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The Refracted Moment: Photographing Chinese History in the Making

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Abstract

This article examines the way in which both Western and Chinese photographers have documented Chinese history in the making by focusing on the photographic documentation of two key events in the formation of Chinese society: the 1911 Revolution that laid the foundation for the birth of the republic and the "energy revolution" that was the Three Gorges Dam project (1994-2012). The major difference between the two revolutions is that the latter was documented by the Chinese themselves. No longer relying upon images made by Westerners exclusively, as was the case in 1911, the Chinese appropriated this monumental event in their history to archive it photographically. The article offers a conceptual framework for understanding revolutionary events in the context of historiography and photography history. The analysis of various photographs of the 1911 Revolution by Francis Stafford and of the Three Gorges Dam project and area by Edward Burtynsky, Bill Zorn, Zeng Nian, and Yan Changjiang shows that the event remains an evanescent and quasi-impossible entity to capture photographically, and that photographers can only archive its *refracted presence* in the faces, landscapes, and objects in front of the lens. What the pictures unveil is that the *refracted moments* of these two events are far more significant than the actual events themselves for the photographers under study.

Keywords

1911 Revolution – Three Gorges Dam – documentary photography – landscape photography – event

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It is seldom remarked upon that the century that invented the discipline of history in the West also invented photography. Photography would eventually challenge the more traditional, historical recording of events as a result of the empirical truth-value that photographic documents possess. The events and people who would have been relegated to history books would now be preserved in still images that greatly enhanced narrative descriptions. Photography's truth claim and indexical link to the real combined to shape a new type of historical document that greatly transformed the manner in which individuals document and archive the lives of others and capture history in the making. This is the issue historian James L. Hevia has referred to as the nineteenth-century "photography complex" ("Photography Complex" 80-82), which was a novel assemblage of photographic images, illustrated newspapers, and human actors whose production of knowledge for global consumption was unprecedented.

The photographic documentation of nineteenth-century China is a case in point, and it has attracted a lot of critical attention lately.[1] Examining the photographs taken by Western missionaries, travelers, soldiers, and traders, numerous studies have shown the great interest the late Qing had for those established in the various concessions and treaty ports. In this article, I build upon such critical efforts to shed light on the way in which both Western and Chinese photographers have documented Chinese history in the making. The chosen approach to the photographic documentation of societal formation is different from that adopted by photo historians, however, in that it embraces both the past and the present. Indeed, I will examine the photographic documentation of two key events in the formation of Chinese society: the 1911 Revolution that laid the foundation for the birth of the republic and the "energy revolution" that was the Three Gorges Dam project (1994-2012). The major difference between the two revolutions is that the latter was documented by the Chinese themselves. No longer relying upon images made by Westerners exclusively, as was the case in 1911, the Chinese appropriated this monumental event in their history to archive it photographically. If sociologist Martin Hand is correct to claim that "Our understanding of the societal life of the last hundred and fifty years or so has been to a great extent *photographic*" (188, emphasis in original), then examining the formation of Chinese society through the photographic lens is bound to generate a fascinating portrait of a nation constantly striving to modernize itself.

The first section lays the groundwork for understanding revolutionary events in the context of historiography and photography history. Avoiding the

1 For studies of early Chinese photography, see Bennett 2009; Chen and Xu 2011; Cody and Terpak 2011; Lau 2008; Ma et al. 1987; Roberts 2012; and Suchomel and Suchomelová 2011.

more philosophical debates that have characterized the study of the "event" in the West lately, the writings of historians such as Pierre Nora, François Hartog, and François Dosse have revealed a far more complex and nuanced picture of the place of the event in historical writings and the current challenge that the notion of the event still poses to more traditional approaches emphasizing history, memory, or heritage.[2] The key point derived from the historiographical reflections considered in the first section is that the event remains an evanescent and quasi-impossible entity to capture photographically, and that photographers can only archive its *refracted presence* in the faces, landscapes, and objects in front of the lens to document what photo historian Michel Poivert has referred to as the "traces of past events in the present." (101) The following sections substantiate this claim by turning to the 1911 Revolution and the Three Gorges Dam project. Needless to say, the goal is not to favor the choices made by Chinese photographers over those of Western photographers, or vice-versa, but to open up a space for discussion about the various strategies used to document the 1911 Revolution and the Three Gorges Dam project as key events in Chinese history. What the images unveil is that the *refracted moments* of these two events are far more significant than the actual events themselves for the photographers under study in this article.

Photographing the Event

An event is often said to be an occurrence that shatters the course of daily life. It can be a radical rupture in the political world such as the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949; it can be a path-breaking discovery in the medical sciences such as pasteurization; it can be an artistic breakthrough in the form of Schönberg's atonal writing system that took the Viennese music world by storm; or, on a more personal level, it can be two individuals falling in love. The reader familiar with Alain Badiou's philosophy (2005) will have realized that the aforementioned examples derive from his understanding of the event that can happen in only four realms: politics, science, art, and love. Although several commentators have taken issue with Badiou's very selective choice of types of events—also known as "truth procedures"—what I want to underline is not so much the potential types of events that Badiou's

2 Well known in historiographical circles for his influential concept of "regime of historicity," Hartog (2003 and 2013) has also written at length about the various shifts that have defined the discipline of history over the last two centuries. Dosse (2010) is the author of a study of the fascinating journey of the notion of the event in historiography.

philosophy excludes such as the economic event (e.g., the 2008 financial crisis) or the technological event (e.g., the first moon landing in 1969) as how *modern* his conception of the event is. By "modern" I mean that Badiou's philosophy of the event is predicated upon an understanding of political, scientific, artistic, and amorous change that leaves little room for longitudinal study and historical inquiry. A modern understanding of the event such as Badiou's is based upon breaks, ruptures, and disjunctions that minimize historical change in the *longue durée* in order to capitalize on the sensational or spectacular eruption of change and newness in the present. In this sense, Badiou's philosophy is in line with televisual media's fetishistic emphasis on the event that it should help to question in the first place. Badiou's modern conception of the event thus is a product of its times that is unhelpful to understand the complexity of historical and socio-political transformations that events such as the 1911 Revolution and the construction of the largest dam in world history entail. The title of one of Badiou's latest books, *The Rebirth of History* (2012), could not be more apropos to illustrate how historical inquiry and a philosophy of the event are antithetical in the form of yet another "end-of-history" discourse that the word "rebirth" implies.

