

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power

edited by Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi,
Andrea Missaglia, Maria Novella Tavano

The Power of Contemporary Chinese Photography

Capturing Moments, Shaping Perspectives

Sen Fu

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract China's contemporary photography scene has witnessed a remarkable growth and transformation over the past few decades. With its rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and rapidly changing society, China has become a fertile ground for photographers to explore and capture the essence of the present moment. This article will delve into the world of contemporary Chinese photography, highlighting its unique characteristics and notable photographers. Contemporary Chinese photography emerged as a distinct art form in the 1990s, coinciding with China's economic reforms and the country's opening up to the global stage. This period of societal transformation provided photographers with a wealth of subjects to document, ranging from the effects of urbanization to social and political issues. Chinese photographers began to experiment with different styles, techniques, and themes, pushing the boundaries of traditional documentary photography.

Keywords Contemporary Chinese Photography. Chinese Society. Social Issues. Educational System. Pandemic. Materialism. Traditional Chinese Cultural Aesthetics. Northern Series. Southern Series. Passersby.

Summary 1 Introduction to Wang Qingsong. - 2 Wang Qingsong's Iconic Works. - 3 Evolution of Wang Qingsong's Artistry. - 4 Introduction to Hai Bo's Photography. - 5 Themes in Hai Bo's Works. - 6 Conclusion.



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Quaderni di Venezia Arti 7

e-ISSN 2784-8868

ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-771-5

Peer review | Open access

Submitted 2023-09-17 | Accepted 2023-10-30 | Published 2023-12-22

© 2023 Fu |

DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-771-5/011

1 Introduction to Wang Qingsong

After the 1990s, in China came a time where the art world opened up to a new gaze and new opportunities. Chinese artists are exposed to the world in order to contaminate their work thanks to the new political situation. From this time on, after this isolation that lasted several years, many photographers also leave the communist scenario of a governmental art to overlook a vision more related to the independence of personal expression.

Wang Qingsong, this contemporary photographer, has made an indelible impact on the Chinese art scene since the beginning of the 21st century. Through his delicate and insightful perspective, a series of his works have culminated in a profound reflection on the contemporary state of Chinese society. Wang Qingsong skillfully employs humor and metaphor to delve deeply into serious social issues.

His works not only reveal the public's deep desire for material prosperity but also critically point out China's unrestrained pursuit of commercial value in its modernization process. This rapid modernization has led to significant urban-rural migration and drastic changes in social structure, further resulting in mounting societal pressures. Through Wang Qingsong's lens, we can sense the helplessness and anxiety of the masses in the face of these societal changes, and how these challenges become legacies passed down from one generation to another.

Wang Qingsong candidly shared his artistic philosophy: "My goal is to capture and comment on the absurdities within the modernization of socialism with Chinese characteristics through photography, and to clearly articulate my stance".¹ The critical and playful tone in his works not only challenges the conventions of traditional photography but also offers a new experimental dimension to contemporary art. Truly remarkable art should not be confined merely to the display of technique but should deeply explore and represent human nature and life.

Interestingly, Wang Qingsong often integrates himself into the scenes of his works, becoming part of the narrative. This unique method of self-inclusion not only differentiates his works but also endows them with an intimate and direct appeal. These pieces, in essence, become mirrors reflecting society's current state, allowing viewers to see their own reflections.

Wang Qingsong's art incisively portrays the expanding desires in a commercialized society, along with the resultant feelings of insecurity and uncertainty about the future. From his highly artistic expressions to straightforward interpretations, Wang Qingsong believes that everything he presents closely resonates with his inner world.

¹ 王庆松: 戏谑荒诞背后的严肃诘问 <http://www.99ys.com/home/2022/03/22/14/213875.html>. All the translations are by the Author.



Figure 1 Follow Me, 120×300 cm, 2003, © Wang Qingsong

Starting from the 1990s, Wang Qingsong embarked on a distinct narrative style in photography, combining post-modern language, grand setups, striking visuals, and popular aesthetics with a grassroots perspective. He firmly believes that true art should emphasize its deep connection with societal realities, and thus, he considers his works to be more akin to ‘documentary photography’.

2 Wang Qingsong’s Iconic Works

Wang Qingsong’s iconic piece, *Follow Me* (2003), was auctioned at Christie’s in London in 2008, fetching an astonishing RMB 11,751,799, instantly garnering widespread attention. The inspiration for this piece traces back to the early stages of China’s reform and opening up in 1982 when the Central Television Station aired a beloved English-teaching program named *Follow Me*. During that pivotal period, countless Chinese relied on this show to learn English and expand their horizons, making the program a vivid emblem of China’s transition from isolation to global engagement.

