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# The New Documents: Creative Shifts in Contemporary Chinese Documentary Photography

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**Abstract:**
*Following China's economic reform and opening-up, contemporary Chinese documentary photography underwent a significant shift. The most notable transformation was the move from Socialist Realism photography to a new form of documentary photography. According to John Szarkowski, former Director of Photography at MoMA, this "new documents" differed from its predecessors by emphasizing "personal purpose" and focusing on "insights into life." These characteristics became increasingly evident in Chinese contemporary documentary photography starting in the early 1980s. When Chinese photographers began to realize that documentary photography serving political purposes should give way to documentary photography reflecting society, the key Western influences that shaped their work were the new wave of documentary photographers emerging in the 1950s. This paper explores the work of six photographers and argues that understanding the shift to this "new documents" provides a crucial framework for comprehending the evolution of contemporary Chinese documentary photography.*

**Keywords**:
*Chinese Contemporary Photography, New Documents, Transformation*

Post-reform and opening-up, every facet of Chinese society, including the arts, experienced monumental changes. In the 1980s, amidst an atmosphere ripe for speculation and innovation, suppressed artistic creativity flourished anew, notably within the realm of photography. A cohort of young photographers sought to break free from the constraints of "traditional" photography, propelling forward the new development of Chinese photography from various angles. This evolution manifested in at least three distinct efforts: emphasizing the formal beauty and artistry of photography, focusing on life and reflecting societal issues, and exploring personal perspectives and the intrinsic language of photography itself. These elements influenced contemporary Chinese photography successively, yet unevenly, in terms of societal reception and the energy and number of photographers involved. Notably, documentary photography, especially, has played a pivotal role in shaping and directing contemporary Chinese photography, so much so that any new generation of photographers must first consider how to transcend the documentary approach.

## 1. Historical Documentation and Individual Expression

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, photographers who had made significant contributions to the Communist Party’s photographic efforts, along with others from the Nationalist-con-

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trolled areas like Zhang Yinquan and Zhang Zudao, formed the first generation of photographers in the new China. From the 1950s, photographers who had fought in the Communist bases gradually began to dominate the trends in Chinese photography. Propagandistic realism became the mainstream, replacing other photographic forms and emphasizing "grand and complete" artistic representations to inspire and unite people through "image expression." However, with the end of the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent reforms, Chinese realism photography began exhibiting new characteristics. The concept of "documentary photography" became deeply ingrained, influencing decades of photographic evolution in China.

The significant changes in post-reform China provided fertile ground for various forms of photography, including "photojournalism" and "documentary photography." Some works transcended mere visual records or information dissemination, holding significant historical value and artistic qualities. Important groups such as the April Photo Society, Modern Photography Salon, Wide Angle Photo Club (Beijing), Shanghai Group, and the Central and Northwestern China Group established the initial practical systems for the development of contemporary Chinese documentary photography[1].

In June 1981, the concept of "Documentary Photography" was first translated into Chinese by Wang Huimin from the China Film Press, marking a crucial conceptual shift in the introduction of Western photographic classics[2]. Although many Chinese photographers had already started to break away from strongly propagandistic realistic photography three years earlier, the explicit definition of "documentary photography" provided a foundational reference point for the extensive discussions on Chinese photographic development during the 1980s.

However, when we look back at the 1980s and 1990s, a large number of photographers, apart from those working in photojournalism, should be classified under the banner of "New Documents Photography." In 1967, John Szarkowski, in his preface to the "New Documents" exhibition[①], noted that "the new generation of photographers used documentary techniques for more personal purposes. They aimed to understand life rather than transform it. Their work contradicted the conventional pity for societal flaws and fragile emotions. Though the world is harsh, they embraced the genuine world and viewed it as a source of all wonders, charm, and value."[②].

Szarkowski identified the main distinctions of the "new documents" as the emphasis on "personal purpose" and "insight into life," which were also evident in contemporary Chinese documentary photography from around 1980. As Chinese contemporary photographers increasingly recognized the need to shift from politically motivated to socially reflective documentary photography, they were influenced by a new wave of Western documentary photographers from the 1950s.

However, when Chinese photographers express personal values in their images, they often convey a strong social consciousness, or what might be described as a "national sentiment" intertwined with personal objectives.

① The "New Documents" photography exhibition featured 94 photographs by Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand.

② The Chinese translation by Li Xin can be found in the WeChat official account of "Cinema Artists" in the article "New Documents (1967 Exhibition Statement) | John Szarkowski".

