

[Vivid Tones \(/features/26290/Vivid Tones\)](#)

Ready, Aim, Click: The Artist Reframing China's Modern History

After five years in the military, Cai Dongdong gave himself a new mission: exploring the country's relationship with its past through contemporary art.



https://www.facebook.com/dialog/share?app_id=774535149382673&display=popup&href=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sixthtone.com%2Fnews%2F1006170%2Fready%2C-aim%2C-click-the-artist-reframing-chinas-modern-history&redirect_uri=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sixthtone.com%2Fnews%2F1006170%2Fready%2C-aim%2C-click-the-artist-reframing-chinas-modern-history



<https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sixthtone.com%2Fnews%2F1006170%2Fready%252C-aim%252C-click-the-artist-reframing-chinas-modern-history&text=Ready%2C%20Aim%2C%20Click%3A%20The%20Artist%20Reframing%20China%E2%80%99s%20Modern%20History%20-%20SixthTone.com>



<https://plus.google.com/share?url=http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006170/ready%2C-aim%2C-click-the-artist-reframing-chinas-modern-history>



<http://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?mini=true&url=http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006170/ready%2C-aim%2C-click-the-artist-reframing-chinas-modern-history&title=Ready, Aim, Click: The Artist Reframing China's Modern History>



whatsapp

[Shi Yangkun \(/users/1000930/shi-yangkun\)](#)

A female guerrilla fighter lays sprawled on the ground, staring down the barrel of a rifle. She looks calm, but intent on eliminating her enemies. The perfect soldier.

To her right, however, stands a mirror at an angle, duplicating the image. The target the woman is aiming at is herself.

It's a neat visual trick typical of Cai Dongdong — the soldier-turned-artist who has spent years finding creative ways to undermine ideological propaganda.



An artist finds traces of ideology on Chinese faces throughout the past century in his 600,000-strong photo collection. Produced in partnership with Yitiao.tv

Born into a military family in China's northwestern Gansu province, Cai has always been a free spirit, seemingly allergic to any form of collective discipline.

At age 17, he and a friend decided they were sick of school and rode their bicycles to Highway 312 — the cross-country road that runs to eastern Shanghai. Over the next six months, the pair traveled over 1,200 kilometers to Shijiazhuang in the northern Hebei province, before eventually returning home.

After this escapade — which was actually Cai's second escape from Gansu — his parents lost patience. Seeing that years spent living in close proximity to the military had failed to tame their son's rebellious streak, the family decided to give him a dose of the real thing.

“

I had some freedom in the army ... I could read photography books in the politics classes

- Cai Dongdong, artist

↳

avascript

rigorous training.

In late 1996, the adolescent left home for the Lanzhou Military Region, to begin his career in the People's Liberation Army. For the next few years, he had to adjust to 6 a.m. starts and

”

"The military is a collective lifestyle — no one can be exceptional," Cai recalls. "After three months, you'll get used to it. Otherwise, you can't survive."

Life in the army was a source of his later artistic career. In camp, he taught himself photography and got appointed as a propaganda officer. Soon, he was skilled enough to complete portraits of 200 troops in a single day.

"In the late '90s, it was an era of reform and opening," Cai tells Sixth Tone. "I had some freedom in the army. For example, I could read photography books in the politics classes."

While still enlisted, Cai began a correspondence course in photography at the Beijing Film Academy to further his skills. Then, in 2001, he left his regiment and moved to the Chinese capital to try and make it as an artist.

According to Cai, his military comrades were slightly bemused by his decision, but they wished him well. He didn't tell his parents about his plans.

Living as a drifter in Beijing, he made money by photographing others. He made his first connections in the art world through this work, but his lack of an artistic education was holding him back.



"Rolled Road," 2014. Courtesy of Cai Dongdong

"I met some artists and photographed paintings, sculptures, performance art, and things like that," says Cai. "I yearned for the lives of those artists."

Through the '00s, Cai began immersing himself in books on Western art history and postmodern cultural theory. This research eventually led him to his first creative breakthrough.