Back in 2003, against the backdrop of China’s rapid economic transformation and growth, Wang Qingsong revisited and reinterpreted the *Follow Me* theme, drawing from the societal shifts of the time. At the Beijing Film Studio, he erected a massive chalkboard filled with a mix of Chinese and English phrases, some of which were deliberately playful. Wang positioned himself in front of this board, pointer in hand, immersing himself in a teaching scene as if guiding the audience through a lesson. He elaborated on his creative intent, saying, “From the previous generation’s *Follow Me* TV show to my current photography piece *Follow Me*, my aspiration remains constant: to witness China’s integration into the global stage and, through this, enable the world to delve deeper into the heartbeat of China”.



Figure 2 *In the Fields of Hope*, 2020, © Wang Qingsong

Subsequently, Wang Qingsong introduced *Learn from You* and *Learn from Him*, forming a conceptual trilogy spanning an entire decade. Within these works, he portrayed various characters shaped by the prevailing educational system, each bearing its symbolic significance. In *Follow Me*, the English teacher character highlights the trend of pursuing short-term gains in education; *Learn from You* portrays a young individual grappling with the oppressive educational regime; while *Learn from Him* represents a student who, stripped of critical thinking, blindly absorbs information. Collectively, this series epitomizes Wang Qingsong's profound reflection on the human distortions brought about by the current educational system and his contemplation and concern for future generations.

Amid the pandemic's havoc in 2020, the artist Wang Qingsong unveiled his new piece titled *In the Fields of Hope*. Ingeniously, the artwork adopts the setting of China's art examination as its backdrop. The scene presents rows upon rows of easels, each with an examinee meticulously recreating the same photograph, which features the likeness of Wang Qingsong himself. These identical images create a potent visual impact, echoing the relentless replication of a virus. Deep within the frame, majestic mountains stand as a backdrop, offering a stark contrast to the foreground.

In the original plan, Wang Qingsong intended to recruit 500 participants for an outdoor shoot. However, due to the severity of the pandemic, this plan could not come to fruition. When naming the piece, a familiar tune resonated in Wang Qingsong's mind: "Our homeland lies in the fields of hope; our dreams rest in the fields of hope; our

future is envisioned in the fields of hope..." (the words are from the song by the same name). Amidst these pandemic-shadowed times, Wang Qingsong aspires to instill a glimmer of aspiration and hope in both himself and the public through *In the Fields of Hope*.

3 Evolution of Wang Qingsong's Artistry

Starting from the end of 1996, Wang Qingsong gradually realized that we should not oversimplify or mockingly view the culture of a nation. Instead, we should delve deeply into why such a culture is fragmenting. Consequently, he shifted his focus to more abstract concepts and sought to express them through photography. Wang Qingsong also became one of the pioneering artists to incorporate Photoshop techniques into photographic creation. In 1999, he released the piece *Requesting Buddha Series No. 1*, utilizing Photoshop to depict those obsessed with money and materialism, as well as the societal scene characterized by rampant materialism, pretension, and ostentation.

Two decades later, in 2019, even though his new piece *Requesting Buddha Series* had a composition similar to the previous work, its content underwent a significant transformation. In the image, objects held in hands changed from Yanjing beer to Lafite, from brick phones to smartphones, and from film to digital. The objects of bygone days are scattered amidst steel bars and rubble, seemingly symbolizing the shifting consumer perceptions across different eras.

Drawing inspiration from the classic ancient Chinese painting *Night Revels* of Han Xizai, Wang Qingsong created *Night Revels of Lao Li*, a work reflecting contemporary societal issues in China. This piece cleverly contrasts the situation of modern Chinese intellectuals with that of ancient times. Wang utilized the scattered point perspective technique to alter the original painting's context, thus presenting the ambiance he wanted to convey more intensively. Deeply influenced by the society's strong yearning for money and desire at the time, Wang transformed the melancholic night banquet scene of Han Xizai in the original painting into a depiction of Lao Li (Li Xi-anting) confronting the gaudy and decadent life scenarios of modern society.

In this work, Lao Li refers to Li Xi-anting. He is not only one of the most influential art critics and curators in contemporary China but also a significant figure who has witnessed China's societal transformation since its reform and opening-up.

Wang Qingsong was born at the onset of the Cultural Revolution. Over half a century, he has witnessed China's transformation from a closed-off nation with relatively outdated production technologies to a global powerhouse with profound influence worldwide.



