

Art in America | Xueli Wang | December 2018

p. 64-69, "China's Photographic Memory"

UVM: 45,000

Not available online

CHINA'S PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORY

**Despite today's social-media image profusion,
key Chinese photographers still value
materiality, physical space, and the camera's
links to a vanishing collective past.**

by Xueli Wang

Cai Dongdong:
Barrier, 2018,
gelatin silver print,
16½ by 15 inches.
Courtesy Eli Klein
Gallery, New York.

AROUND 2012, the photographer Cai Dongdong lost interest in making new images. By then, he had been taking photographs for fifteen years, first as an official portraitist in the People's Liberation Army in the late 1990s, and then as an artist in Beijing, where his work evolved from evocative black-and-white snapshots to carefully staged scenes, featuring mirrors and camera lenses, which probe the nature of the medium itself.

In the early 2000s, before emerging as a rising star in contemporary Chinese photography, Cai had a particular hunger for new images. Rent was negligible then in the Songzhuang art colony outside Beijing, where Cai roamed freely with his camera. "During that period, I only had a Contax T3 clipped to my waist, taking photographs wherever I went," he recalled in 2017. "There wasn't much of an art scene or art market. Our village didn't even have restaurants."¹

But over time, something shifted in Cai's relationship to photography. "I'm no longer so interested in the photograph directly as artwork," he told me recently. "Nowadays everyone takes photographs, so there can no longer be any distinct perspective."² Beneath this observation of the medium's ubiquity lies a deeper lament: in their profusion, photographs may have lost their hold over the past, lost their evocative power over memory.

This can be gleaned from Cai's recent turn toward archival and found photographs, and his careful attention to their materiality. He folds, cuts, curls, and rubs these nearly forgotten images, and sometimes even attaches three dimensional objects

to the pictures, extending them into real space and giving them a second life as what he calls "photo sculptures."³

A few such works were on display this past summer in the survey exhibition "Ten Directions" at Beijing's Three Shadows Photography Art Centre. *Barrier* (2018) features a folded middle section that sticks out, creating a literal "barrier" between the photograph's two human subjects; in *Rolled Road* (2015), a sliver of the image has been cut out and curled to leave a blank space in the shape of a winding road; in *Moved Moon* (2015), a hole punched in the print serves as the double of a full moon that shines nearby. In a wall-text statement, Cai described these manipulations as a "surgery on the pictures," intended to meld real and photographed space.

Cai's play with space is especially striking in the installation *Night* (2018), his most elaborate work in "Ten Directions." Over a thousand small black-and-white photographs line the glass panels of a folding screen. The images are imperfect—some out of focus, some crookedly shot, some underexposed or washed out—and their subjects are unassuming: modestly dressed men and women pose before scenic sites; children, couples, and families smile or gaze out dreamily.

Taken with 35mm film cameras, these small photographs were printed directly from the negative without enlargement—a common, low-cost format in late 1970s and '80s China. They bear the physical traces of time, with yellowed and frayed edges, creases, and stains. Some have hand-scrawled notes on the

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Cai Dongdong:
Night, 2018, found
photographs, folding
screen, table,
mirror, and camera
lens, 6½ by 6½ by
6½ feet.



back—visible through the other side of the glass panel—disclosing names, dates, and dedications in faded ink.

Once precious momentos, the photographs have now been abandoned, perhaps outliving their owners. Cai collects these expired possessions, rescuing them from antique shops, recycling stations, and dumpsters all over the country. Displayed together in the open space of the gallery, they had a startlingly intimate effect. Each imperfect image unlocks a moment in a particular life, which has likely since disappeared or become

radically different. By assembling them inside a piece of furniture, Cai emphasizes their lingering presence in everyday life, and allows the past to take shape and occupy physical space.

Facing the folding screen a few feet away was the rest of Cai's installation: a round desk mirror propped on a stool, with a camera lens protruding through the glass. This reflexive reference to photography is less interesting than the domestic space opened up between folding screen and mirror. "There's a sense of human presence," Cai remarked of this space, "as if there's someone living there, getting dressed behind the screen or doing their makeup before the mirror. . . . A sculpturized photograph is no longer just a surface, but a place."

This emphasis on an embodied and transportive experience suggests Cai's desire to return to an older, now waning, relationship to photography. As remnants of a past era, the small portraits in *Night* also anchor us to this older relationship: photographs as scarce, physical containers of memory, and not, as they have become in the age of social media, an infinite stream of short-lived, virtual scenes that substitute for current reality itself. Cai, whose career matured during the transition from analog to digital photography, has always preferred to work with film cameras. "Digital cameras have no sense of life," he told me.

In addition to highlighting the digital turn, Cai's preoccupation with old images reflects the fraught relationship between photography and memory in recent Chinese history. Under Mao, most photographs were carefully composed to reflect state ideology, depicting happy soldiers, workers, and farmers in a collectivist utopia. They amounted to what the theorist Gu Zheng calls a kind of "false history," overwriting private memory.⁴ After Mao's death in 1976, documentary photographers began to depict social and historical truths left out of the official narrative, opening up a restorative space for remembrance and reflection.