The media's appropriation of the event has long preoccupied historians. Worried that the craft involved in the writing of history may be at stake in the common predilection for the event and jeopardize the understanding of historical change as unfolding over time rather than in a flash, historians have questioned the influence of the event on their practice. As early as 1974, Pierre Nora, whose stellar editorial efforts on the *Les Lieux de mémoire* multi-volume project has made him a key player in contemporary historiographical debates, noted the imminent change that could be perceived in historiography as a result of the emphasis on the event. Aptly historicizing the rise of the notion of the event in the years following the rise of mass media such as radio, newspapers, and television as the de facto provider of information, Nora pointed to a crucial shift in the writing of history insofar as the "tyranny of the event was prohibited from entering history; it was understood that history would rest upon the event." (285) He comments on how this shift—the event now resting on history given its predominance—had major consequences for a discipline whose positivistic inclinations made the historian the person who would organize events in a historically coherent narrative rather than the historical narrative itself culminating in a given event.

Nora elaborates on the problem of the event by turning to a crucial distinction that will bring to bear on photography: modern society's incessant production of events as opposed to traditional society's *rarefaction* of the event (296). Traditional society's time was a time with few to no events beyond the

cyclical and repetitive nature of particular events such as religious rituals and seasonal festivities that would somewhat lose their evental character due to their annual repetition. This rarefaction of events in traditional societies sustained a worldview based upon stability and equilibrium that the emphasis on the event would challenge. It was therefore necessary to negate the potential force of the event to sustain a way of life. Similarly, the "historian of the present" would not be that different from the "historian of the past," were it not for the fact that, as Nora insightfully reminds us (303), the contemporary historian's work culminates in the event, whereas the Annales School historian, for example, tended to subtract the event to examine a phenomenon over decades or even centuries in order to reduce its impact and put the emphasis on the structure of a historical system rather than on the events punctuating it.

In light of the preceding discussion, one can see that the problem of the event in historiography is how to characterize *change* itself. The two competing approaches take the form of either emphasizing the change brought forward by an event in its unforeseen irruption in the present, or prioritizing the unveiling of the structure or system enabling the production of events in the first place. The conclusion to draw is that with the rise of "evental history," which is to say historical writing that culminates in a given event, came the slow decline of subtractive historiography, which refers to the type of writing that uses the event as only one element in the story it tells.

Celebrated French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson would have applauded the rise of "evental history," for it conforms with his famous description of the task of the photographer vis-à-vis the event: "To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression." (42) Cartier-Bresson's understanding of the photo event can be described retrospectively as Badiouian in nature: the photographer's job is to capture the event as it unfolds in a flash when all compositional elements are at a standstill for less than a second. Such a photograph cuts through the real and represents the "decisive moment" dear to Cartier-Bresson. His photographic practice thus was predicated upon the suspension of contingency and the subtraction of all elements unnecessary to the composition in the present.

Photographers have always taken issue with the cult of the event and the present that a perspective such as Cartier-Bresson's promoted, and the fact that it would function as the truly quintessential moment in the photographic act. As an alternative to Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment, countless artists in the history of photography have emphasized the traces left behind by an event, which is to say the "indecisive moment." Such photographers do not seek to capture a once-in-a-lifetime compositional miracle. Rather, they bear

witness to the traces of past events in their spectral presence. It is in this sense that photographers have always questioned the primordial place the event should occupy in order to privilege the *rarefaction* of historical events via their *refraction* in other elements in the frame such as faces, landscapes, buildings, and objects. Hevia echoes this view when referring to the photograph as "neither reflection nor representation of the real, but a kind of metonymic sign of the photography complex in operation." ("Photography Complex" 81) It is the traces of what is left on the margins of events that many photographers value more than anything, regardless of technological improvements to their medium, and it cannot but suggest that documentary photography has always been one step ahead of historiography in its rejection of the event's hegemony and of what photo historian Vincent Lavoie has described as "the reduction of history to the instant." ("Photography and Imaginaries" 16) This could already be seen in the work of the photographers who documented the 1911 Revolution well before the notion of the event was canonized in 1930s photojournalism.[3]

1911: Revolutionary Pictures

As a result of the Western forces, both imperialist and capitalist, that made their way into China in the nineteenth century, a new global market for images of daily life in China and the Chinese themselves framed the major sociopolitical events that marked the second half of the century. It is not farfetched to claim that China became an object to be visually consumed by Westerners during the same period. In the form of *cartes-de-visite*, stereoscopic cards, and postcards, pictures of the Middle Kingdom catered to the overseas demand and the Western gaze's insatiable thirst for all things Chinese. A sign of the longstanding Orientalist fascination with the Far East, the visual construction of China began in the early 1840s. The Western technology accompanied the invasion of Chinese territory to show the world the superiority of British forces; it photographed their presence and made an indelible mark upon the psyche of both the Chinese and Westerners. The photographs taken by John Thomson, Felice Beato, Leone Nani, Milton Miller, William Saunders, Ogawa Kazuma, James Ricalton, Auguste François, George Ernest Morrison, Edwin John Dingle, Luther Knight, and Francis Eugene Stafford, to name the most well-known, committed this period of Chinese history to memory at a time

3 Lavoie (2001 and 2010) has written at length about the function of the event in photography history, especially with regard to the monumentalization of the photograph in photojournalistic practices and the iconic figure of the war photojournalist.

when photography rose to prominence as the medium par excellence to archive daily lives and events. The images of pre-revolutionary China testify to the importance of photography for offering a novel type of historical documentation in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the first decade of the new century.

