entering a new stage, this development was suddenly halted by a political event: the government’s violent suppression of the June Fourth Movement (the prodemocratic student demonstration in Tiananmen Square that ended in bloodshed on June 4, 1989). Avant-garde art was banned afterwards. For the next two to three years, no groundbreaking photography exhibitions were organized, and existing photographic journals only featured works devoid of political and artistic controversy. In this atmosphere, art photography and documentary photography were both banned to become part of the official establishment. This period of repression created a significant gap in contemporary Chinese photography. When a new generation of photographers reemerged in the early-to-mid 1990s, they were challenged not only to create new images but also to reinvent their identities as independent artists.

**EXPERIMENTAL PHOTOGRAPHY (EARLY 1990S TO THE PRESENT)**

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.28 This photography first emerged in the late 1980s, but only became a trend in the early-to-mid 1990s.29 Before this, photography had basically developed within the self-contained field of Chinese photography (Zhongguo shengyuan), constituted by various art institutions including schools and research institutes, publishers and galleries, and various associations of Chinese photographers within the state’s administrative system.30 Even though amateur and unofficial photographers played a leading role in the New Wave movement, in their effort to reinvent these institutions they eventually had to join them.

This situation underwent a fundamental change in the 1990s, when a group of young photographers organized communities and activities outside the institutions of Chinese photography. They owed their
independent status, to a large extent, to their educational and professional background. Some of them were self-taught photographers who collaborated with experimental artists; others began their careers as 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 proofs of this identity, these photographers often lived and worked together 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 with appointments in professional institutions, the experimental photographers of the 1990s insisted on their outsiders' 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 colleagues, dealers, and museums abroad.

Three events in the first half of the 1990s played pivotal roles in the formation of this new unofficial photography. The first was the organization of a series of Document Exhibitions (Wenxian zhan) that helped sustain artistic experimentation during a difficult period: responding to the official prohibition of avant-garde art instituted immediately after the June Fourth Movement, a group of art critics designed this exhibition format in 1991 (Fig. 17) (second and third shows were held in 1992 and 1994, respectively). Consisting of photographic records and reproductions of recent works by unofficial artists, it traveled to different cities and provided an important channel of communication among these artists throughout the country. Although the organizers of this series defined the exhibited images as documents, not real art objects, to the participating artists the photographs, especially those recording performances and temporary installations, were their works. The situation became more complex when a performance was photographed not by the artist but by a collaborating photographer. Questions about such an image included whether it was an unmediated record of the original art project, or should also be considered a creative work of the photographer. This and other questions led to discussions and debates about the nature of art media and about photographic representations of other art forms specifically. Not coincidentally, the third Document Exhibition had the subtitle Revolution and Transformation of the Art Medium (Metti de bianjie). The debate about the authorship of performance photography finally subsided in the late 1990s. Many performance artists began to document their own works, assuming the function of a photographer, while an increasing number of experimental photographers designed and conducted performances for photographing. Both approaches reflect a further internalization of interactions between different art forms and media.

The second 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 fringe of Beijing (Fig. 18). Most of these artists were immigrants from the provinces, who moved into this tumbledown village from 1993 to 1994 for its cheap housing, and soon discovered their common interests and began to conduct collaborative art projects. They also developed a close relationship to their environment—a polluted place filled with garbage and industrial waste—as they considered moving there 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, and Zhu Ming, directly resulted from this alliance. Viewed in the context of experimental Chinese art, however, this alliance also initiated one of the most important developments of the mid-1990s, when experimental artists working in different media increasingly envisioned and designed their works as performances; many of these artists were also increasingly attracted by photography, not only deriving inspiration from it but also making photographs themselves.

The third event was the appearance of new types of experimental art publications. After the June Fourth Movement, 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 siciao)—were banned by the government; the existing art journals largely avoided controversial issues for political security. In response, 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 (Heipishu). Privately published by Ai Weiwei, Xu Bei, Zeng Xiaojun, and Zhuang Hui 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 Ai Weiwei, Geng Jianyi, Lu Qing, Zhang Peili,
Figure 13

Figure 14
Yuan Dongping, Mental Hospital, black-and-white photograph, 1989.