"Photography is not just about looking, sometimes it is also about resisting forgetfulness," remarked the photojournalist He Yanguang, who documented the rehabilitation of persecuted cadres and intellectuals after the Cultural Revolution, among other previously restricted subjects.⁵ Li Xiaobin, who photographed quotidian scenes in 1980s China, defended his apparently plain style by noting presciently: "This [period's] particular look is different from what has gone before and from what is to come. . . . If we cannot capture it with our cameras in a timely manner we will be creating a gap in our history, creating a loss that is difficult to make up."⁶

In the 1990s, photography also played a vital role in preserving traces of rapidly disappearing structures in China, as Deng Xiaoping's policies of economic reform and opening up swiftly advanced massive demolition and construction projects. Xu Yong, for example, photographed many of the *hutong* alleys of Beijing before they were razed to make room for high-rises. Zhang Dali recorded countless buildings, many only half-standing, spray-painted with his own profile and/or the sign for imminent knock-down. Hai Bo duplicated Cultural Revolution-era group portraits with the now aged original subjects. Chen Qulin staged costumed performances at construction sites or in her remote and nearly abandoned hometown. Rong Rong, chronicler of Beijing's bohemian East Village scene of the early 1990s, also documented half-demolished houses in the city, treating former social and domestic spaces as ruins.



Xu Yong: *Willow Alley Hutong*, 1989, black-and-white photograph, 41 3/8 by 57 inches. Courtesy Hua.

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In 2007, Rong Rong and his partner, Inri, founded Three Shadows, the first independent photography exhibition space in China. "Ten Directions" was organized on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Three Shadows annual photography award, and Cai was featured alongside thirty-seven other artists—all past prize contenders, including this year's winner, Wang Tuo. On full display in this sprawling survey were the wide-ranging formats, techniques, and materials, as well as the intellectual and aesthetic concerns, that have animated Chinese photography over the last decade. Some notable trends included a focus on feminism and gender, as in pictures by Luo Yang, Liang Xiu, and Wang Lin; conceptual abstraction, exemplified in works by Luo Dan and Shen Linghao; and experiments with digital media, as in the 3D animation video of Zhang Wenxin.

THE MOST COMPELLING works in "Ten Directions," however, came from artists who seem to have inherited the pre-occupation with cultural memory so potent in the photographs of Rong Rong and others of the previous decades. Traces of this theme can be felt in the works of Zhang Kechun and Yan Wang Preston, who each document the dramatic transformation of landscape and built space in present-day China, to disquieting effect. It is in the work of Du Yanfang, however, that the theme of memory finds its most luminous distillation, in part because Du, like Cai, goes beyond the purely photographic approach of older artists, even as she shares their yearning for continuity between past and future.

In her essay for the "Ten Directions" exhibition catalogue, art critic Karen Smith observes: "Many photographers today are not 'looking' in quite the same way, or with the same type of goals, that underscored the use of a camera, a lens, by photographers through the twentieth century."⁷ Life in China these days no longer lacks visual documentation, as smartphone photos overrun WeChat and other social media platforms daily. Nevertheless, these images, produced and disseminated instantaneously, do not conjure the past so much as flow ceaselessly alongside, or in place of, the present.

As China undergoes yet more large-scale urbanization, with poor rural communities uprooted to become "floating" migrants in megacities, photographic representation alone is no longer enough to preserve a sense of sustained rapport with the past. How then can photography help memory endure in the midst of this convulsive change?

Du offers a kind of answer in her two series "Dialogue" (2015) and "Breaking In" (2016), both of which feature a marvelous superimposition of photography and Chinese ink painting. The titles and compositions of "Dialogue" evoke a sense of familial intimacy and melancholy homesickness. In *The Riverbank by Sister's House*, a little girl stands alone on the side of an unpaved road, gazing down at a puddle at her feet. The road is deserted, containing only withered grass and barren trees. Off in the distance, another lone figure gazes in the opposite direction, presumably toward the river in the title.



Tuo Wang: *The Interrogation*, 2017, video, 18 minutes, 35 seconds.

This otherwise forlorn photograph is brightened by the addition of a group of three figures, rendered in watery colored ink. A mother, father, and child pose together, a few steps away from the solitary girl in the foreground. Their contours are soft and incomplete, with different colors melting together, as though on the verge of dissolving. The familial closeness of this group exists in tension with the isolation of the two photographed figures, creating a poignant sense of dissonance.

Du Yanfang: *Breaking In 10*, 2016, giclée print, 39% by 31½ inches.

Other works from "Dialogue" on view—*Grandpa's Peach Blossom*, *Grandma's Vegetable Field*, and *Childhood House*—similarly juxtapose lone figures or deserted rural spaces with painted family portraits that evoke a simpler, livelier time. Each image is produced from two layers: the painted group portrait, in Chinese ink wash and color, and the photograph, taken on a large-format film camera. Du scans and digitally superimposes the two to form a single giclée print.

