Disrupting Imaginaries, Continuing Histories: Interrogating the use of the Archive in Contemporary Chinese Photography

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For this essay I will examine how Zhang Dali's 'A Second History' series (2003-2011) and He Bo's 'The Extending Punctums' (2013-2015) use photographic archives in their works to either disrupt lingering political imaginaries or to foster a relationship between the present and the images of the past. I will also aim to interrogate the creation of historical and interpersonal narratives and the relationship between past and present through visual means. These issues will be considered with regards to ideas of the archive, representation, literal and ideological image-making, and the creation of 'micro-histories.'

In 'Global Photographies: Memory - History - Archives,' Michels keenly notes that photographs make claims on being faithful to reality, which is why "photography is a strong tool in the hands of politicians."[1] This is clearly acknowledged by Zhang Dali (b. 1963) in his photography series 'A Second History,' which places official images alongside original photographs in order to makes visible how consciously historical events have been framed and presented by those in authority. In the context of this series, the term 'official' refers to images produced and circulated with a strict propaganda intention, prior to Mao's death in 1976.[2] Zhang embeds photographic archives into the series to underscore how hegemonic impressions of Mao and certain events celebrating him have been consciously conveyed through the specific 'official' compositions. Archives play a pivotal role in excavating the

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[1] Stefanie Michels, "Re-framing Photography: Some Thoughts," in *Global Photographies: Memory - History - Archives*, ed. Sissy Helff and Stefanie Michels (Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2018) 10.

[2] Wu Hung, *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video From China,* (New York: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago ; International Center of Photography, 2004.) 11.

realities of images, and allows historians (and in this case, artists) to "unearth stories that need to be added to the history of photography."[3]

Zhang's careful juxtaposition of images highlights the visual facets and ideological intentions of image-making, and what historical truths have been concealed in the process of creating an imaginary. The combination of an original photograph and an edited photograph based off the original also calls to mind the concept of the 'meta-photograph,' the purpose of which is to explain the staging and "self-knowledge" of pictures as visual constructions of events.[4]

For example, 'Chairman Mao at Xiyuan Airport, Beijing, 1949' **(Fig 1.)** consists of two photographs: a 'top' edited image portraying Mao as the composition's key focus as he stands up on a vehicle against an idyllic pale-blue sky, and a 'bottom' original image where Mao is no longer the central focus, and a large vehicle takes up more than half the composition. A quick glance at the two photographs reveals that the 'top' image is a cropped and heavily edited version of the 'bottom' image, as the 'top' image has a vehicle—a symbol of excess— and any soldiers or weapons present in the background of the 'bottom' image. This comparison calls into question certain elements of the 'bottom' image have been removed, and how this contest grand, visual narrative of Mao to the viewer. Mainly, the removal of the most of the vehicle prevents Mao from being associated with material excess, and the complete erasure of soldiers and weapons staves off any violent perceptions of the leader. Instead, the 'top' image's Mao-centric composition imparts a sense of grandeur and leadership, and further imparts a sense of positivity and halcyon through the addition of a pale-blue sky as a background; a stark contrast to potential reading of Mao as an aggressor, as presented the original, 'bottom' black-and-white image.

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[3] Michels, *Global Photographies,* 10.

[4] Gu Zheng, *Contemporary Chinese Photography,* (Harrow: CYPI Press, 2011) 316.

Another set of images featuring 'Mao Zedong on an Airplane to Chongqing for a negotiation, August 27, 1945' **(Fig. 2)** presents Mao as a cheerful, individual leader. Following the same format as the Xiyuan Airport piece, the 'top' image features Mao smiling with a vehicle and blue skies in the background, with his arm outstretched and holding onto a Western-style hat. There seems to be a sense of candidness to this image at first, as implied by the dynamism of the moment where Mao removes his hat and raises it to the air: a moment of excitement and positivity prior to political negotiations.