Figure 15
Figure 16

Figure 17

Figure 18
Zhao Bandi, and Zhu Fadong (Figs. 19, 20). Avant-garde serials dedicated exclusively to photography only appeared in 1996 as represented by New Photo (Xin shuying) (Fig. 21). 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 and produced only twenty to thirty copies of each issue. The first issue bore a preface entitled “About New Photography,” which defined this art in terms not of content or style but the artist’s individuality and alternative identity. This definition changed a year later, however, as the two-sentence 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.”

This statement reflected an important change that occurred in 1997, when experimental Chinese photography came to be equated with conceptual photography. Until then, experimental photographers had identified their art mainly through negation—they established their alternative position by divorcing themselves from mainstream photography. But now they also hoped to define experimental photography as an art with its own intrinsic logic, which they found in theories of conceptual art. This theoretical interest prompted them to form a new discussion group—the Every Saturday Photo Salon (Xingqiliu shuying 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 Zi, 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 postcolonial, postmodern, and postautocratic conditions. It would be wrong, however, to conceive of experimental photography in the 1990s 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-90s already implied a movement toward conceptual art, which gives priority to ideas over representation. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, experimental photographers also continuously found guidance in postmodern theories, conducting experiments to deconstruct reality. No longer interested in capturing meaningful moments in life, they instead focused on the manner or vocabulary of artistic expression, and fought hard to control the situation within which their works were 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 the poet and art historian 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 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.

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, advertisement, and photography itself, transforming preexisting images into photographic “re-representations.” Again, this tendency first surfaced in the early-to-mid-1990s; although some emerging experimental photographers such as Wang Jinsong, (Cat. 62, Fig. 22) seemed to continue the straight, documentary tradition, their works actually reconfigured fragmentary, accidental images and inscriptions into new compositions and narratives. 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 (Cat. 12–16, 50–54). 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 readymade photographic materials, toward 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 as Wang Qingsong’s computer-generated images of monuments (Cat. 27), Hong Lei’s painted-over images (Cat. 9, 10), and Zhao Shaoruo’s reconstructed historical photographs (Cat. 32, 33), have constituted the majority of experimental photographs since 1997.

This type of constructed photography could be seen as 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. Artists' 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 (see Fig. 19), 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. 23). 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 into individualized references, languages, and points of view. Their pursuit of contemporaneity continuously underlies their fascination with postmodern theories, startling visual effects, 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 Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China, focusing on history and memory, self, the body, and people and place, encapsulate some of the major themes of these works.

HISTORY AND MEMORY

Works in the first section of this exhibition refer to China's history and represent collective and individual memories, reflecting the artists' particular historical visions and artistic aspirations. Some of these images feature famous historical sites, particularly the Great Wall and the Forbidden City, important symbols of Chinese civilization and the nation. Both Hong Lei and Liu Wei take the Forbidden City as their subject. Hong's carefully crafted scenes of a mutilated bird lying in the former imperial palace fuse traditional melancholy with the contemporary fascination with violence (cat. 9, 10). Liu's computer-generated images derive inspiration from traditional puppet theater to allude to a court intrigue (cat. 11). Ma Liuming's photograph records one of his performances on the Great Wall, in which he walked stark naked along the wall until his feet bled (cat. 17). Entitled Fen-Ma Liuming Walks on the Great Wall, the performance was conceived as an interaction between the artist's androgynous alter-ego (Fen-Ma Liuming) and the national monument. With long hair, an expressionless face made up with cosmetics, and supple limbs exposed in abandon, this constructed self-image heightens his sexuality and independence.

In contrast to such works that contemplate China's nationhood and cultural origins, some images in the exhibition recur deep, painful memories from the country's past. Wang Youshen's Washing: A 1941 Mass Grave in Datong (cat. 28) is one of the most poignant examples in this group. This installation consists of newspaper pages on the wall and photographic images in two large basins under circulating water. The newspaper reports the discovery of the remains of thousands of Chinese who were buried alive by Japanese soldiers during World War II. The images in the basins represent these remains. "The water washes the image away," the artist explained, "just as time has washed people's memories clear of this atrocity that occurred fifty years ago."

Like Wang Youshen, Sheng Qi's interest lies in the historicity and vulnerability of printed images—and hence the existence and impermanence of the history and memory that they preserve. A series of photographs by Sheng represents his mutilated hand holding tiny photographs of Mao, his mother, and himself as a young boy (cat. 21–23). While his damaged body (he cut off one of his fingers in 1989) commemorates the June Fourth Movement, the black-and-white photos are remains of a more distant past associated with his childhood.