As Chinese art historian Wu Hung has shown in his examination of early photography in China, the types of photographs that Westerners took can be divided into three categories: photographs of people, places, and events. Whereas photographs of people can be associated with traditional portraiture, racial and ethnic typologies, and medical photography, photographs of places documented buildings, landscapes, and panoramas. The third type is the one Wu is at pains to describe. Indeed, regarding photographs of events, Wu does not clearly state what the image revealed. Rather, he mentions the need to construct a visual narrative to depict events ("Introduction" 15), and discusses the rise of photojournalism in China in the context of colonialism and war imagery. The incapacity to describe the essence of a photograph of an event is a serious problem in the context of a medium that was supposed to illustrate historical accounts or even replace them. Of course, the fact that photographic technology did not allow for the capture of events due to long exposure times has to be taken into account. However, this technologically deterministic explanation does not solve another of Wu's problems: the fact that photographs of events tended to include both people and places would question the need for a tripartite distinction. Here we are confronted with the double-sided problem of the event in photography: on the one hand, the photograph cannot seem to give a complete account of the unfolding of an event regardless of technological advancements, and, on the other hand, the photo of a given event invariably includes people and places, thereby rendering the distinction between people, places, and events superfluous.

What I wish to stress is not so much the conceptual limitations of Wu's model as the representational problems that arise when the still image wishes to document an event rather than a person or landscape. As Wu intimates, constructing a visual narrative turns out to be crucial to capture an event, and resorting to an album or a photobook is key for the photographer interested in archiving an event. With the help of two publications containing dozens of photographs documenting the events surrounding the 1911 Revolution, let us see how two editors have reconstructed the revolution that launched China on its path to modernization. Two brief case studies will be presented below: American photographer Francis Eugene Stafford's work, as collected and introduced in historian Lu Hanchao's *The Birth of a Republic: Francis Stafford's Photographs of China's 1911 Revolution and Beyond*, and the mostly anonymous

photographs collected in the lavishly illustrated exhibition catalogue entitled *China in Revolution: The Road to 1911*, edited by photographer Liu Heung Shing. What these two publications unwittingly stage via photographs of the 1911 Revolution is the problem of representing the event in the still image.

The 1911 Revolution is considered a watershed in Chinese history, because it marked the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), and it was the first of a series of major socio-political revolutions that would characterize twentieth-century China. The 1911 Revolution put an end to two millennia of Confucian way of life and imperial rule and to what one historian of China has called "the most enduring political system in the history of mankind." (Esherick 1) After a series of humiliating defeats at the hands of Western and Japanese powers that would culminate in the signature of unjust treaties in the nineteenth century, the first decade of the new century saw rebellious activities and European-influenced revolutionaries and intellectuals such as Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei contest the primacy of Manchurian rule and its possibility of guiding China into the new century.

Noteworthy is the fact that the 1911 Revolution, which expressed the desire to transform society in the aftermath of the cruel defeats at the hands of Western and Japanese powers and the unfair financial settlements that followed, is an event that is available for visual consumption today due to the efforts of Westerners interested in capturing the faces, landscapes, and locales defining this crucial moment in Chinese history. The late-Qing dynasty events that led to the 1911 Revolution were documented and archived by Western photographers to such an extent that the "visual memory" of this crucial period in Chinese history is the result of the efforts of Western missionaries, diplomats, traders, and a few professional photographers. They depicted the Chinese in their everyday lives in the treaty ports, and their photographs can be seen as the backdrop against which Chinese history unfolded. Francis Eugene Stafford (1884-1938) was one of those photographers.

Stafford was based in China between 1909 and 1915. During these busy years, he worked for the Commercial Press and photographed court officials, prisoners, rebels, revolutionary soldiers, school children, female workers, beggars, and peasants. He also captured on film various locales and pagodas, the Temple of Heaven, public demonstrations, buildings in ruins, and, most interestingly, he indulged in various acts of self-inscription in the form of numerous staged photographs of himself. Bearing in mind Wu's three types of images—of people, places, and events—one can see how the first two types are easily identifiable in the list above. As far as events themselves are concerned, they are more difficult to locate in Stafford's photographs. Actually, one has to look for them in their refracted presence, as we shall see.

Lu Hanchao's book collection of Stafford's photographs is divided into five sections covering the various moments associated with the 1911 Revolution in chronological fashion. The two sections that would seem most conducive to the study of the event in photography are the ones entitled "Wuchang Uprising" and "The Politics of Chaos," which are the book's middle sections. The last two sections, entitled "A Society in Transition" and "Stafford in China," focus on the aftermath of the Revolution and Stafford's autobiographical photographic acts. As far as the middle sections are concerned, they demonstrate that Stafford was interested in documenting not so much the 1911 event itself as its refracted moments using urban scenes and portraiture.

Stafford's photographs document the people associated with the 1911 Revolution and the urban backdrop against which various military activities unfolded.[4] Pictures of revolutionary soldiers on the march follow the gruesome photo of the severed heads of two leaders, Liu Fuji and Peng Chufan (44), which memorably opens the "Wuchang Uprising" section. Images of rebel troops and imperial forces on the move accompany more sober portraits of army officials and Red Cross workers tending to the wounded. A sequence of four powerful pictures of bodies of dead soldiers on the battlefield, gunned down rebels, corpses whose clothes are missing, and a corpse that is being devoured by a dog (87-90) conclude this section and offer a devastating portrait of the uprising without actually showing eventful situations.

Stafford photographed various sites empty of human presence, and the last sequence of this section focuses on buildings either in ruins or burning with heavy smoke occupying the pictorial space. Hankou is seen aflame (93) and, then, after the fire, the burned down city is pictured in a state of ruins (95). Two photographs focus specifically on the Chinese looking for valuables left behind or returning home only to find it in ruins (96-97). Most tellingly, the section ends with two photographs of Stafford (99-100): the penultimate image features the American leaning against the wall of a bombed out house now in ruins, while the last provides a most picturesque, staged photograph of Stafford sitting atop the city wall in Wuchang holding a fan and looking afar. It is a most enigmatic coda to the most visually shocking section of the book.