Cai decided to make a series of works that combined photography and classic Western paintings. The clash of the two media allowed him to create unexpected new meanings — a useful technique for someone with a lifelong suspicion of overly pious propaganda.

This flash of inspiration produced "The Eighth of the Twelfth Lunar Month" — the work that first brought Cai to the attention of the Chinese art world.

The staged photograph is a deliberate echo of Spanish painter Goya's famous work "The Third of May, 1808," which memorialized the civilians shot and killed during Madrid's Dos de Mayo Uprising against Napoleonic France.



Top: "The Eighth of the Twelfth Lunar Month," 2008. Courtesy of Cai Dongdong; Bottom: "The Third of May, 1808," by Francisco Goya, 1814. From Wikipedia

In Cai's reworking of the scene, a group of Kuomintang soldiers prepare to execute two prisoners on a gravel beach. To the right, however, we can see another figure — a photographer. Like the soldiers, this person is also preparing to shoot.

According to Cai, a quote from the writer Susan Sontag gave him the idea for the image: "Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder — a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time."

Cai spent two weeks and around 30,000 yuan (then \$4,000) — nearly his entire life savings — shooting the scene in 2008. But it proved to be the springboard for his artistic career. Over the following months, he created several other well-known pieces playing on paintings from the Western artistic canon, including "Giving," "Bed," and "The Grid of Nine Paintings."



Left: "Giving," 2009. Courtesy of Cai Dongdong; Right: "The Milkmaid," by Johannes Vermeer. From Wikipedia

After his daughter's birth in 2013, Cai's career entered a new phase. He began spending more time at home, where he developed an obsession with old photos.

Over the years, he had accumulated trunks filled with historical images — personal photos, magazine portraits, as well as masses of party-commissioned shots. True to form, he decided to doctor them, to insert his own meanings into the images.

One notable work from this period is "Shooting Practice," the duplicated portrait of the guerrilla soldier. In another, "Off the Target," Cai uses a posed propaganda photo showing a soldier pointing at a target, while a crowd of people to his right listen attentively. The artist, however, has inserted an arrow to the right of the bull's eye — aiming directly at the spectators.

“

It's very difficult to be the person you want to be.

- Cai Dongdong, artist

“
‘javascript’

“My work mainly focuses on the action in the photos, but it's actually ... a loosening of the ideology,” says Cai. “We still have that kind of collectivist ideology today, which hasn't changed at all. It's just that the economic development of the past 30 years has covered it.”

“ Photos taken during the '60s and '70s, which tended to be highly posed and political, were particularly easy to manipulate, according to Cai.

“After the '80s and '90s, it's not easy to doctor them,” says Cai. “Because of

‘reform and opening-up,’ social life became more complex and the pictures are also more complicated.”

Later, Cai began focusing on more personal images. He sorted through thousands of black-and-white portraits, and he started to notice how people from the same time period had quite literally let their hair down, their hair being a metaphor for how they chose to pose for a family photo.

“During the Republic of China period, people had a special attitude, and their hair was full of product,” says Cai. “People from the '50s to the '80s looked more serious. From 1980 to 2010, after the ‘reform and opening-up’ policies began, people started to look more vivacious.”



Details of "A Hundred Years," 2019. Courtesy of Cai Dongdong via Yitiao

Cai inserted hundreds of these portraits into acrylic boxes and strung them up like partition screens. Each screen represents a certain era, spanning a century of Chinese history: 1910-1950, 1950-1980, and 1980-2010. When the viewer passes through the partitions, it's like wandering through the past.

"It's very difficult to be the person you want to be; it's more about how the times have shaped you," says Cai. "I've also been entangled by the times."

Cai acknowledges he was fortunate to become a photographer just as China's contemporary art scene began to flourish, allowing him to "ride the wave." Yet this artistic movement has always been fragile, at risk of being crushed by the shifting tectonic plates of Chinese history.

Over the past 10 years, Cai has seen four of his Beijing studios demolished amid the capital's breakneck redevelopment. After each round of demolitions, artists are pushed further and further outside the city center. The cultural atmosphere in the capital, meanwhile, feels tenser than when his artistic career began, Cai says.