When asked about the title of her series, Du explained: "Dialogue" uses family as a connecting thread. . . . [It] is a dialogue between reality and memory."⁸ The two sides of this dialogue can be mapped on the two layers of each image. The photographic layer, clear and immediate, seems to embody present reality, while the painted layer possesses the elusiveness of memory. The dissonance between them suggests the loss of family and community experienced by China's rural population.

Du herself is no stranger to this loss. Born in Baiduyao, a rural village in Hunan province, she was raised by her grandparents in the countryside while her parents worked in faraway factories, coming home only once a year. As she grew older, Du, too, moved away to more urban areas, first for fifth grade, then for high school, and finally for college at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, from which she graduated in 2011. "With every move, the distance widened between me and my home," Du recounted. "The superficial city felt cold, while every tree and blade of grass in my village lingered in my mind and my dreams."⁹

In 2015, "Dialogue" became the latest of several projects for which Du returned to Baiduyao to capture the places of her childhood. Instead of documenting only with a camera, Du opted for a more hybrid approach, using painting to give form to the people, relationships, and atmospheres no longer present, and to highlight the subjective associations that permeate the physical spaces left behind. This hybrid form was, for Du, a more robust container of memory than photography alone.¹⁰

If the layers of painting and photography remain disparate in "Dialogue," they merge to become nearly indistinguishable in "Breaking In." The prints in this series show abandoned luxury residences populated by country folk—migrant workers, according to Du's artist statement: "When walking through the city, we often stumble upon beautiful





Du Yanfang:
Grandpa's Peach Blossom, from the series "Dialogue," 2015, giclée print, 39 3/4 by 31 1/2 inches.

abandoned villas. For those of us who have come from outside the city, these abandoned homes are still untouchable, ideal dream houses." In the ethereal fantasy world of "Breaking In," migrants trespass and roam freely in these "dream houses."

In one image, translucent, simply rendered figures—children, parents, and grandparents—loiter about the front yard of a Western-style mansion. In the foreground, the withered grass has been colored a lush, surreal violet. The air is festive, as if the families dislocated and dispersed in "Dialogue" had reunited in some utopian afterlife. In another work, children and young couples with umbrellas stroll through the inner courtyard of a condominium complex. The image almost resembles an advertisement for luxury housing, except that the complex features a large pit overgrown with weeds and a spectral glow emanating from the surrounding buildings.

These surreal compositions evoke the dual phenomena of China's migrant worker growth—which reached 281 million in 2016, equivalent to more than two thirds of the total US population—and the rise of what has been called "ghost cities" in China: luxury developments built in urban outskirts that have thus far failed to attract residents. To accentuate the haunted quality of this uninhabited architecture, Du added a third layer to "Breaking In," overlaying each photograph with its negative to create a ghostly, double-exposure effect.

The photograph, thus manipulated, becomes untethered from reality. "Breaking In" goes beyond the chronological binary of "Dialogue" to open up a soft permeability between photography and painting—at times it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins—and along with it, a lovely porousness between reality and memory. Palpable in these images is an aching empathy for the countless souls

adrift in China's factories, construction sites, and service sector. Du, who nearly followed her parents' footsteps to become a migrant worker herself, here paints a lyrical vision of their unfulfilled yearning for home.

Like Cai's photo sculptures, Du's photo-painting hybrids can be understood as a strategy for working through the irreconcilability between China's past and present, and for countering the amnesiac effect of both aggressive urban development and endless digital image flow. These works are part of an ongoing effort among Chinese artists to restore photography's diminishing power over memory, and preserve a sense of existential wholeness in the midst of China's breakneck transformation. ○

1. Quoted in Wanjuan Xu, "Cai Dongdong: Searching for a Way Out, A Kind of Delight" (interview with Cai Dongdong in Chinese), ifeng.com, June 11, 2017; my translation.

2. Unless otherwise noted, quotes from Cai Dongdong are translated from my interview with the artist, Aug. 13, 2018.

3. Quoted in Wanjuan Xu, "Cai Dongdong: Searching for a Way Out, A Kind of Delight."

4. Gu Zheng, *Contemporary Chinese Photographic Arts*, Beijing, People's Publishing House, p. 5.

5. He Yanguang quoted in Claire Roberts, *Photography and China*, London, Reaktion Books, 2012, p. 127.

6. Li Xiaobin, *ibid.*, pp. 135–36.

7. Karen Smith, "Ten Years of TSPA: Photography in 2018; A Sea-Change in Image-Making," 2018. The original English version of Karen Smith's catalogue essay for "Ten Directions" was sent to me by the Three Shadows publicist; it is translated into Chinese in the catalogue.

8. Artist statement, emailed to me by Du Yanfang; translation mine.

9. Du Yanfang, "A Brief Introduction to the Female Photographer Du Yanfang," ed. by Min Chengbei, *vision.xitek.com*, Apr. 19, 2013; translation mine.

10. Stephanie Thiedig, "Du Yanfang: From the Countryside to the World," *Confucius Institute Magazine*, Chinese-German edition, issue no. 4, September 2014, *cin.chinesecio.com*; translation mine.