Many experimental art projects from the 1990s were related to artists' memories of the June Fourth Movement. Song Dong's Breathing Part 1 and Part 2 offer exceptionally powerful examples of this type (cat. 24). The two images in this mini-sequence record a bipartite performance, with the first designed as a tribute to the ill-fated June Fourth Movement. The picture was taken after New Year's Eve, 1996. Holiday lights outlined Tiananmen in the distance. Song lay prone and motionless in a deserted Tiananmen Square, breathing onto the cement pavement for forty minutes. On the ground before his mouth a thin layer of ice gradually formed. I offered this interpretation of the performance photograph when it was first shown at the Smart Museum of Art in 1999:

[Unlike some early works in experimental Chinese art] Song Dong is no longer staging a real or pretend suicide in Breathing. Instead he tries to inject life into the deserted square, thereby bringing us to those brief moments in history when the square was transformed into a "living place." It reminds us that in 1996 the square still remained an unfeeling monolith. Breathing not only represents a continuing effort to challenge this monolithic power but also demonstrates the extreme difficulty of making any change: all Song Dong's effort produced was a tiny pool of ice, which disappeared before the next morning. 
Figure 19

Figure 20

Figure 21
The first issue of New Photo magazine, 1986.
Figure 22

Figure 23

Figure 24
Both Sheng Qi and Song Dong connect the present to the past by evoking personal memories. Hai Bo's series of portraits more specifically forge memory links in the national psyche. Each series juxtaposes two photographs taken several decades apart (CAT. 4–8). The first, an old group photo, was taken during the Cultural Revolution and shows people in Maoist or army uniforms; their young faces glow with their unyielding beliefs in communism. The second picture, taken by Hai Bo himself, shows the same group—or in some cases, the surviving members—twenty to thirty years later. The contrast between the images often startles viewers. In an almost graphic manner, the two images register the passage of time and stir up viewers' personal memories.

Historical memory is also the subject of Xing Danwen's Born with the Cultural Revolution (CAT. 36) and the photo installation Woman/Here by Sui Jianguo, Yu Fan, and Zhan Wang (CAT. 53), but these two works give fuller accounts of the lives of specific persons and can therefore be considered biographical representations. The creation of the second work responded to the Fourth International Women's Congress held in Beijing in 1995. Many leaders of women's movements around the world participated in the event, but they were kept separate from ordinary Chinese people. Reacting to such separation, the three artists created Woman/Here in the form of an experimental art exhibition—an alternative space where, in their words, "an ordinary Chinese woman could become part of the international event and the contemporary movement of women's liberation." The installation/exhibition featured their mothers and spouses' collections of personal photographs and memorabilia (FIG. 24). Compiled into chronological sequences and displayed in a public space, these fragmentary images told the lives of several ordinary Chinese women, unknown to most people beyond their families and work units.

PERFORMING THE SELF AND REIMAGINING THE BODY

Experimental photographers tend to be intensely concerned with their identity. The result is a large group of self-representations, including both self-portraits and images of the body. The second and third sections of this exhibition, which include forty-nine works by thirty-two artists, reflect the artists' urgent quest for individuality in a rapidly changing society.

As demonstrated by examples in the preceding section, experimental representations of history and memory are inseparable from artists' self-representations and reveal a close relationship between history and self that sets experimental art apart from other branches of contemporary Chinese art. Although academic painters also depict historical events—often episodes in the founding of the People's Republic—they approach such subjects as belonging to an external, canonical history. Experimental artists, on the other hand, find meaning in the past only from their interactions with it. When they represent such interaction they customarily make themselves the center of the representation, as in Song Dong's Breathing or Ma Liuming's Fen-Ma Liuming Walks on the Great Wall. Mo Yi's Front View/Rear View (CAT. 91, 92) is also inspired by the artist's experience during the June Fourth Movement; he was thrown in jail after participating in a demonstration in Tianjin. Unlike Song and Ma's performance photographs, Mo's work deconstructs the language of self-portraiture. To express his traumatic experience he repetitively obscures his face with a white metal column inscribed with the words "Made by the Police Department."50

These and other images allow us to generalize four basic representational modes or types. The first is interactive in nature: the artist discovers or expresses him or herself through interacting either with historical sites (the Great Wall and the Forbidden City) or political institutions (Tiananmen Square and the police department). Other works in the exhibition represent the artists' interactions with people in the present, as seen in Zhuang Hui's Group Photos (CAT. 80–82). To Zhuang, taking a picture of an entire crew of construction workers, or of the more than six hundred employees of a department store, requires patient negotiation as well as skilled orchestration (FIG. 25). Such interaction with his subjects is the real purpose of his art experiment, whereas the photographs, in which he always appears way over to the side, certifies the project's completion.