Lu Hanchao's collection of Stafford's photographs is instructive in several respects. First, it underlines the role photography played in permitting Chinese history to reach the West via still images. What certainly strikes this viewer is Stafford's hovering presence throughout, which was both literal and symbolic

4 The reader will find more than 200 of Stafford's photographs of the 1911 Revolution on the Stanford Digital Repository website: http://purl.stanford.edu/th998nk0722#gallery/1.

given the pervasive role Western photographers played in the production and dissemination of images of China. Second, Stafford's photographs captured the 1911 event only by way of what preceded it or followed it, thereby implying that capturing the event in the present was impossible. Indeed, Stafford's pictures do not document any particular *momentous* event during these years. Rather, his images focus on the people and places associated with the 1911 Revolution either before or after it took place. The emphasis on post-battle landscapes and the faces of prisoners attest to this. This is a point Lavoie makes with regard to the invisible presence of the event in war photography. He notes: "what war photography shows is situations without any real evental quality [*qualité événementielle*] . . . Photography fails to represent war in its evental quintessence, which means that the bulk of photographic representations of war deal with the geographical and temporal periphery of the event." (*Photojournalismes* 207) Bearing in mind this last remark, Stafford can be said to have documented the 1911 Revolution via the event's refracted presence in the portraits, buildings in ruins, and, therefore, the material traces of history rather than the event itself.

Another publication that has thoroughly documented the 1911 Revolution is photographer Liu Heung Shing's *China in Revolution: The Road to 1911*, which also adopts a chronological approach. Rather than focus on one particular photographer, however, Liu's collection provides a longer history of the events that led to the 1911 Revolution, beginning with the Second Opium War (1856-1860), which serves as the first core chapter. There follow five chapters focusing on the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Boxer Rebellion (1898-1903), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), the Wuchang Uprising (1911), and the Chinese warlord era (1912-1928). The six core chapters thus offer a photographic history that frames the 1911 Revolution itself.

One notices how the historical frame provided by the other five sections do contextualize the 1911 events, but they also distract the reader from having access to the event itself insofar as the publication is more about what preceded the 1911 Revolution as recorded photographically than what either constituted it in the present or its impact in the years that followed. This is no small editorial move on Liu's part, as "The Road to 1911," which is the book's subtitle, indicates the orientation of the editor. Indeed, what matters to Liu in the 1911 Revolution is not so much the momentous events themselves as what paved the way for them. The images in the "1911: The Wuchang Uprising" chapter reveal a concern for group portraits of imperial troops, rebels at rest, laborers, and prisoners waiting to be sentenced or executed. Noteworthy is the absence of buildings in ruins in Liu's selection for this central chapter,

aside from two panoramic photos of Hankou after being burned to the ground (332).

The differences in treatment between Lu Hanchao's and Liu Heung Shing's collections come to the fore by way of their treatment of the event by photographic means. On the one hand, Lu puts the emphasis on the post-evental situation, privileging Stafford's photographs of building in ruins. On the other hand, in terms of framing and background information, Liu accentuates the importance of the decades that preceded the 1911 Revolution to make the following point: the event itself, and the photographs selected, do not matter so much as the actors and situations that led to 1911. Both collections of photographs clearly indicate that the event itself, in the present, is an evanescent occurrence that defies the photographic act.

Regardless of the editorial choices made, however, where both collections' photographs unite is in refracting the 1911 Revolution, that is, rarefying the event that was the end of Manchu rule and the fall of the Qing dynasty and making it discernible only in the human faces, street scenes, and landscapes that either preceded or followed the event. Such a strategy might explain why Esherick would describe the 1911 Revolution in terms that would question the use of the word "event" to characterize what, the historian claims, was "a most unrevolutionary revolution." (8) That said, it is Lu's and Liu's merit to have shown how photographs taken by Westerners have shaped our understanding of the years preceding and following the Revolution. The refracted moments that were captured on film by nineteenth-century photographers such as Stafford added to both the "knowledge of 'Chineseness' that had been produced over the previous decades" (Hevia, *English Lessons* 196), and the visual production of China for Euro-American consumption inside and outside of the empire that would extend all the way into the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The Three Gorges Dam: Chronicle of a Disappearance Foretold

Juxtaposing two watershed events in the formation of Chinese society such as the 1911 Revolution and the construction of the Three Gorges Dam serves a comparative function aiming at revealing a significant change in terms of photographic agency. Indeed, what characterizes the dam and its photographic documentation is that, contrary to the 1911 Revolution, both Western *and* Chinese photographers have archived the building of the dam, the neighboring areas left in ruins, and the lives of the Chinese. I will focus on four artists, the ones whose photographic inquiries into the Three Gorges have been the

most extensive and are the most well-known both in the West and China: Edward Burtynsky, Bill Zorn, Zeng Nian, and Yan Changjiang.[5]

One potential pitfall would be to claim that Westerners photographed the Three Gorges Dam project in such a way, whereas the Chinese adopted a different strategy. As will be made clear, a nation-based or ethnic approach to photographic strategies does not help to make sense of the various ways in which photographers conceptualized their task as they went about documenting an area that would go through a cycle of demolition and construction impacting the lives of millions of people. It is more useful to focus on the strategies that were used to face the challenges the Three Gorges Dam presented as an event unfolding over several years. Similar to the photographic coverage of the 1911 Revolution *qua* event, Burtynsky's, Zorn's, Zeng's, and Yan's photographs implicitly reveal the solution for capturing the Three Gorges event in all its complexity. Here again, archiving people, places, and objects is the most popular strategy used in order to confront an event that could only be documented as refracted in the faces, landscapes, and the material culture that framed it.