Figure 3 The Northern Series No.11: Nameless Plain, 130×830 cm, 2005, © Hai Bo

The core of Wang Qingsong's creations lies in his acute capture of societal phenomena, as well as reflections and introspections on his life experiences. His artistic works both unveil the Chinese public's desire for emerging material wealth and critically display China's impulsiveness in pursuing commercial benefits. Furthermore, they highlight the profound societal impact of a massive influx of migrant workers into cities. As he stated in *In the Fields of Hope* "I hope my photographic works can authentically reflect and critique the absurdities within China's unique socialist modernization process, thereby clearly expressing my views and stance".

4 Introduction to Hai Bo's Photography

Wang Qingsong's works delve deeply into the society's excessive pursuit of materialism, while Haibo's art represents a pure interpretation of traditional Chinese cultural aesthetics, showcasing its intrinsic charm in the most minimalist way. Haibo, an artist from northern China, is deeply rooted in his place of birth and has engaged in long-term creation against its backdrop. In his *Hometown series* spanning several decades, characters, landscapes, interiors, and objects are presented without embellishment, as if they are fully immersed in their own existence, with no distractions. Whether it's the sprawling horizon, the extended rooftops, or the lines on window grids, they all reveal the most natural and unadulterated state. This simplicity and authenticity are not deliberate but rather their true essence.

Haibo's photography is filled with love for simplicity, tranquility, and everyday elements. The vast harvested plains, endless horizons, disappearing roads at the end of the sightline, and the few figures seemingly frozen in time, the elderly strolling - they all present moments of serene life. It could be the warm ray of sunlight indoors, the contemplative expression, or the calendar gently hanging on the window, turned to a specific date - these images seem to intentionally avoid overt visual impact and excessive emotional expression. They are more like softly sung melodies, reminiscent of distant whispers of the wind, the awakening silence, or the whispers among blades of grass. These sounds seem to briefly pause within the frames, waiting for the viewer to listen, and then gradually submerge into endless silence.



Figure 4 The Southern Series No. 13, black and white photograph, 2012, © Hai Bo.

In his *Hometown series*, spanning several decades, every person, every landscape, every room, and various objects are portrayed truthfully, without the need for additional embellishments. They all appear to be immersed in their own worlds, maintaining the purest form of existence: whether it's the boundless horizon, the straight lines of extending eaves, or the orderly lines in window grids. This beauty of straightness is not a result of deliberate construction but rather dictated by their nature and essence. As for the wind, it simply naturally rustles the trees on the open field, without conveying any specific emotions or human sentiments.

5 Themes in Hai Bo's Works

In the *Hometown series*, especially those large-scale images, we are often struck by the vastness of the landscape displayed: an open, exposed, and unobstructed scenery, where the horizon seems to stretch this land and sky infinitely, forming both a stable and profoundly abstract visual structure. His work vividly portrays this magnificent scene. On that massive nine-meter-long printed canvas, what people see is a world where the sky and earth share equal prominence. Here, the pale sky and the deep wilderness form a sharp contrast. The only line in the image is a lightly colored road, leading to a vanishing point at the center, where a shadow, possibly of a vehicle in the distance, is faintly indicated. The transience and fragility of everyday life are replaced here by a form and ambiance that transcend time, almost divine in nature. In other smaller black and white photographs, the horizon not only delineates light from darkness but also reveals the silhouettes of figures. They appear like dark silhouettes against the backlight, seemingly standing there since ancient times, narrating timeless tales.

Haibo describes his hometown with deep emotion: "There, there are no magnificent landscapes, no majestic mountains, and no flowing rivers. There's just the vast land and the distant horizon. In this



Figure 5 The Southern Series No. 55, black and white photograph, 2012, © Hai Bo

expansive space, people seem as insignificant as dust”.² He once reminisced with overwhelming sentiment about a winter trip back to his hometown during his childhood. At that time, the heavy snow seemed to cover everything, leaving only a tranquil expanse of white in the universe. Everything else seemed to disappear. This powerful force of nature might have given him the initial shock of his life, leaving a lasting impression, compelling him to return and explore time and time again. From this perspective, one could say that what Haibo’s lens captures of his hometown is both a fleeting moment in the passage of time and a moment frozen in eternity, much like the last rays of the setting sun on the horizon before nightfall, leaving a final image behind.

