

The Propaganda, Documentary and Imagination of Revolution: A Visual Political Expression in Chinese Contemporary Photography

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On October 10th 1926, the 15th anniversary of the Republic of China, the Northern Expeditionary Army from Guangdong suffered significant losses while attempting to occupy Wuhan which was at that time controlled by warlord Wu Peifu. The generals defending the region, Liu Yuchun and Chen Jiamo, were captured and their punishments generated a controversy. Finally after much debate, the captured generals were prosecuted as counterrevolutionaries.

The fact that these generals were charged with counterrevolutionary crimes indicated that the Northern Expeditionary Army was fighting under the name of revolution. To the public, the legality of revolution has never been a question. This was the first time in the history of modern China that the count of counterrevolution, usually a derogatory term, was turned complimentary and an important symbol for “political correctness”. In this context, the term revolution became endowed with new symbolic meaning, signaling advancement, correctness and sacredness. It thus became a critical keyword for political parties to leverage legality and to mobilize the society. The sacredness of the term was shown when Liu Yuchun told the judge that he had no idea what revolution was and that although he had never read any text about it, he would never again commit such crime. [\[1\]](#)

Revolution is unquestionably one of the most important events of China during the 20th century.

During this transitional time, China has displayed extreme and fanatical characters, making revolution a common social status. It has generated a sharp division between the pro-revolution and the counterrevolution groups, leaving no possible third alternative. Historically speaking, the term revolution is often used to characterize the struggles between the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Communist Party. Both sides thought they were pro-revolution and the other, counterrevolutionary. Immersed in such contrasting ideologies, revolution became a method of mobilizing the people, and photography, which became a means of political mobilization that has formed the basis of a visual order of that time, penetrated people’s daily lives.

Photography is a medium that can be used for documentation and the photographs taken can be reproduced or duplicated. Having both the ability to document and replicate, photography can literally visualize the documented history. We must recognize, however, the fact that the camera can accurately record the past as well as reflect the view of the person doing the recording. Documentary photography can literally picture history as evidence while the view chosen by the photographer can be used as propaganda, recording a world that is different from reality. This character demonstrates that photography can both act as record and as a form of propaganda.

From a practical standpoint, the ability to mechanically reproduce photographic images using the printing press has made photography into a medium. Easily comprehensible by ordinary people, photography as a mass medium becomes an effective visual tool to mobilize the people. Famous battlefield photographer Fei Sha once wrote in 1938 "Photography is a powerful tool to mobilize the people against the Japanese, especially in such illiterate country. Pictorialised messages will contain a much more powerful impact than mere words." [2] Fei Sha understood well the relationship between pictorial messages and social mobilization. He held up his camera in the stance of a soldier and has left us with images that not only documented our history but also recorded the mobilization under visual propaganda.

Looking at photography as a tool does not stand in contradiction with photography as a document. Through the ability to document, photography also becomes a form of politics. Politically influenced documentary photography penetrates into the daily lives of people and creates a desired political visual order. This has made photography an important tool. During period between the founding of New China in 1949 and the end of Culture Revolution specifically, Chinese photography was heavily influenced by politics. On a superficial level, photography documented an important part of modern Chinese history. But in reality it witnessed revolution. The development of Chinese photography under the call for revolution during that period affected the perspective of people using observation as a form of revolution and documentary as a form of propaganda. This means literally pictorialising the revolution so that it is easier to understand and accept for the people. Therefore the photography during that time was not precisely documentary but a unified form of propaganda. As a result, revolution became a static pattern that fixated the perspective of photographers and made photography a tool of revolution that spread standardized propaganda.

Since the 1980s, the enormous changes in the social environment have motivated a new generation of photographers to pursue the documentary function of photography, attempting to change its associated role as a form of propaganda. Meanwhile, a type of propaganda is still being carried out through these photographers but this time it is the imagination of revolution. Although both can be seen as propaganda, they are different - the imagination of revolution can take the form of suspicion, entertainment, or sexualized imagery... And as a result, revolution loses its original meaning. There still exist some documentary components between these two forms of propaganda. Sandwiched by the two, these components acted as glue connecting the two propaganda forms.

During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, the documentary side of photography was completely left out. What was remained was a large pile of images that suited the political needs of that time. It is rare to see any unbiased photo documentation of that time period. To date, only two photographers actually documented that moment of history using their cameras: *Heilongjiang Daily* reporter Li Zhensheng and *Shenyang Daily* reporter Jiang Shaowu.