First proposed by Sun Yat-sen in 1919 but eventually left on ice for decades, the idea for the dam was revived by Mao Zedong in 1953. After Mao's death and the Cultural Revolution, it was Deng Xiaoping who brought the project back to life a second time in the early 1980s. Elaborated over a period of more than fifteen years, the plans for and the construction of the Three Gorges Dam were imbued with controversy from the inception. The three reasons justifying the building of the dam were to increase the national output of electricity in light of China's economic reform and industrial boom; to control flooding downstream; and to improve river navigation. These are the positive aspects that the Chinese authorities played up during the initial stages of the construction and over the following decade. Environmentalists and activists who alerted the Chinese and the international community to the dangers of constructing such a gigantic dam mentioned issues such as hastily conceived resettlement plans, the rebirth of the destroyed ecosystems, the protection of still unearthed antiquities and unexplored archeological sites along the Yangtze

5 This is not to say, however, that these four are the only photographers worthy of interest. For example, Benson (2006) and Butler (2004) have published important photobooks on the same topic. Others such as Chetham (2004) have combined the more scholarly tone with personal observations. Moreover, the Three Gorges was the object of two noteworthy exhibitions in 2007 that would deserve closer attention: "Three Gorges / Sanxia," Minnesota Center for Photography, Minneapolis, and "Na shan, na shui, na ren—Chen Wen, Li Ming, Song Ge Sanxia yingxiang zhan" (那山，那水，那人 — 陈文，黎明，宋戈三峡影像展), Jianeng Yingxiang Kongjian, Beijing.

River going back to the Daxi and Ba cultures, and land use, to name only the major challenges.[6]

There were two main problems according to most Chinese and international observers. First, the resettlement of 1.4 million people was the most pressing issue, which explains why journalists such as Dai Qing made their voices heard and aroused the ire of Chinese authorities.[7] Second, the construction of the dam worried environmentalists because its potential collapse would have disastrous consequences for the environment and the population. Bearing in mind the collapse of the Shimantan and Banqiao dams, Henan Province, in August 1975, which killed more than 85,000 people, the impending catastrophe was on the minds of several observers such as Dai, who claimed that building a series of smaller dams on the Yangtze's tributaries would have achieved the nation's energy targets.

The artistic responses to the Three Gorges Dam have been varied. Liu Xiaodong's series of Three Gorges paintings, filmmaker Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren*) and *Dong*, and Li Yifan and Yan Yu's documentary film, *Before the Flood* (*Yanmo*), are the most well-known works associated with the controversial dam (Wu, "Internalizing Displacement"). These and other artists who documented the area in the midst of profound changes in the early 2000s now belong to the long tradition of Chinese artists such as Li Bai and Du Fu who have been inspired by the breathtaking scenery. However, contrary to the elegiac tone used by their forebears, the painters, filmmakers, and photographers who have turned their attention to the Three Gorges area adopt a more cautionary than celebratory tone. As one curator has put it regarding documentary photographers: their works act as "evidence of transformation and suggest the many facets and implications of this extraordinary undertaking." (Slade 10) The photographic responses to the Three Gorges Dam project thus demand that we pay close attention to how photographers have approached the hydroelectric event. While conceptual and compositional strategies differ from photographer to photographer, the viewer soon notices that there remains the need to refract the event using the faces of the Chinese in various individual and group portraits and to focus on the changing landscape via buildings in ruins.

6 For studies of the Three Gorges Project and its related social challenges, see Luk and Joseph (1993), Heggelund (2004), and Tan (2008).

7 Dai Qing is a journalist who was imprisoned for publishing a book of interviews and essays critical of the Three Gorges Dam project in 1989. Since then, she has been involved in another book project and has served as an inspiration for critics both Chinese and Western. See Dai (1994) and (1998).

The photographs documenting the Three Gorges to be discussed in this section cover the period between 1996 and 2010.[8] Some of the most well-known images of the area are those of Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, whose oversized color photographs of the Three Gorges were shot in Fengjie, Wushan, and Wanzhou between 2002 and 2005.[9] The title of Burtynsky's first publication devoted to China, *Before the Flood* (2003), clearly indicates the intention underlying the project: capturing the lives of individuals on the move, the actions of demolition workers, and the ruins left behind. Burtynsky's retrospective photobook published two years later, *China*, opens with the photos taken in the Three Gorges area, but it does not limit itself to it. Indeed, *China* is the summation of Burtynsky's work in the country, and the book features sections about steel and coal, old industry, shipyards, recycling, manufacturing, and urban renewal.[10]

In order to document the gigantic nature of the Chinese modernizing forces at play in the Three Gorges Dam project, Burtynsky uses a view camera, repeat photography, and the panoramic book format. "Dam #2, Three Gorges Dam Project, Yangtze River, 2002" (*China* n.p.) captures an imposing section of the dam in construction spread over two pages in panoramic fashion. Other photographs, taken in Fengjie and Wushan, archive the massive urban destruction that took place prior to the flooding of the areas and indulge in framing areas in ruins. Shot eight weeks apart in 2002, "Three Gorges Dam Project, Feng Jie #1" (*Before the Flood* 4) and "Three Gorges Dam Project, Feng Jie #2" (*Before the Flood* 5) masterfully reveal the pace of change in Fengjie once demolition workers started tearing down the walls of the various buildings in the background of the first photo taken. In the second picture, the background buildings have disappeared. Relying upon "repeat photography" (also known as "re-photography" and "before-and-after photography"), Burtynsky thus allows change and transformation to enter the still image. It is also used in two other pictures, this time taken in Wanzhou. "Three Gorges Dam Project, Wan Zhou #5" (*Before the Flood* 12) features a side view of an already half demolished

8 The photographer who first "specialized" in capturing the Three Gorges was Chinese. She Daike travelled there in the 1960s, that is, well before Western photographers got interested in the region as a result of the dam project.

9 Several of Burtynsky's Three Gorges photographs can be found online. See http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/site_contents/Photographs/China.html.