The second type of image explicitly displays the body, which experimental artists employ as an unambiguous vehicle for self-expression. This body art was given the strongest expressions in Beijing's East Village, where artists such as Cang Xin, Ma Liuming, Zhang Huan, and Zhu Ming developed two kinds of performances characterized by masochism and gender reversal. Ma Liuming's androgynous alter-ego, Fen-Ma Liuming, exemplifies this type (CAT. 17, 18). Masochism is a trademark of Zhang Huan—almost every performance he undertook involved self-mutilation and simulated self-sacrifice. In some cases he offered his flesh and blood; in other cases he tried to experience death, either locking himself inside a coffin-like metal case or placing earthworms in his mouth. By subjecting himself to an unbearably filthy public toilet for a whole hour, he not only identified himself with the place but also embraced it. (See Rong Rong's photographs of this performance, CAT. 118, 119.) With the same spirit, Zhu Ming designed a performance in 1997 during which he nearly suffocated inside a huge balloon (CAT. 104).51 Masochistic body representation took more extreme forms in the late 1990s, as represented by several works in Infatuated with Injury, a private experimental art exhibition held in 1999 in Beijing.52
The third type of self-representation also features performances, but the central figure, whether the photographer or a fellow artist, disguises him or herself as a fictional character or transforms him or herself into a symbolic image. A number of works in this exhibition fall into this category, including Wang Jin’s A Chinese Dream (cat. 96), Sun Yuan’s Shepherd (cat. 95), Hong Lei’s After Liang Kai’s (Song Dynasty) Masterpiece “Sakyamuni Coming Out of Retirement” (cat. 87) and I Dreamt of Being Killed by My Father When I Was Flying Over an Immortal Land (cat. 88), and Hong Hao’s Mr. Hong, Please Come In (cat. 86), and I Know Mr. Guo (cat. 85). In these last two works, Hong disguises himself as an idealized global citizen in popular imagination—a young entrepreneur in an opulent environment served by a white-gloved servant. Examples of cynical realism, these images employ an iconography of self-mockery to express a dilemma between globalization and individuality that many experimental Chinese artists face.

Rong Rong’s photograph of Cang Xin’s performance Trampling on the Face (cat. 93) represents a complex performative/photographic project that works within several modes of self and body. For the performance, Cang made a mold from his own face and used it to cast fifteen hundred plaster masks in a month. Each mask bore a white paper strip on the forehead, on which he wrote the time of the cast’s manufacture. He then laid the masks on the ground to fill the entire courtyard of his house, and also hung some masks on the walls as witnesses of the performance. During the performance, guests were invited to walk on the masks to destroy them, until all these artificial faces had shattered into shards. Finally he stripped and jumped on the broken masks, using his naked body to fragment them further.

Rong’s photograph vividly records this destructive/evocative process. Numerous masks, many of them destroyed, lie behind the figure in the foreground, who holds up a mask to cover his face. The date written on the mask’s forehead is “2:21-2:26 PM, November 26, 1994.” The mask is damaged, with the left eye and a portion of the forehead missing. The figure behind the mask is not Cang Xin, but Ma Liuming, recognizable from his shoulder-length hair and delicate hand. Here Cang Xin and Ma Liuming have interchanged their roles: wearing Cang’s face, Ma makes himself a surrogate of the performer and the subject of a simulated destruction. But it was the photographer who designed this performance within a performance as a subject to be photographed.