In 2003, UK-based Phaidon published the book *Red-Color News Soldier* which collected Li's early works on the Cultural Revolution. This book was well received in the west and

generated enormous fame for Li. [3] Images within the book such as “Ren Zhongyi Criticism” and “Soldiers with Mao’s badge” have become important visual symbols of that time. Jiang’s work on the other hand is slightly less famous. Because of the fact that most of his works were not published until the latter half of the 1990s, people simply did not know what he did under the banner of ‘revolution’.

What I could never understand is why after such a long period of time, with so many photographers documenting China, only the works of Li Zhensheng and Jiang Shaowu have been uncovered. Both are photojournalists from the Northeast part of China that documenting this revolution. Whether it is by accident or out of principle, their style of photography was far from mainstream photography at the time. As a result, their work projected a sense of dangerousness. However, this is the exact reason why such crazy revolution can be documented so realistically through the tens of thousands of priceless images.

Jiang Shaowu accepted his position of powerlessness during that period. The only thing he could do was to document the truth of the revolution through his lenses. Because of that, he had to live through the revolution with extreme caution. He shot his camera during the day and developed the photos during the night, and carefully recorded both the time and location for all photos and preserved them. For safety reasons, Jiang Shaowu never released nor shared his work with others. He kept on waiting, hoping that one day he could publicly share his work with the world. It was not until the mid 1990s that he felt safe from any government threats. He then started to convert his films into photos. Only a small portion of his films was ever exhibited. However, it was enough to create a powerful impact to the society. We are finally able to see the other side of the Cultural Revolution through his lenses. Li Zhenshen on the other hand was different case. Li was actively involved in the early stage of the revolution. He eventually withdrew from the revolution and safely lived through those crazy years without losing his films. These precious films would then show the world a completely different perspective than what was published by the press during that time.

The photography works of Jiang Shaowu and Li Zhensheng literally documented the revolution. Their images have demonstrated how photography can be used to document a reality that is different from documenting an imagined reality. In other words, propaganda was meant to create a visual order whereas documentary photography was used create the opposite. For the newer generations, revolution is no longer a dangerous game. It is a topic that can be fantasized about in many directions. Thus, the imagination of revolution is reborn.

Beijing photographer Liu Zheng once proposed that revolution is an endless dream. Around the year 2000, he started to have his own imagination of revolution which resulted in new photographic series. Following the theme “People’s Breast Milk”, the photographs were created by asking a model to expose her breast in order to challenge the imaginations that once existed for revolution. From a rhetorical perspective, “People’s Breast Milk” is a metaphor for the relationship between the people and the army during the revolution. This form of imagination can never be presented factually or directly because women’s breasts

can only be shown indirectly. To do otherwise would reveal sexually explicit images and, like the revolution, would lose its meaning. Currently, Liu is working on converting this form of expression into reality, and in turn hope to inspire the public to rethink the concept of revolution. On the other hand, in "Seduction of the Revolutionist", Liu changed a traditional revolution story into a real life example where the propaganda of revolution was transformed into actual imagination towards revolution. Liu is constantly reminding us that perhaps revolution and sex are not related because revolution is sacred and sex is ungodly. But is this true? Are revolution and sex completely unrelated? Through his work, Liu wishes to argue that not only is revolution indeed related to sex but may also be seen as a form of sex. From this perspective, Tian Tiaquan of Chongqing presented an even bolder creation: sex and revolution are together as one and that revolution is a form of sex, expression, and excitement.

In conclusion, the evolution from propaganda to imagination has reflected in photography the change from societal to personal imagination. It is through this channel that documentary of the revolution becomes connected to imagination and propaganda. Without propaganda, documentary would not have been so difficult and rare to carry out. Jiang and Li are now the only remaining photographers that have documented the revolutionary era. Given their work, they are the lonely heroes that have demonstrated the true will of standing behind the truth. Liu and Tian however, have shown a different perspective. To them, revolution is a subject of imagination. The propaganda of revolution can never be related to sex, but imagination of it is and can be sex itself. This suggests that photography has evolved from propaganda, but it remains in its shadows. Now, revolution is viewed through sex. This is the imagination of revolution.

[1] Wang, Qisheng, *Revolution Counter-Revolution*, (Beijing: She hui ke xue wen xian chu ban she, 2010)

[2] Wang, Yan, *My Father H. Szeto*, (Beijing Shi: She hui ke xue wen xian chu ban she, 2005)

[3] Li, Zhensheng, Robert Pledge, and Jacques Menasche, *Red-color News Soldier: A Chinese Photographer's Odyssey Through the Cultural Revolution*, (London: Phaidon, 2003)