10 An aspect of Burtynsky's work that would deserve further investigation is the omnipresence of China in his photos of the early 2000s. China still occupies a central place in Burtynsky's latest projects, the photobook *Water* (2013) and the documentary film *Watermark* (2013), co-directed with Jennifer Baichwal, which actually opens with a sequence shot in China.

building in the background and two demolition workers in the foreground. "Wan Zhou #4, Three Gorges Dam Project" (*China* 27) captures the façade of the same building spectacularly suspended in midair before it crumbled to the ground to suggest how the event took place in real time.[11]

Burtynsky's photographs of various areas that were to be flooded focus on the cost of hydroelectric modernization as refracted in ruins. In fact, Burtynsky's work in China expresses two tensions: the mixture of environmental anxiety and "catastrophism" (Dupuy) that his photographs reveal, and the concern for the size of post-industrial transformations via a detached, almost abstract perspective. This greatly impacts the way in which the viewer is meant to appropriate his photographs: "The spectator is thrust into an ambiguous situation of pondering pictures of ecological devastation while beholding dazzling visual surfaces. Such is the visual event Burtynsky stages with his photographs." (Bordo 91) A problem thus arises from the fact that Burtynsky's photographs double the event they are supposed to document by acting as pictorial events themselves. This may explain the critical reception his work has faced, especially in terms of aestheticization, abstraction, and detachment. As we shall see, other photographers approached the Three Gorges with a very different goal in mind in the early 2000s.

A retired ER doctor now living in Beijing, American photographer Bill Zorn zeroes in on the Three Gorges and the faces of the Chinese whose lives were impacted by the building of the dam and the resettlement campaign rather than the sites or buildings themselves, which, if present, serve only as background to the more humanistic portraits he privileges.[12] Zorn's black-and-white photographs focus on the "landscape of the Chinese face" in order to offer a "personal portrait of the area between Yichang and Fengjie with a two year exposure, between 2001 and 2003." (n.p.) Zorn's preface to his photobook makes a very pregnant remark on refraction to the effect that it is through the eyes of the descendants of the countless Chinese that we can observe the Three Gorges as event, and it is by means of documenting the faces of the Chinese that he has most poignantly archived a disappearing area and its people.

Accompanied by quotes from Laozi, Bai Juyi, Kongzi, Du Fu, and Li Bai in both Chinese and English translation, Zorn's photographs combine landscape

11 Intriguingly, these two photographs of Wanzhou do not appear in *China*; only "Wan Zhou #4" does. In the case of *Before the Flood*, "Wan Zhou #4" is not featured in the book itself but on the book cover. For more about Burtynsky's work in China, see the award-winning Canadian documentary film, *Manufactured Landscapes* (dir. Jennifer Baichwal, 2006).

12 A selection of Zorn's China photographs can be found on his website: http://www.billzorn.com/china/intro.shtml.

and portraiture, interiors and exteriors. Two of the most iconic photographs in Zorn's series are "Nai-Nai and Grandbaby, Qingshi" (48) and "Chengkehua, Daxi Village, Qutang Gorge" (39), which is a well-composed portrait of a grandmother holding a baby in her arms, with the background displaying the river and the mountainous area, and the portrait of a man against the dramatic natural background provided by Qutang Gorge, respectively. The first photograph frames the two generations and the implicit disparity between the life experiences of the grandmother, who, we assume, had been living there for decades and whose habitat was on the verge of being flooded, and the uncertain future of the baby. Contemplating this image a decade after it was made, the viewer comes to the conclusion that their shared experience is to have been relocated. "Peisha Village, Wu Gorge" (54) is another photograph that testifies to Zorn's superlative abilities as a portraitist of the elderly. Other pictures such as "Fengjie Square" (20) are group portraits in which local residents gathered around the photographer "to be in the shot," and "Fengjie" (27) uses the same compositional strategy to capture the smiling faces of young children. While a photographer such as Burtynsky exclusively focuses on more dramatic urban scenes and buildings in ruins, Zorn captures the face of the place, so to speak, using masterfully conceived portraits that refract the Three Gorges event. After having examined how Western photographers have documented the Three Gorges, let us have a look at how two of their most outstanding Chinese counterparts have documented the Three Gorges project.

A Jiangsu-born photographer who has been living in Paris for more than twenty years, Zeng Nian has offered some of the most artistically perfected photographs of the Three Gorges. Collected in a beautifully conceived book published in Lyon, France, which aptly uses the panoramic book format to fit the orientation of Zeng's photographs, these images combine Burtynsky's and Zorn's styles in order to offer a vivid account of the region before the completion of the dam project. Using both color and black-and-white, Zeng provides stunning photographs of the entire building process using the wide-angle lens. Zeng's photobook adopts a clear thematic progression focusing on demolition, resettlement, dam building and workers, archeological matters and object culture, and, finally, life in Chongqing. The book chronologically retraces the photographer's steps between 1996 and 2010, making his work one of the most sustained photographic inquiries into the Three Gorges project. The main advantage of Zeng's photobook design is to take the viewer on a journey from the first years after the construction of the dam was announced to the now inundated areas and relocated families.

A former member of Contact Press Images who is now with GAMMA, Zeng, as mentioned above, could be said to combine Burtynsky's and Zorn's styles to

fashion a unique portrait of the Three Gorges *qua* event over fourteen years. Indeed, Zeng deftly uses both the panoramic perspective and the close-up portrait to effectively convey a sense of the place and the locals. In fact, having already examined Burtynsky's and Zorn's conceptual strategies, it appears that one of Zeng's most successful strategies is to have struck a good balance between the place, its people, *and* its material culture. In other words, Zeng's strategy is to be able to read the Three Gorges event as refracted in the faces, landscapes, and objects left behind before the area was inundated.

A few photographs will suffice to illustrate Zeng's method. A solemn panoramic black-and-white group portrait shows how Zeng uses the human face to refract the drama in the region. "Three Lumberjacks" (48-49) captures in a side view three men gazing at something unidentified across the river. The caption reveals that their intense, collective gaze stares at the gate of Kui (*Kuimen*). One can read in their gazes the immensity of the transformations afoot and the human presence dwarfed by the mountainside. Finally, noteworthy color portraits (102-103) remind the viewer of Zorn's work and its focus on the elderly gazing at the urban landscape in ruins.