A fourth mode of self-imaging is that of self-portraiture, which constitutes an important genre in contemporary Chinese experimental art. A common tendency among experimental artists, however, is a deliberate ambiguity in portraying their likeness, as if they feel that the best way to realize their individuality is through self-distortion and self-denial. These ambiguous images are still about the authenticity of the self. But they inspire the question “Is it me?” rather than the affirmation “It is me!” More than one third of the self-portraits by experimental artists in the 2001 publication Faces of 100 Artists use this formula. Many such images, such as Lin Tianmiao’s self-portraits, make the subject’s image appear blurry, fragmentary, or in the process of vanishing. Lin’s digitally generated portrait, four meters high and two-and-one-half meters wide, is out of focus and devoid of hair; the image thus represses the artist’s female identity but enhances its own monumentality (cat. 89).

Other artists employ different methods to deconstruct their conventional images. Yin Xiuzhen’s Yin Xiuzhen (cat. 100), for example, is a concise biography of the artist, consisting of a series of her ID photographs arranged in a chronological sequence. The portraits have been cut into insoles and installed into women’s shoes that Yin made with her mother. In so doing, the artist imbued the fragmented images with a sense of vulnerability and intimacy, transforming the standard ID photos into genuine self-expressions. Qiu Zhijie’s photos, Tattoo 1 and Tattoo 2 (cat. 115, 116), result from his persistent experiments to make his own image transparent. The man standing straight in a frontal pose in both pictures is the artist himself. In one photo, a large character bu—meaning no—is written in bright red across his body and the wall behind him. Different parts of the character are painted on his body and on the wall. When these parts connect to form the character, they create the strange illusion that the figure’s body has disappeared, and that the character has become independent, detached from the body and the wall. In other words, this character rejects the ground and makes the person invisible. The other picture employs a similar technique, with metal dots attached to both the body and the background. While the body again seems to vanish, the repetitive dots form an ever-expanding visual field, with neither set boundaries nor clear signification.

Like Yin’s photo installation, these two photos by Qiu reflect upon contemporary visual identifications of individuals. The figure’s unnatural pose and expressionless face make the photos look like ID pictures. As an artist well versed in postmodern theories, Qiu believes that in this world “individuals have been completely transformed into an information process. Signs and codes have overpowered actual human beings, and our bodies have become merely their vehicles.” These two photos illustrate an answer to the artist’s question of how to make such signs and codes—passport photos, archives, etc.—disappear for a second time in an artistic representation.

PEOPLE AND PLACE

Works in the last section of this exhibition respond to drastic changes in China's
contemporary environment—the vanishing of traditional landscapes and lifestyles, the rise of postmodern cities and new urban cultures, and the large-scale migration of populations. Underlying these interests is a generational shift in experimental art: a majority of the artists featured in this section started their careers in the 1990s, and have been finally able to bid farewell to the Cultural Revolution and its visual and mental baggage. They can therefore comment on the Cultural Revolution and the June Fourth Movement as events firmly in the past. At the same time, they directly and rigorously interact with China’s current transformation. An important aspect of this transformation, one that attracted many artists’ attention, was the rapid development of the city. A striking aspect of a major Chinese metropolis such as Beijing or Shanghai in the 1990s and early 2000s has been a never-ending destruction and construction. Old houses were coming down every day to make room for new hotels and shopping malls. Thousands and thousands of people were relocated from the inner city to the outskirts. In theory, demolition and relocation were conditions for the city’s modernization. In actuality, these conditions brought about a growing alienation between the city and its residents: they no longer belonged to one another.

This situation is the context and the content of many works in experimental photography of the 1990s. In 1997 and 1998, Yin Xiuzhen was busily collecting, as she had said, “traces of a vanishing present” along the construction site of the Grand Avenue of Peace and Well-being (Ping’an Dadao), an enormous project funded collectively by the Chinese government and individual investors with a total budget of $350 million. Envisioned as the second largest east-west road across central Beijing, the avenue took up a broad strip of land, some thirty meters wide and seven thousand meters long, in the most populated section of an overcrowded city. Yin collected two kinds of materials: images of the houses (and their residents) before they were demolished, and roof tiles of the houses after they were demolished. She then used these materials for various installations (fig. 26). Bearing black-and-white photos of the demolished houses, the rows of tiles in this installation have an uncanny resemblance to a graveyard. In fact, we may think of this installation in terms of a mass grave, only the “dead” here are places, not people.