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## 2. Reflection, Representation, and Expression

Following China's reform and opening-up, there were clear signs of cultural and intellectual revitalization. This cultural awakening, seen through the emergence of various movements focused on scars, reflection, roots, and rural life, was reflected in contemporary Chinese photography. Yu Haibo, born in 1962, is a leading figure in contemporary Chinese photography. His most famous series records the dramatic changes in Shenzhen after the economic reforms, capturing the lives and dreams of the city's immigrants. However, around the age of 20, he photographed a series in his hometown of Yongcheng, Henan, capturing scenes like livestock markets, grain harvests, and family planning promotions. These rural-themed photographs were distinctly different from earlier representations of rural life, focusing on real life rather than promoting specific images, as photographers consciously began to find meaningful subjects in rural settings to convey their observations and experiences. As noted by Yu Huijian, director of the Henan Museum of Fine Arts, in the preface to the 2022 exhibition "My City, My Hometown—Yu Haibo's Photography Works": "As a photographer who grew up in Henan, his spiritual roots are still deeply connected to the central plains. The Eastern Henan Plain is not just a geographical home but an eternal spiritual homeland for him."[③]

Photographer Hei Ming from Yan'an, Shaanxi, took his exploration of his hometown, northern Shaanxi, a step further in the 1980s. Born in 1964, he joined the China Photographers Association and the China Press Photography Association in 1989. His early work often focused on single-frame photographs depicting his hometown, showcasing not just his deep affection for the Loess Plateau and his concern for people's lives and fates, but also a unique visual style derived from the intrinsic characteristics of photographic language, rather than merely reflecting a specific theme. His works like "Iron Rice Bowl" (1985), "In Front of the Cave Dwelling" (1987), "Sunflower" (1988), and "Electric Hair" (1989) exhibit a distinctive style in his documentary photography, indicating that his approach wasn't just about simple representation but about effectively conveying a deeper expression.

Born in 1958, Chen Haiwen, from Shanghai, is a key representative and driving force of the "Shanghai Group" in contemporary Chinese photography. Since the early 1980s, he's been capturing the urban landscapes and people of Shanghai. His work demonstrates a concerted effort to find authentic ways to depict the reality of social life. He seeks connections—both between the photographed environment and the subjects, and between the photographer and the portrayed objects—reflecting the photographer's perspective that stems from personal experiences. Later, he collected over 20 years of Shanghai-themed photography in a series titled "Happy Survival." These images, depicting letter-writing, careful newspaper reading, and alleyway socializing, illustrate his city-dweller perspective and capture the vibrant spirit of the times.

Documentary photography aims to depict the real world through compelling narratives, inviting viewers to see the world from a fresh perspective. Contemporary Chinese documentary photographers gradually came to recognize their role as storytellers and witnesses of their era, inspiring many to record China's changing landscape by focusing on their hometowns. Born in 1955, Yu Zhixin, who began working at China Picture Agency, part of Xinhua News Agency, in 1973, started his photographic journey in 1979. Despite the convenience of shooting in Beijing, he preferred to travel across the country, capturing the lives of ordinary people. He once remarked on his approach: "I enjoy finding harmony among the bustling crowds. These touching

[③] The exhibition was held from March 16 to April 10, 2022, in Hall 1 of the Henan Provincial Art Museum.

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scenes, simple yet rich in charm, emerge from the everyday lives of ordinary people." This concept reflects in the practices of many documentary photographers in the 1980s and 1990s, where the images might depict "ordinary people's everyday lives," but the results were far from ordinary. The dramatic changes in post-reform China provided a rich ground for documentary photographers, fostering new themes and invigorating energy. As society grew more vibrant, documentary photographers continued to explore captivating subjects and novel shooting methods, breathing fresh life into the genre.[3]

Photographer Li Nan, born in 1961, began his photographic journey in 1980, initially focusing on photographic novels and film stills. By the late 1980s, he transitioned to thematic documentary photography, producing several unique series. In 1996, his photograph "Children in the Acrobatic School in Liaocheng" won the 39th World Press Photo Award for Arts, making him the first Chinese photographer to earn this prestigious award, which quickly gained him recognition across China. This photo was from his 1995 series "Children Practicing Acrobatics," which highlighted the beauty of acrobatic movements and showcased the expressive potential of traditional Chinese acrobatics. Another of his series, "The Troupes on the Yellow Land," focused on a Jin opera troupe that performed in Shanxi and Shaanxi, but instead of recording their stage performances, Li captured the backstage atmosphere, conveying rich emotion and a vibrant sense of energy.

## 3. Documenting Life and Society

What determines the value of a photograph? There are many possible answers, but one of the most compelling is that its value arises from the meaning and significance it accumulates over time, lending the photograph its "topic value." At the moment of capture, the photograph is a slice of time; when viewed, time is condensed and perpetuated.

Photographer Xie Hailong, born in 1951, has maintained the topicality of his works for over 30 years. In 1986, China implemented a nine-year compulsory education policy, ensuring all school-age children received elementary and middle school education without tuition fees. While this policy was rapidly adopted in cities and affluent eastern regions, it faced challenges in rural and underprivileged western areas, with school dropouts still prevalent, especially among girls. In October 1989, to promote educational equality, the China Youth Development Foundation launched Project Hope, a nationwide public welfare initiative to help underprivileged children return to school and improve rural education. In March 1991, Xie Hailong became a volunteer for Project Hope. Within a year, he submitted 40 carefully selected photographs to the foundation, many of which were quickly published in China's central media. The most famous of these is "Big Eyes," taken in April 1991 in Jinzhai County, Anhui, featuring a 9-year-old girl named Su Mingjuan looking directly into the camera.