Another strategy to illustrate the changing nature of landscape itself is to have photographed Zigui County, Hubei Province, at least twice in 1996 and 2010. The 1996 color picture (69), which includes a blurry funeral procession, archives the Yangtze in the background, and, most importantly, the buildings that would either be demolished or flooded. Returning to Zigui County in 2010, that is, fourteen years later, Zeng's use of re-photography captures a stunningly different area: the buildings in the 1996 color picture are invisible, and the city life in the 2010 black-and-white panoramic picture is imbued with nostalgia and features two workers gazing across the river and a German shepherd in the foreground (234-235). Water dominates the scene, as a ferry can be seen making its way to the other side of the river.

Concerning material culture, one of the most vivid ways in which Zeng manages to convey what will be lost is in his black-and-white photographs of White Crane Ridge (*Baiheliang*) in Fuling District, Chongqing (88-89). The natural giant stone ridge that was 1750 yards long and 18 yards wide is now submerged. It featured hydrological inscriptions, poems, and fish carvings, some of them dating back to the Tang dynasty.[13] Whether it be via portraits, landscapes, or objects, Zeng delivers a complete photographic account of the Three Gorges as refracted in the quotidian aspects of life in the area.

13 Fortunately, there is an underwater museum, which opened in 2009, where visitors can still have access to the ridge.

The last example of work done in the Three Gorges area is that of Yan Changjiang. Having published two books about the Three Gorges area, Yan should occupy a central place in any examination of the photographic documentation of the Three Gorges.[14] Born in Zigui County, Hubei Province, in 1968, Yan is a graduate of Wuhan University, and works as a picture editor for *Yancheng wanbao*. In *Sanxia rizhi*, Yan presents the diary of his travels in the Three Gorges area and along the Yangtze between 2002 and 2008. This work is a most idiosyncratic document of the Three Gorges region that belongs more to the photographic essay genre than the traditional photobook.[15] Heavily relying upon the written word given its nature as a diary, Yan's publication offers autobiographical snippets, hand-drawn maps, and long meditations upon his travels written in both vernacular language and classical Chinese. The color photographs accompanying Yan's daily entries capture the faces, landscapes, and artefacts encountered in various counties such as Zigui, Yunyang, Fengdu, Fengjie, Badong, and Wushan and suburbs of Chongqing such as Fuling and Changshou. Yan's diary contains more than 200 pictures, 2002 and 2003 having been his busiest years.

Yan's photographs alternate between the genres (portraiture and urban landscape) and the spaces covered so far in the work of Burtynsky, Zorn, and Zeng, although his aesthetics is far less polished than that of these three photographers and recalls street photography aesthetics. Some of the most moving portraits in the photo essay include the image of a middle school classroom in Yan's hometown, Zigui, the children's faces staring at the photographer's lens and provoking the viewer into thinking about the future of these students once relocated (127); the portrait of a middle-aged man standing next to a statue of the mythical Da Yu (2100 BCE), who is said to have tamed the floods, reminds the viewer of the perennial place flood control has occupied in Chinese history (233); and the photograph of Liu Guoxiu, a former army volunteer, in a shrine dedicated to Guanyin, the bodhisattva associated with compassion and mercy, in the town of Yuzui, Chongqing (275).

The landscapes found in Yan's diaries vary greatly, and some of the most interesting photographs were taken in Yan's hometown, going from the idyllic to the city in ruins à la Burtynsky. For example, an ancient gate in the process of being demolished (54) and a primary school in ruins whose mural is still visible amongst the rubble (59) refract the Three Gorges event in Yan's

14 It is no small irony that Yan's given name, Changjiang (长江), means "long river," which is also the Chinese name of the Yangtze (*Changjiang*).

15 I will focus on the 2009 publication, as it contains most of the images found in the 2003 work and is the more recent and comprehensive work.

urban landscape photo work. More picturesque in nature, the photo on the book cover of the diary is one of the most memorable in the lot. Shot in Daxi, Wushan County (181), it features a man crouched over facing a mountainous landscape whose bluish aura shrouds the area at dawn.

Regarding the documentation of material culture, Yan focuses his efforts on the remains and visible traces in objects themselves. For example, near Chongqing, Yan archives the remains of folk calligraphy carved in a stone monument that is still standing on the site of a former grain depot in ruins (219). Also noteworthy is a series of three photographs of White Crane Ridge (*Baiheliang*) in Fuling District, already discussed above. Yan adopts a strategy different from Zeng's more detached perspective, however, insofar as he zeroes in on one fish carved in stone (151). Then, he proceeds to photograph the same inscriptions Zeng shot for the second picture (156). The third photo is a most fascinating act of preservation, showing two men using tracing paper to copy two birds carved in stone before they were submerged (157).

The last picture in the book is quite significant at the end of the viewer's journey (and Yan's), and it was taken on a ferryboat in Mudong, Chongqing, in 2008.[16] Its particularity is that in the center of the image one finds a newborn baby. The caption reads: "2008 nian 4 yue 16 ri, Mudong, Changjiang duchuan shang de xin shengming." (379) It is quite fitting that Yan's work should end on a celebratory note, for the "new life" (*xin shengming*) that he privileges in the end is the one that will not have known the hardships associated with the Three Gorges firsthand, and that will nevertheless be the continuation of life in the region. Though it may be Yan's farewell to the area reaching the end of the road, this newborn baby's presence serves as an unassuming welcome after several years of travels documenting the refracted impact of the Three Gorges Dam project.