But people have indeed “disappeared” during such demolition and dislocation; and this is exactly the subject of Rong Rong’s photographs of Beijing’s demolition sites (cat. 56–58). Devoid of human figures, the half-destroyed houses are occupied by images left on walls, which originally decorated an interior that has now become the exterior. A pair of dragons probably indicates a former restaurant; a Chinese New Year painting suggests a similarly traditional style. The majority of such “leftover” images are various pin-ups from Marilyn Monroe to Hong Kong fashion models. Torn, and even missing a large portion of the composition, these images still exert an allure over the spectator, not only through their seductive figures but also through their seductive spatial illusionism. With an enhanced three-dimensionality and abundant mirrors and painting-within-paintings, they transform a plain wall into a space of fantasy. These works can be viewed together with photographs by Zhang Dali, the most famous graffiti artist in China, who developed a personal dialogue with Beijing through his art (fig. 27). From 1995 to 1998, Zhang sprayed more than two thousand images of himself—the profile of a shaven head—all over the city, often in half-destroyed, empty houses (cat. 74–78). He thus transformed these urban ruins into sites of public art, however temporarily. The locations he chose for his performance-photography projects often highlight three kinds of comparisons.

The first contrasts a demolition site with an official monument. The second contrasts abandoned residential houses with preserved imperial palaces. The third contrasts destruction with construction; rising from the debris of ruined houses are glimmering high-rises of a monotonous, international style.

Zhang’s interest, therefore, lies not simply in representing demolition, but in revealing the different fate of demolished residential houses from buildings that are revered, preserved, and constructed. His photographs thus serve as a bridge from Rong’s urban ruin pictures to another popular subject of experimental Chinese photography in the 1990s—representations of the emerging cityscape, as seen in Yang Yongliang’s representations of southern Chinese cities such as Shenzhen (cat. 73). Li Tianya’s striking triptych Tianyuian Space Station (cat. 49) further demonstrates how the new cityscape can reorient an artist’s point of view and stimulate his imagination. The middle panel of the triptych represents Li standing in front of a modern glass building in central Beijing. His blurry image conceals his identity and the building’s international style omits any local reference—he could be anyone in any city around the world. Following the building’s vertical lines, he raises his head to the sky. The right panel is a microscopic detail from the inside of the human body, infinitely enlarged to resemble a cosmic abyss amidst a galactic nebula. The left panel presents the view of a returning gaze from space—an aerial photograph of Beijing. The white circle on this aerial map indicates where the artist stands in the city and leads the viewer back to the central panel. Once viewed on earth, however, modern Beijing is again stripped of local features and can be imagined as a space station for its inhabitants. In a very different style, Luo Yongjun offers a realistic, cynical view of the new city. Gloomy and depressing, his newly constructed residential buildings appear as abandoned ruins.
Significantly, his rejection of the new city as a promised land has guided him back to the tradition of documentary photography, in which the power of an image must lie in its exploration of truth.

The emerging city attracts experimental photographers not only with its buildings but also with its increasingly heterogeneous population. Hu Jieming’s Legends of 1995–1996 (cat. 42), for example, registers the artist’s fascination with the randomness of urban life. Made of photo transparencies with fragmentary scenes of people and their activities taken from TV and downloaded from the Internet, this installation lead the audience to explore a city by throwing them into a maze. The new Chinese city represents deliberately rebels against its predecessor. Whereas a traditional Chinese city has the typical, orderly image of a chessboardlike space concealed inside a walled enclosure, the new city is sprawling yet three-dimensional, fast and noisy, chaotic and aggressive. It refuses to stay quiet as a passive object of aesthetic appreciation, but demands our participation to appreciate its vitality.

To Chen Shaokai, a member of the avant-garde Big-Tailed Elephant Group in Guangzhou, a heterogeneous city resembles the stage of a plotless tableau; what unites its characters is the place they share. This notion underlies a series of photographs which are conceived and constructed like a series of puppet theaters within the real cityscape. Images in each photograph belong to two detached layers: in front of a large panoramic scene are cut-out miniature passersby, shoppers, and policemen amidst traffic lights, different kinds of vehicles, trees, and anything found along Guangzhou’s streets. These images are crowded into a tight space but do not interact. The mass they form is nevertheless fragmentary, without order, narrative, or a visual focus.

