

[Please note this is a pre-publication version (post peer review) of a review article published in *The Journal of Architecture*. Full citation:

Sterling, C. 2016. An Era Without Memories: Chinese Contemporary Photography on Urban Transformation. *The Journal of Architecture* 21(7), 1159-1164]

An Era Without Memories: Chinese Contemporary Photography on Urban Transformation

Edited by Jiang Jiehong

London, Thames and Hudson, 2015

ISBN 9780500544433 (hbk)

pp. 192, 132 illustrations, 115 in colour

Almost since its invention, one of the key values ascribed to photography has been its capacity to record things – people, places, ways of life – on the brink of change. As Baron Pollock, then President of the Photographic Society, famously declared in 1855, photography would allow everything subjected to visual observation to be ‘rendered permanent, so that whatever is noticed now be noticed by all the world for ever.’²¹ Although photography is ostensibly defined by this notion of fixedness – an immobility that both conveys and responds to wider appeals to preserve and protect – it is also bound up with ideas of development, transformation and variation; with the shifts that elicit a desire to document.

This tension underpins *An Era Without Memories*, a compendium of photographic work by contemporary Chinese artists confronting in very different ways the vast changes seen across urban China in recent decades. This is not a book to turn to for a dispassionate historical overview of new architectural forms. Instead, it provides a highly personal and intensely provocative impression of the important role creativity can play in the face of loss and revolution. Photography in this context is not simply a tool of documentation, but rather a vital interlocutor in discussions around demolition, development, urbanisation and – perhaps most forcefully – the sense of dislocation these processes give rise to. What emerges here is thus a critical photographic engagement with the constantly evolving morphologies of the Chinese city, and the impact these changes have on notions of identity, home, history and memory.

The reach of the volume is broad, taking in work by over thirty artists active across the country between the mid 1990s and 2014. This time period reflects a recent and widespread history of vast urbanisation, but it also resonates with the editor’s own personal experiences. As Jiehong writes in a short afterword, ‘the house where I was born has disappeared, and my kindergarten and schools have been relocated, rebuilt or renamed. Urban development is not only about construction; it also involves social transformation and – certainly, to me – disorientation, both geographical and cultural.’²² By collating and interpreting these photographic endeavours Jiehong therefore implicitly examines his own sensitivity to change in China, as seen from the perspective of a UK-based expat and Professor of Chinese Art. This positionality lends the volume a distinctive energy that animates the images within, assembled around four themes: ‘Ephemeral Cities,’ ‘The Otherness of the Real,’ ‘An Alienated Home,’ and ‘Memories Invented.’ Rather than offer a coherent narrative of the change seen in China over the past twenty to thirty years, this approach works along the grain of Jiehong’s personal disorientation, taking us backwards and forwards in time and opening out onto new and unexpected critical vantage points across a host of spatial contexts. The result is a thrilling if sometimes confused look at what Pierre Nora –

discussing the European experience of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – famously called the ‘acceleration of history,’ a phenomenon that eradicates ‘real environments of memory’ and replaces them with ‘*lieux de mémoire*.’ sites of memory that are both topographical and constituted from ‘sifted and sorted historical traces.’ⁱⁱⁱ

The association here with Nora’s work is useful (and encapsulated in the very title of the volume), but it may be misleading. While the urbanisation of China has gone hand-in-hand with a nationwide increase in museums, heritage sites, historic quarters and other ‘sites of memory,’ this was preceded not by generations of ‘timeless practice’ (the phrase is Nora’s), but by Mao’s Cultural Revolution, a movement that explicitly sought to destroy ‘the “Four Olds” (Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, Old Ideas)’ as part of an ideology asserting ‘no construction without destruction.’^{iv} The experiences of urban development traversed in *An Era Without Memories* therefore document not a wholesale shift in attitudes to the past, but an intensification of processes initiated under the Maoist regime. Indeed, as Stephan Feuchtwang writes in his excellent introductory essay, the post-Mao craze for modernisation has destroyed huge swathes of the city, replacing ‘the old with pastiches of the centres and suburbs, skyscrapers and villas of the most powerful and wealthy imagined “West”.’^v Against this backdrop, the artists gathered here explore the fragility of any ‘temporal anchoring’^{vi} for memory. Somewhat paradoxically – as the only familiar and ongoing experience of the city – transformation itself becomes a form of anchor under these circumstances: a persistent phenomenon that allows past, present and future to be negotiated and understood, giving rise to highly fluid conceptualisations of memory and heritage.