Conclusion: Why Photography Matters to the Chinese as Never Before

The formation of twentieth-century Chinese society as captured by photographers could include a myriad of events such as the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the Cultural Revolution. The two chosen events examined in this article being roughly one hundred years apart, their singular function is to bookend a century of Chinese revolutions, starting with the

16 Yan reminisces about his experience that day in a 2012 blog entry. See http://yanchangjiang.vip.blog.163.com/blog/static/300414042012315111156450/.

birth of the republic after two millennia of socio-political life predicated upon Confucian principles and ending with the building of the Three Gorges Dam in the era of economic reform and openness, which symbolizes yet another event in China's quest toward modernization, transformation, and adaptation.

What the photographic documentation of these two events signals is a major concern for cultural memory as refracted in portraits, landscapes, and objects. In fact, for both the 1911 Revolution and the Three Gorges Dam, a key *topos* for photographers, from Francis Stafford to Yan Changjiang, is the significance of ruins as temporal markers of change. Wu Hung's recent study of Chinese visual culture, *A Story of Ruins*, is helpful to summarize the various approaches to the refraction of the event as found in ruins. Focusing on the use of ruins in the visual arts and media from Chinese antiquity to the present, Wu shows how images of ruins, initially a predominant interest of the West, gradually made their way into Chinese culture as a result of war-related destruction and the need to memorialize and monumentalize certain sites and events. In the face of many contemporary art projects interested in documenting urban ruins, one cannot but come to the conclusion that both memory and transition are refracted in these images of ruins.

Inspired by the images of Westerners whose culture of ruin images was based in the pictorial tradition, Chinese artists developed a predilection for ruins in the early twentieth century that was unique to them. As Wu points out: "What became influential and finally developed into a broad visual culture in twentieth-century China was a different kind of ruin and ruin image. Instead of inspiring melancholy and poetic lamentation, they evoke pain and terror." (*Story of Ruins* 121) Whether it be images of war scenes or of late twentieth-century urban demolition, they record "destruction that left a person, city, or nation with a wounded body and psyche." (*Story of Ruins* 121) As refracted records of events, such images have come to stand in for what Wu has described as a "suspended temporality" (*Story of Ruins* 172) that oscillates between the past, present, and future of China. This is the story the photos discussed in this article tell, regardless of the photographer's nationality one might add, as China reemerges and transitions into a new era of its already rich and fascinating history.

It is a truism today to remark that we live in a world of images. In fact, one could say that, in the West, we are bombarded with images *of* China. Ever since the implementation of the economic reforms, the proliferation of images of China has been continuous and often reinforces the Orientalist biases of yesteryear. Given China's eventful history, it is no wonder that it has always been a privileged object of fascination in the West. Starting with the first European missionaries who set foot in China in the seventeenth century to convert the

Chinese, China has remained at the heart of the West's concerns, and this is not going to change now that China has positioned itself as one of the world's top economic leaders. It will be Chinese photographers' role to counterbalance the images produced in the West about their society and develop their own poetics of documentary knowledge. Reviving the role of the socially committed photographer in China will be key to accomplish this.

In recent years, there have been several efforts at re-legitimizing photography in light of both its ubiquitous status and the prevalence of moving-image media that seem to have rendered it passé. For example, Michael Fried (2008) and Jerry L. Thompson (2013) have both sought to demonstrate that photography still matters. For Fried, it is the fine art photography tradition (Jeff Wall's work and the Düsseldorf School mainly) that still matters. For Thompson, it is the legacy of 1930s documentary photography and its key figure, Walker Evans, that matter. In other words, according to Fried and Thompson, photography would still matter because of its accomplishments in the realm of fine art photography and documentary photography. What is most telling, however, is the sense of urgency that belies the very question of photography's meaningfulness in the twenty-first century, a question that neither Fried nor Thompson ponders but which the Chinese can answer from a very different perspective.

The Chinese know that photography matters to record and archive the great transformations their country has undergone over the last 150 years. The only caveat is that the production and distribution of images were in the hands of Westerners whose ownership and command of photographic technology allowed them to capture the formation of a modern nation for so long that a rebalancing needed to take place.[17] The major change is that since the mid-1970s the Chinese have restarted documenting themselves, and have produced a diversified photographic body of knowledge that is still mostly unknown in the West beyond what can be found in coffee table books. Building off Richard Kent's comment to the effect that the Chinese would have to reclaim the documentary photography tradition left behind in the Mao years, one can certainly say mission accomplished in light of the work of documentary photographers such as Zeng Nian, Yan Changjiang, Wu Jialin, Hu Wugong, Lu Yuanmin, Hei Ming, Zhao Tielin, and Zhang Xinmin, among others. Moreover, an artistic event whose importance will only emerge with time is the "Humanism in

17 Drawing upon Jack Goody's revisionist position in *The Theft of History*, one could very well claim that, in the second half of the nineteenth century, there occurred the theft of Chinese history via photographic means given that the visual history of the period that was and still is available today is the result of the efforts of Westerners living in China.

China" exhibition, held at the Guangzhou Museum of Art in 2003, which collected the works of many of the aforementioned photographers. An impressive catalogue (Wang and Hu 2003) featuring essays by well-known Chinese photographers and critics accompanied the pioneering exhibition.

In his insightful study of contemporary photography, Michel Poivert devotes a chapter to the fate of photojournalism and documentary photo after the rise of broadcast media. He remarks that in the works of photographers such as Eric Baudelaire, Luc Delahaye, and Carl De Keyzer, there occurs a fictionalization of historical matters, which points to the alternative role photography has come to play in the West to offer something that live television coverage cannot envisage. Reaching the end of this study, it is important to underline that, in the case of China, documentary photo and photojournalism have not exhausted their role as provider of visual information about the Chinese. Although there are photographers such as Liu Zheng, whose *The Chinese* (2008) may come to occupy in China the same place as Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1958) occupies in the West, who have already started fictionalizing Chinese history, the various documentary book series available and the images coming out of China today show that the tradition is thriving. If Wang Hui is right to claim that the "political subjectivity [*zhengzhi zhutixing*] of New China was established on the basis of the foundation of its own historical activity" (105), then one can add that future documentary activity will help to ground the political subjectivity of twenty-first-century China.

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