In 2012, Haibo put aside his continuous and exhausting creation in the *North series*, choosing to head south and embark on an upstream journey along the Yangtze River from Shanghai. Although from certain perspectives, the landscapes he encountered might not entirely embody the typical southern characteristics, for Haibo, who had long resided in the north, the novelty and uniqueness of this unfamiliar land became a profound emotional comfort. In his heart, the distinction between the North and the South transcends geographical

² 故乡，海波和他的北方 https://m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_10479469.

meanings; the north represents the pursuit of materialism, while the south leans more towards a spiritual haven. As he put it: “I am fond of the sceneries that hover between reality and dreams”. For this reason, perhaps the identity of a passerby best interprets his understanding of life’s roles. He witnessed temples shrouded in mist, observed young people inquiring about their destinies from a blind person by a wall, noticed the distinct marks made by weeds and branches on pedestrians’ clothing, and the river water imbued with life, flowing quietly along the Yangtze.

Haibo’s hometown is Changchun, Jilin. He spent decades of his life in the north, and it was on those not-so-nurtured plains that his works thrived. For him, the South and dreamland almost became synonymous. He once said, “Being a northerner, I have little understanding of the South. The South carries meanings of fantasy and illusion for me. Therefore, the South I captured is filled with a northerner’s fantasy of the South. It can even be seen as a representation of my own dreams, rather than the South in the real world”.³

Haibo noticed that when mentioning the South, colorful images often come to people’s minds. However, he unexpectedly found that many artists prefer to present their feelings about the South in black and white, just as shown in his *Southern series*. While color photos might have a higher degree of reproduction, black and white photos leave a deeper emotional aftertaste for him. The choice behind this is not merely based on aesthetics; for him, it’s more about an emotional outpouring, expressing the confusion, bewilderment, doubts, and regrets deep within his heart.

In fact, for Haibo, there isn’t much essential difference between the South and the North. As previously mentioned, his works often depict a path with a person walking along it. Even in the South, his creative approach hasn’t changed significantly. However, the South provides him with more opportunities to fantasize and reproduce dreamscapes. The South has become the source of his dreams and also the medium through which he manifests his dreamscapes.

Haibo’s works often feature scenes of mist and falling snow. These aren’t just visual representations; they reflect more deeply the artist’s inner sentiments and emotions. Faced with the world, the various facets of life, and even the scenery right in front of him, the artist is always accompanied by a sense of exploration, confusion, and bewilderment. As he said, many real scenes often become reflections of the dreams in his heart.

The works in the Northern series feature Haibo’s friends and relatives, as well as the native soil of the North, closely tied to every aspect of his personal life. However, the South appears abstract to

3 故乡, 海波和他的北方 https://m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_10479469.

Haibo, devoid of specific connections. Hence, even though it relates to Haibo's personal experiences, the South seems more like an illusory realm in his fantasies.

For example, in the *They series* created by Haibo in the North, the characters are not distant strangers, but his relatives, close friends, and neighbours. The bond he shares with these people is profound; this is also the land where his parents and ancestors have lived for generations. In contrast, the South doesn't have a direct material connection to him, but at a deeper spiritual level, it resonates with his soul.

To Haibo, the Northeast China where he lives visually appears somewhat desolate. This desolation does not refer to material scarcity, but rather the endless horizon where occasionally a few ant-like figures hurry by. This is his fundamental impression of the North: simple, clear, starkly contrasting with the South's lush, intricate, graceful, and complex landscapes.

From a creative perspective, due to its historical background, the Northeast does not have the rich cultural heritage like the South. It lacks ancient artifacts like stone tools, tombstones, city walls, temples, calligraphy, and other objects. This results in a stark visual contrast between the Northeast and the South. The South, with its relics, ancient cities, and moats that represent Chinese and even broader Eastern cultures, is something Haibo never experienced during his upbringing. Yet, surprisingly, even though these were not the backdrop of his growth, they deeply resonated with his inner world. This is because China possesses vast geographical and cultural breadth, leading to potential misalignments and asynchronies between physical experiences and one's inner realm.

6 Conclusion

In Haibo's works, the frequently appearing pedestrians symbolize his feelings of inner detachment. Although at times these passersby in his art may walk in groups or bustle about, ultimately, each person will separate from the crowd, returning to their own solitude. Unlike the clearly labeled characters in the Northern series, those in the Southern series don't have explicit identity definitions; they are not merely farmers or elderly people. This reflects Haibo's perspective when conceiving the *Southern series*. He observes the South from a distance, because both the South and the North constitute chapters of his fate. Yet, in this vast world, he is but a fleeting passerby.

Bibliography

- Gu Zheng (2022). *Chinese Contemporary Photography 1980-2020*, 上海人民出版社.
- Wu Hung (2020). *40 Years Of Chinese Contemporary Photography*, 浙江摄影出版社.
- Hai Bo (2015). *Hai Bo*, 浙江摄影出版社.