Representing urban spaces and population, Chen’s photos are linked with another popular subject in contemporary Chinese photography—images of a new urban generation, or dusshi yidai in Chinese. Works belonging to this category include Zheng Guogu’s Life and Dreams of Youth of Yangjiang (cat. 79), Yang Fudong’s Don’t Worry It Will Be Better (cat. 71, 72), and Yang Yong’s untitled installation (cat. 73). Instead of portraying the lives of urban youths realistically, these images deliver constructed visual fictions. Each work consists of multiple frames that invite us to read them as a narrative unfolding in time. Indeed, such interest in seriality and storytelling may be linked to contemporary Chinese experimental cinema, especially the “urban generation” films of the late 1990s and early 2000s. But the stories in the photographs remain nonspecific or allegorical. What the artists hope to capture is a certain taste, style, and mood associated with this generation of people, and for this purpose they have created images that are often deliberately trivial and ambiguous. Yang Fudong’s Don’t Worry It Will Be Better, for example, represents a group of fashionable Shanghai yuppies, including a girl and several young men. The pictures resemble film stills, but the plot that connects them remains beyond the viewer’s comprehension.

These images of the urban generation contrast sharply with other photographs in this exhibition, which represent deeper and less glamorous strata of Chinese society. Among these works, Liu Zheng’s series The Chinese (cat. 12–16, 50–54) portrays aged entertainers, female impersonators, traveling troupes in the countryside, and obnoxious entrepreneurs in a dance bar.

Experimental photography owes a great deal to the transformation of the city and the emergence of new urban spaces and lifestyles. But the city also realizes its impact on artists in a reverse way: sometimes the chaos and high pressure associated with urban life drives artists to rediscover and communicate with nature through their art. Thus Song Dong designed and photographed a performance to affix a seal on the surface of a river (cat. 94), and Xiong Wenjun took a long journey to Tibet and photographed what she found on route (cat. 66–69). Still, as experimental artists become self-conscious about their postmodern identities, they can never take such a return to nature at its face value. Song’s obsessive seal-stamping left no impression on the water, and Xiong installed a colorful curtain on the door of each Tibetan house she photographed, to register an intrusion from an outside gaze.

When Nature, Society, and Man was held twenty-five years ago in Beijing, the organizers conceived this exhibition as a new beginning in an unofficial history of Chinese photography that they had embarked on three years earlier. The opening sentences of the introduction to the exhibition express this historical vision:

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
Figure 25

Figure 26
Yan Xucheng, Beijing, photo installation, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia, 1999.

Figure 27
Zhang Dali and his graffiti images in Beijing, 1986.
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 have never succeeded in escaping their political and social context. On the contrary, this exhibition shows how political and social issues have reentered 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.

For example, Wang Zhiping set up a store called Xinyang, which sold art supplies and offered instruction in photography. He also organized several photography exhibitions in China, including the “Shanghai Photography Festival” (1988) and the “China Modern Photography” exhibition (1990). These events were part of the larger trend of experimental art in China during this period. In addition, there were several art magazines and publications that focused on photography, such as the “Photography” magazine, which was published in Shanghai in 1989. These publications played a significant role in promoting the development of experimental photography in China.

For the audience’s reactions to the exhibition, see Ren Shulin, “Yingzhuan shang de wanzan” (Writings in the photographic exhibition), in ibid., 78–84; quotation, 82.

For the most authoritative record of this project is offered by Li Xiaobin himself. See his essay “Guangxi ‘Shangfang zhe’ de shanshi ji qishi” (About photography ‘People Pleading for Justice from the Higher Authorities’ and other matters), Lao zhexiao (Old photos) no. 16, 126–33.

For some of these exhibitions, see Bao Mu (note 16), 63; and see also “Huixing yiyuan wanzhi, xiangsi yiyuan xinren: Wang Zhiping, Peng Zhengge, Shi Baosu tanhua” (An Introspection of the past events—An introduction to a new generation): A conversation featuring Wang Zhiping, Peng Zhengge, and Shi Baosu), in Wang Hezi and He Shanshi, eds., Shanshi dou shi (A collection of papers on the art of photography) (Beijing: Zhongguo shuyan chubanshe, 1994). This section also includes a comprehensive bibliography of Chinese publications on photography from 1919 to 1994. Essays by Bao Kun, Chen Xiaoqin, and Bao Mu in the same anthology are early attempts at an historical narrative of contemporary Chinese photography.