The work of Chen Shaoxiong is a case in point. In the late 1990s Shaoxiong began to create small three-dimensional collages of city life – complete with pedestrians, cyclists, advertising, traffic and street furniture – by mounting cut outs from original photographs onto a blank board. He would then take these collages out into the ‘real’ city of Guangzhou and photograph them against an ever evolving backdrop of cranes and high-rise towers. The artist’s justification for this process is worth quoting, capturing as it does many of the themes drawn out in the volume:

Although I am a resident of Guangzhou, I still have a tourist mentality towards this city. Not just because this city will outlive me, but faced with the daily changes, I often have the feeling of being elsewhere [...] the speed with which I photograph the streets of Guangzhou will never catch up with the speed with which the streets of Guangzhou are changing.^{vii}

In Shaoxiong’s photographic world the collage becomes the foreground, sharply focusing a constructed memory of place that pushes the city itself to the margins, fuzzy and indistinct. This is how the present feels to the city dweller, and the only ‘things’ worth preserving are those infinitesimal gestures and moments that photography allows us to cut out of the frenetic flow of everyday life.

Hu Jieming’s *Where is My Home* operates in a similar way, but at a vastly different scale. Imposing photographs of his home town Shanghai onto the geography and urban layout of Guangzhou, Jieming creates a hybrid and impossible city entirely false yet entirely documentary. This painstaking process explores the madness of mapping and delineating boundaries in the face of a constantly evolving landscape, and while the spectre of appropriation and colonisation hangs over the resulting image, the playfulness of such a wholesale visual resettlement is beguiling.

Dislocation of another kind is found in the work of Zhang Peli. In two images taken one year apart at the entrance to the Hangzhou Parterre, Peli documents the exact same location from the exact same spot, but the entire scene has changed. In place of a tree lined boulevard there is a stark

square, and mountains seem to have appeared in the distance. There are no visual clues to help orient the viewer, no anchors on which to maintain a dialogue between ‘then’ and ‘now.’ Photography in this context seems burdened by its indexical relation to a place no longer accessible. The images are so different, the vistas so fundamentally at odds with each other, that we begin to question their verisimilitude. How could these images possibly have been taken in the same place just twelve months apart? The pace of change here overturns the imagined ‘rootedness’^{viii} of photography by reconstituting the very ground in which such roots might take hold.

This radical redevelopment does not however destroy everything in its path. Some things are left behind, and a number of the artists included here turn their attention to these remnants as a means of grasping and critiquing the broader transformations in which they are situated. Two projects by Shao Yinong and Mu Chen, for example, show leftovers of the Cultural Revolution. In the first series, dating from 2003, the artists set out to document all the Chairman Mao statues remaining across the country. In city squares throughout China the figure of Mao – usually with right hand raised – has stood witness to unprecedented change over recent decades. Recording these locations in grand panoramas and hand-tinting the resulting images to lend the photographs a timeless quality, Yinong and Chen accentuate the idea of monumentality and permanence implicit to the statue. The irony here is that the project was motivated by the impending removal of these effigies, whether as the result of economic development or historical revisionism. The photographs thus become a last hurrah, a wave goodbye. This sense of passing is more acute in the artists’ later series *Assembly Hall*, which documents hundreds of communal spaces across the country that were once the centre of town or village life but are now largely obsolete, the artists recording empty and ruined structures devoid of their original meaning. China has moved on from these revolutionary sites, but – as Jichong writes – ‘they appear determined to guard the spiritual home of past generations...at least until the last minute before the earth-movers start to rumble.’^{ix}

A sense of threat pervades these images, as it does many of the works featured in the volume. Chi Peng’s foreboding and monumental photograph of the Shanghai cityscape – titled *I’m a Little Scared, The Sky is Getting Gloomy* – is perhaps the most direct articulation of this menace, but others draw out a sense of impending catastrophe in subtler ways. Wang Jinsong’s *One Hundred Chai* for instance records the character *chai* (to demolish) inscribed on buildings across Beijing, with the artist sublimating the individual and emotive contexts in which the inscriptions were made into an objective catalogue of the character itself. Rather than neutralise the mark, however, this strategy highlights the ‘despotic, truculent and even tyrannical’^x nature of such demolition, as manifest in the simple graphic form of the character.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the consequences of this demolition are also highlighted by many of the photographers. Rong Rong for example was struck by the spectacle of ruins in mid 1990s Beijing, and his series documents the small signs of previous habitation still clinging to demolished houses across the city. In Shao Yinong’s *A Century’s Dream*, meanwhile, the artist inserted mugwort plants – believed to exorcise evil spirits in Chinese tradition – into the walls of recently destroyed residential areas and then set fire to the flora, photographing the black streaks left behind. These traces take on a strange quality in the resulting images, like sores on an open wound. Even more extreme in their constructed disposition are the *literati* style landscapes assembled by Yao Lu. At first glance the blues and greens of these circular images appear serenely nostalgic, but in fact the bucolic ‘landscapes’ are composed from mounds of rubbish covered with dustproof netting – residues of demolition found across the Chinese city. There is more than simply a thematic connection here with the work of Jiang Pengyi, whose series *All Back to Dust* transforms the architecture characteristic of modern China into heaps of rubbish, creating digitally discarded piles of buildings left to slowly decay in open fields.