1/5 "Stalking," 2019. Courtesy of Cai Dongdong

"I've always been in a guerrilla mindset," says Cai. "Beijing has become an increasingly strange place for me."

For Cai, the future of Chinese art looks increasingly uncertain. He wonders what the changing global situation will mean for him and his colleagues.



Today, we're heading into a tense era. It seems inevitable.

- Cai Dongdong, artist

"The prosperity of Chinese contemporary art over the past 20 years was closely related to the 'reform and opening-up' movement," he says. "If economic exchanges begin to weaken ... I worry contemporary art here will gradually disappear."



Sadly, however, Cai recognizes there's little he can do about this. "Today, we're heading into a tense era. It seems inevitable. The train is already on the track; it can only follow it."

There's at least some light at the end of the tunnel, however. After nearly a year of cancelled exhibitions due to the pandemic, Cai is now in Germany, where he'll be exhibiting his work in a gallery in Frankfurt. For the following months, he plans to travel across the country, preparing a series of shows. "To the future, there must be hope," he says. "Otherwise, life would be quite boring."

Additional reporting: Ding Yining; translator: Matt Turner; editor: Dominic Morgan.

(Header image: "The Eighth of the Twelfth Lunar Month," 2008. Courtesy of Cai Dongdong)



(https://www.facebook.com/dialog/share?

app_id=774535149382673&display=popup&href=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sixthtone.com%2Fnews%2F1006170%2Fready%2C-aim%2C-click-the-artist-reframing-chinas-modern-history%3A%2F%2Fwww.sixthtone.com%2Fnews%2F1006170%2Fready%2C-aim%2C-click-the-artist-reframing-chinas-modern-history)



https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sixthtone.com%2Fnews%2F1006170%2Fready%2C-aim%2C-click-the-artist-reframing-chinas-modern-history%3A%2F%2Fwww.sixthtone.com%2Fnews%2F1006170%2Fready%2C-aim%2C-click-the-artist-reframing-chinas-modern-history&text=Ready%2C%20Aim%2C%20Click%3A%20The%20Artist%20Reframing%20China%E2%80%99s%20Modern%20History%20by%20SixthTone)



(https://plus.google.com/share?url=http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006170/ready%2C-aim%2C-click-the-artist-reframing-chinas-modern-history)



(http://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?mini=true&url=http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006170/ready%2C-aim%2C-click-the-artist-reframing-chinas-modern-history&title=Ready, Aim, Click: The Artist Reframing China's Modern History)



javascript:

YOU MAY ALSO LIKE



[China's Most Famous Disabled Poet Gives Raw Interview on Love, Lust](#)
 (/news/1006177/chinas-most-famous-disabled-poet-gives-raw-interview-on-love%2C-lust)

[Attack on Chongqing 'Chengguan' Was Self-Defense, Police Say](#)
 (/news/1006178/attack-on-chongqing-chengguan-was-self-defense%2C-police-say)



['Devils' on the Silver Screen](#)
 (/news/1006166/devils-on-the-silver-screen)

[Guizhou Court Holds Man Who Fed Stray Dog Liable for Dog's Actions](#)
 (/news/1006171/guizhou-court-holds-man-who-fed-stray-dog-liable-for-dogs-actions)

FOLLOW US



<https://www.facebook.com/sixthtone>



<https://twitter.com/sixthtone>



<https://www.instagram.com/sixthtone>



[/](#)



[/rss](#)

ABOUT SIXTH TONE

[About Us](#) (/about-us) | [Contribute](#) (/contribute) | [Join Us](#) (/join-us) | [Research](https://interaction.sixthtone.com/fellowship/) (https://interaction.sixthtone.com/fellowship/) | [Contact Us](#) (/contact-us) | [Terms Of Use](#) (/terms-use) | [Privacy Policy](#) (/privacy-policy) | [Sitemap](#) (/sitemap)

Subscribe to our newsletter

Enter your email here >

By signing up, you agree to our [Terms Of Use](#) (/terms-use)