Some Chinese critics have called this type of photography “new documentary photography” (xin jishi shuyan), to distinguish it from Socialist Realist documentary photography promoted by the party. According to Wang Zhiping, an exhibition organized by the Modern Photo Salon in 1986 entitled Flash Back—A Decade of Chinese Photography (Shihian yishu), marked the dominance of documentary photography. See “Huixing yiyuan wanzhi, xiangsi yiyuan xinren: Wang Zhiping, Peng Zhengge, Shi Baosu tanhua” (note 16), 104.

For an introduction to Zhu Xianmin, see Gong Zhiming, “Zhongguo daode shuyan jiedu” (Reading contemporary Chinese photographers) (Shanghai: Zhongguo shuyan chubanshe, 2002), 35–49.

For the audience’s reactions to the exhibition, see Ren Shulin, “Yingzhuan shang de wanzan” (Writings in the photographic exhibition), in ibid., 78–84; quotation, 82.


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I have discussed the concept of "experimental art" in Reinterpretation (note 2), 11-12.

The four Bohemian artists featured in Wu Wenguang's documentary film Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers (1990) include Gao Bo, a representative of emerging "experimental photographers" in the late 1980s.

For this definition of "Chinese photography," see Gu Zheng, "Guannian sheying yu Zhongguo de sheying" (Conceptual photography and "Chinese photography"), in Lo Qi and Guan Yuda, eds., Zhongguo xingwei sheying (Performance photography of China) (Hangzhou: China Academy of Art Press, 2001), 5-10.

This situation changed after 2000, when mainstream museums such as the Shanghai Art Museum and the Guangdong Museum of Art began to include experimental art in their exhibitions. For the changing world of Chinese museums and exhibitions, see Wu Hung, Exhibiting Experimental Art in China (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2000).

For a discussion of this phenomenon, see ibid., 14-18.

The real name of the village is Dashanzhuang. It was demolished in 2001 and 2002 and assimilated into the ever-expanding Chinese capital.

For a history of the East Village, see Wu Hung, Rong Rong's East Village (New York: Chambers Fine Arts, 2003).

For a brief introduction to publications and studies of experimental Chinese art, see Wu Hung, Transience (note 25), 176-79.

Only four issues of this serial have been produced. For the first two issues, twenty copies each were made, and thirty copies were made for each of the last two issues.

This attitude is clearly demonstrated in the introduction to the first issue of New Photo.

For some images by Qiu Zhijie and Mo Yi featured in this exhibition, see Wu Hung, Transience (note 25), pls. 6, 22.

Dao Zi, "Xin yingxiang: Dangdai sheying yishu de guannianhua xianzheng" (New image: Important characteristics of the conceptualization of contemporary photographic art), Xiangdai sheying bao (Modern photography) (1998) 1, 2-13. The same issue also includes the preface of the New Image exhibition written by Dao Zi, 28-30.


For a good discussion of this phenomenon, see Karen Smith, "Zero to Infinity: The Nascence of Photography in Contemporary Chinese Art of the 1990s," in Wu Hung, ed., Reinterpretation (note 2) 35-50, especially 39-41.

For a discussion of this group of photographs, see Wu Hung, "Photographing Deformity: Liu Zheng and His Photographic Series My Countrymen," Public Culture 13, no. 3 (2001), 369-427.


For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Wu Hung, "Contemporaneity in Contemporary Chinese Art," forthcoming.


For a fuller introduction to this project, see Wu Hung, Transience (note 25), 54-59.

Ibid., 58.

For a detailed discussion of Xing Danwen's work, see ibid., 48-53.

Sui Jianguo's letter to the art critic Gu Zhifeng, provided by the artist.

For a fuller introduction to this work, see Wu Hung, Transience (note 25), 60-65.

For an introduction to this project, see Wu Hung, Rong Rong's East Village (note 34).

For an introduction to this controversial exhibition, see Wu Hung, Exhibiting Experimental Art in China (note 31), 204-98.

For a fuller discussion of this project, see Wu Hung, Rong Rong's East Village (note 34), 11-14.

For a discussion of self-portraiture in experimental Chinese art, see Wu Hung, Exhibiting Experimental Art in China (note 31), 108-20.

Shen Jinding, 100 ge yishu/ 100 artist (Faces of 100 artists) (2001). Private publication.

For a discussion of these experiments, see Wu Hung, Transience (note 25), 168-74.


Yongyuan de siyue (note 5), 88.