However, the 'bottom' black-and-white image disrupts these ideas as it reveals a man on Mao's left hand side, who is absent in the 'top' image. It is likely that this man was Patrick J. Hurley, an American ambassador who was sent to Chongqing to facilitate negotiations between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party after the Second World War.[5] The historical context of Chongqing in 1945 proves crucial in understanding the reason why the 'top' image promote such a brave and cheerful perception of Mao. While Mao was not yet in charge of the CCP in 1945, and only rose to the position of Chairman in 1949, one can assume that if the 'top' image was circulated after 1949, it was to enforce an optimistic image of Mao, and therefore by extension, his regime.

Furthermore, it is interesting to consider as to why Hurley was originally in the photograph with Mao: historic sources mention that Mao had a fear of flying, and actually requested Hurley to fly with him.[6] Whether or not this is true, there still remains the intention to visually obscure the knowledge that Hurley accompanied Mao. Instead, the edited 'top' photograph promotes Mao as a independent individual who did not require anyone's assistance, and this is blatantly highlighted through the complete removal of Hurley from the composition.

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[5] Jane Perlez, "In Heat of August 1945: Mao and Chiang Met for the Last Time" *The New York Times,* November 4, 2015. Accessed April 19, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/05/world/asia/the-last-time-mao-and-chiang-met.html

[6] Ibid.

While it is difficult to assess to what extent either of the images have been circulated and consumed, it can be understood that the original photographs have been edited (either through erasing figures, the addition of colour or a change in composition) in order to market to the public a friendly and non-violent perception of Mao. Not only does 'A Second History' reveal the authority's ability to control how the masses receive history, the series also invites the viewer to reconsider how "imaginaries could be constructed, established, circulated and reformed."[7] Fundamentally, the series effectively disrupts the political imaginary of Mao as a cheerful and peaceful leader by highlighting how consciously images have been edited to construct such positive narratives.

On the other hand, He Bo's 'The Extending Punctums' (2013-2015) foregrounds the "viewer's activeness"[8] and sense of continuing history by involving viewers in his threefold creative process. Firstly, He selects a picture from his collection of vernacular photographs, which are the types of domestic records made or bought by everyday people.[9] He is keen to use a photograph which contains many 'punctums,' what Barthes calls the detail which immediately catches the viewer's eye upon the first viewing.[10] Secondly, the practitioner circulates the photograph to his friends via e-mail or Wechat, and asks them to note and write down their 'punctums' onto the photograph. Finally, he compiles all the text onto a single image via Photoshop, which results in the vernacular photograph being overlayed with the various people's first impressions. With text of all shapes and sizes on a single image, the collection of photographs is visually striking, and through including text written by people of the present day, the vernacular photograph is inextricably propelled into the contemporary age.

7 Beatriz Hernández & Tânia Ganito, "On Imagination and the City: Interview with Zhang Dali" in *Diffractions Issue 5* (Fall 2015) Accessed April 15, 2019. https://lisbonconsortium.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/interview_zhang-dali.pdf

8 He Bo, "The Extending Punctums," Accessed April 17, 2019 https://hebo.photography/the-extending-punctums/lea9qoyce7hdqdwzxnz168hffpu68v

9 Marine Cabos-Brullé, "He Bo," in *Photography of China*. Accessed April 17, 2019. http://photographyofchina.com/blog/he-bo

10 He Bo, "The Extending Punctums."

Each of the 11 triptychs which makes up the series can be considered in its own right a 'micro-history,' as defined by Wu Hung to be a personalised, unsystematic historical accounts, as constructed by the use of old pictures.[11] For example, Image 11.0 **(Fig.3)** presents a sepia-toned vernacular image of a man kissing a woman's left cheek. The woman is presented in a 3/4 pose and her eyes are wide-open in shock at the man's actions. Her mouth agape, she does not smile, but holds has her right hand intertwined with that of the man. The woman's shocked expression alone is enough to make any viewer stop and consider the seemingly strange circumstances under which the photograph was taken, and Image 11.1 **(Fig. 4)**, which features a multitude of written 'punctums,' addresses many of these potential concerns.