Xie Hailong began documenting China's impoverished education system in 1987, but his connection with Project Hope marked a significant milestone in his career, making him an enduring name in Chinese photography history. His "Big Eyes" photograph became widely recognized, serving as Project Hope's promotional emblem and was even included in elementary school language textbooks and high school art textbooks. The entire series of Project Hope photographs has had a lasting impact for over 30 years. In 1994, he published "I Want to Go to School," a collection of 61 photographs depicting the state of education in poor regions of Chi-

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na, which caused a nationwide sensation. From 1987 onward, he continued to explore this subject, visiting 26 provinces and more than 120 counties, traveling over 25,000 kilometers, persistently capturing the changes in China's foundational education through his lens.

Photography critic Bao Kun praised Xie Hailong's work for Project Hope, stating that it "revealed the true face of Chinese life, promoting social progress in this area. At that time, his work had another significant meaning—it allowed photographs to confront suffering and darkness directly, showcasing them in national public spaces with official recognition and approval, directly influencing changes in China's education system."[4]

In the 1990s, Hei Ming also shifted from single-image artistic photography to documentary series and non-fictional photo essays, depicting stories from various groups in China. By doing so, he not only documented the era but also constructed a unique visual narrative, creating images that transcended historical memory, extending personal and collective recollections. From 1994 to 1997, he photographed over 100 former Beijing "Zhiqing"④who had been sent to the countryside in Shaanxi; from 1998 to 1999, he documented 100 "Rightists" across more than 20 provinces, municipalities⑤, and autonomous regions; from 1996 to 2004, he completed a field study of "New Yaozi," a small mountain village on the outskirts of Yan'an; from 2000 to 2003, he photographed over 100 monks at Shaolin Temple; from 2004 to 2009, he chronicled China's dramatic societal changes by contrasting old and new photographs in front of Tiananmen; from 2010 to 2015, he photographed 100 World War II veterans; in 2013, he ventured into the Taklamakan Desert, exploring the last "tribe" in China, the Keriya people, at Daryabuyi.

Meanwhile, Yu Haibo, Li Nan, Chen Haiwen, and Yu Zhixin also explored the intersection of personal expression and societal progress in their photography. In 1989, Yu Haibo moved to Shenzhen as a photojournalist, documenting the city for over 30 years. He photographed the lives of various groups such as factory workers, small business owners, and entrepreneurs, capturing the aspirations and dreams sparked by Shenzhen's rapid growth. His decade-long focus on Dafen Village, known as the "oil painting village," offered a glimpse into this unique cultural industry.

In addition to his well-known "Children in the Acrobatic School in Liaocheng," Li Nan is best known for

④ "Zhīqīng" refers to "educated youths." During the Cultural Revolution, universities in China ceased admissions, leaving many high school graduates without opportunities for further education or employment. In this context, Chairman Mao Zedong issued a directive in 1968 stating that it was necessary for educated youths to go to the countryside to "be re-educated by the poor and middle peasants." From 1968 to 1978, over 16.23 million urban youths were sent to rural areas. After the restoration of the university entrance exam and the beginning of economic reforms, many returned to the cities, though some remained in the countryside.

⑤ "Rightists" refers to those labeled in October 1957 by the CCP Central Committee in the "Notice on the Criteria for Identifying Rightists," who were accused of opposing the socialist system, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the system of democratic centralism, and the leadership of the Communist Party in national political life. That year, a large-scale anti-rightist campaign was launched, which was later shown to have wrongly targeted over 550,000 intellectuals and patriots. They were gradually rehabilitated and had their reputations restored after 1980.

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his extended series documenting the last group of "foot-bound women" from 1982 to 2005[⑥], with most photographs taken in the 1990s. This series reflects his focus on human destiny and his keen insight into evolving Chinese culture.

The rapid societal changes in China have significantly influenced contemporary documentary photography. Yu Zhixin's collection, titled "Vanishing Images," reflects the photographer's vision for contemporary documentary photography's future role. His photographs of teahouses in Shaoxing and theater actors in Beijing represent his perspective: "Recording those existing states that are about to vanish."

Chen Haiwen's ambitious "56 Ethnic Groups in China" series demonstrates this ambition even further. Starting in 2008, he spent 12 years traveling through 28 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions, visiting 554 counties and cities, traveling 260,000 kilometers to document the culture and lifestyles of all 56 ethnic groups in China. This work not only represents the personal sentiment of the photographer but also the broader societal commitment to documenting social realities.

Over the past 40 years, many photographers have enriched contemporary Chinese documentary photography through their innovation and creativity. While the six photographers mentioned in this article are key representatives, their work clearly demonstrates the transition from individual expression to social expression, from socialist realism to a new form of documentary photography, providing valuable insights into the evolution of Chinese documentary photography after China's reform and opening-up.

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⑥ "Women with bound feet" refers to women who underwent foot binding, a cruel practice that began around the Song Dynasty. It involved tightly wrapping the feet of young girls with cloth to deform and minimize them, symbolizing "feminine beauty." Foot binding usually started when girls were around four to five years old and continued until their bones stopped growing. It was a form of physical mutilation of women, and its prevalence decreased significantly after the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty, being completely abolished after the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

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