As the above should make clear, this book offers a probing introduction to the different techniques, ideas and approaches now possible under the umbrella of ‘photography.’ In light of such prospects, we must rethink Burgin’s claim that photographs, as ‘vestiges’ of ‘how things were,’ represent ‘the ruin of the world.’^{xi} While this may be true of the photograph as record or document, the artists assembled in *An Era Without Memories* signal an altogether different attitude. If these photographs are ruins at all, they are more like Stoler’s ‘imperial debris’ – ‘sites that animate new possibilities, bids for entitlement, and unexpected political projects.’^{xii} A new appreciation of the ruin from this perspective might ‘create a sense of irretrievability or of futures lost,’ unsettling alternate histories and shining a critical light on people ‘dispossessed’ or ‘rendered waste’ by the act of ruination.^{xiii} The artists gathered here show how this might work in practice, activating the photograph in a number of critical directions via multiple exposures to the ruin – embodied in the form of demolished buildings, half-built structures and the visual remnant of the photograph itself. As Jiehong writes, photography has ‘always been a means of holding onto the present at the moment of its demise.’^{xiv} The difference in the context of urban China is that ‘the present’ is such a constant tumble of events and experiences that the very process of its demise becomes the foremost space for any articulation of memory, identity or history. Nothing can be held onto, and so the experience of slippage itself becomes an anchoring mechanism.

It would be easy to equate an anthology such as this with earlier photographic responses to large-scale urbanisation and development, such as that seen in the survey movements which swept Britain and France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like the work documented in *An Era Without Memories*, survey photography was built around a tense relationship with the modernisation of cities, although the focus tended to be on things at risk of decay and demolition, rather than the processes of ruin and rebuilding themselves. Referencing but not beholden to the chief concerns of such movements (preservation, memory, history, heritage), the Chinese artists marshaled here might then be said to implicitly reassert Peter Mandle’s call for a revised consideration of ‘the social, economic and political forces behind – and also the cultural meanings of – development.’^{xv} There are however clearly strong overlaps between these two photographic moments (Europe in the nineteenth century, China today). The key point here is to look beyond the surface of the image to distinguish these intersections, engaging with the act of photography, and with the artists who – like the survey photographers before them – aim to mark, ‘in some small way, their own agency in the broader cultural processes of history and modernity.’^{xvi} This landmark volume makes an important contribution to these debates, providing fresh insight as to the human consequences of rampant property speculation, and the place of art and photography in critiquing the architecture of development.

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ⁱ Baron Pollock quoted in F. A. S. Marshall, *Photography: The Importance of its Application in Preserving Pictorial Records of the National Monuments of History and Art* (London: Hering and Remington, 1855), p. 12

ⁱⁱ J. Jiehong, *An Era Without Memories* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), p. 185

ⁱⁱⁱ P. Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire’. *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), pp. 7-24

^{iv} J. Jiehong, *An Era Without Memories*, p. 27

^v J. Jiehong, *An Era Without Memories*, p. 10

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- ^{vi} A. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 7
- ^{vii} J. Jiehong, *An Era Without Memories*, p. 46
- ^{viii} R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1980)
- ^{ix} J. Jiehong, *An Era Without Memories*, p. 31
- ^x W. Qinsong in J. Jiehong, *An Era Without Memories*, p. 103
- ^{xi} V. Burign, *Voyage to Italy* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag), p. 86
- ^{xii} A. L. Stoler, 'Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination'. *Cultural Anthropology* 23 (2008), p. 191-219
- ^{xiii} *ibid.*
- ^{xiv} J. Jiehong, *An Era Without Memories*, p. 7
- ^{xv} P. Mandle, 'Rethinking the "Powers of Darkness": An Anti-History of the Preservation Movement in Britain' in M. Hall, ed., *Towards World Heritage: International Origins of the Preservation Movement 1870-1930* (Farnham & Burlington: Ashgate), pp. 221-239
- ^{xvi} E. Edwards, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885-1918* (Durham & London: Duke University Press), p. 20