What is intriguing about the written 'punctums' is that while they encapsulate the viewer's first impressions of the vernacular image, many of the 'punctums' draw on the viewer's own personal experiences. For example, while there are phrases and questions that closely pertain to the composition's potential context, such as "Proposal?" or "If she is being kissed, why is her expression like this?," there are a much more visceral and open-ended responses, such as "You look like someone I really despise" and "She and I have already left."[12] These latter statements undoubtedly poignantly "prick" and "bruise," and are effects Barthes states 'punctums' have.[13] Embedding responses from a contemporary audience not only propels the vernacular images into the consciousness of the present, but also reveals the potential for images of the past to be represented and understood through the concerns of another time.

In this light, Image 11.1 and the rest of the 'The Extending Punctums' series clearly reflects how the process of question-asking has been externally expressed and made visible through the inclusion of text. Furthermore, the layering of contemporary text and past images

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[11] Wu Hung, *Zooming in: Histories of Photography in China* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016) 231.

[12] Original Chinese text written on Image 11.1 include "求婚？" "如果是吻她，为什么女人的表情这样?" "你长得真像我十分讨厌的一个人," and "我和他已经离了。"

[13] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida:Reflections on Photography,* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 27.

also creates dialogue between the composition of past vernacular photographs and the viewers of the present, and thus continues the moment captured in those vernacular images.

Ultimately, comparing Zhang's 'A Second History' and He's 'The Extending Punctums' reveals the various ways photographic archives have been integrated into contemporary photography in order to interrogate the relationship between the past and the present, and how people of the present relate to representations of the past. In juxtaposing original photographs with edited 'official' ones, 'A Second History' effectively disrupts the of Mao's political imaginary through revealing the visual processes which construct it, while 'The Extending Punctums' involves engaging a contemporary audience with vernacular photographs from a bygone era in order to facilitate an ongoing dialogue between the past and the present.

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List of Images

Fig. 1. Zhang Dali. *Chairman Mao at Xiyuan Airport, Beijing, March 1949* 2003-2011. Gelatin silver prints, photo mechanical reproductions and typewritten text, 45 1/4 x 24 13/16" (115 x 63 cm). Courtesy the artist and Eli Klein Fine Art, New York. © 2011 Zhang Dali. Image from: https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/newphotography/zhang-dali/chairmanmao-at-xiyuan-airport-beijing-march-1949/index.html
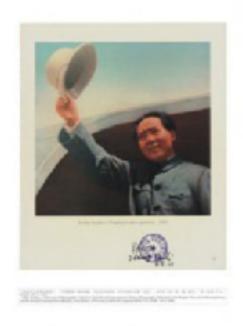

Fig. 2. Zhang Dali, *Mao Zedong on an Airplane to Chongqing for a Negotiation, August 27th, 1945*. 2003-2011. Gelatin silver prints, photo mechanical reproductions and typewritten text, 45 1/4 x 24 13/16" (115 x 63 cm). Courtesy the artist and Eli Klein Fine Art, New York. © 2011 Zhang Dali. Image from: https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/newphotography/zhang-dali/mao-zedong-on-an-airplane-to-chongqing-for-a-negotiation-august-27th-1945/index.html

Fig. 3. He Bo, Image 11.0, from *A Series of Punctums, 2013-2015*. Vernacular photograph archive, photo reproductions and digitised handwritten text. Image from: https://hebo.photography/the-extending-punctums/5n0fq7vatz0dn8blqwpaiay30znan0

Fig. 4. He Bo, 11.1, from *A Series Punctums, 2013-2015*. Image of Vernacular photograph archive, photo reproductions and digitised handwritten text. Here, the text, or 'punctums,' written by He's friends have been integrated into the image through Photoshop. Image from: https://hebo.photography/the-extending-punctums/4qy430bumu42w1qfogys4dsuoyh6pc