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Access Point: Yuan Dongping’s *Mental Patients in China* and the State of Chinese Documentary Photography in the 1990s

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History, Hunter College The City University of New York

2018

Thesis Sponsor:

December 15, 2018

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DEDICATION

To my family.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis advisor Professor Wen-Shing Chou for providing invaluable feedback throughout the research process, from determining the thesis topic to reviewing the final draft. I would also like to extend my genuine thanks to my second reader Professor Antonella Pelizzari for her encouragement and help in sharpening my argument during and outside of the thesis workshop. A heartfelt thank you to my friends who were always there for me these past two years. A special thank you finally to my family for supporting all my dreams and goals, including returning to school after years of work.
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INTRODUCTION

In early 1989, Yuan Dongping, a Chinese photographer who was then the photo editor at the Chinese state-run *Nationality Pictorial* magazine (民族画报) in Beijing, was invited by his old college friend Wang Binghu to visit a mental hospital in Tianjin, where Wang’s sister worked. It was almost Chinese New Year and Wang suggested the self-taught photographer to attend the hospital’s annual New Year festival performed by the staff and patients. This was the first time Yuan had stepped foot in a mental institution and engaged with mentally ill patients, and unbeknownst to him at the time, his interaction and the photographs he took in his subsequent visits would mark the beginning of a multiyear project that brought the relatively unknown magazine editor to the forefront of Chinese contemporary photography in the early 1990s.

Over the next three years, Yuan took on a personal mission, initially along with fellow photographer Lü Nan, to track down and visit dozens more mental hospitals and asylums across seven provinces in China including Beijing and Guizhou. In Chinese culture and especially during the Cultural Revolution, mental illness has been strongly associated with shame for the family and perceived as a weakness unfit to serve the Communist Party. Mental institutions were therefore founded more as a security measure for the public during the mid-twentieth century.¹ Inside these isolated spaces and often behind high walls with barbed wires, Yuan’s aim was to capture and document the hidden and almost forgotten lives of mentally ill patients as a way to spotlight the problematic stigmatization of mental illness in China. Though initially he did not have a specific agenda on what to do with the hundreds of images he had taken, in the end forty-

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one were selected and published in 1996 through the China Photographic Publishing House as a photobook entitled *Mental Patients in China*. The book has been out of print since this date.

Given his role at the *Nationality Pictorial*, a monthly magazine founded by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with the aims of promoting the positive image of minority groups in China, Yuan’s independent project certainly presents an interesting departure in terms of its mission and focus. As such, contrary to his social documentary goal, the reception of the photographs was mainly focused on the aesthetics or discussed within the context of contemporary art at the time. Some of the images have earned him a prize for excellence at the prestigious Pictures of the Year (POY, now POYI) in the United States as early as 1992, while a few others were selected for several local and overseas exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art, such as the 1999 seminal travelling exhibition “Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century,” curated by Wu Hung at the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, University of Oregon Museum of Art, and the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College. What is perhaps most ironically of all is how Yuan responds to this success, frequently stating in his interviews that instead of improving the lives of those in his photographs, he became an artist of Chinese avant-garde photography.

Indeed, in the two decades since its publishing, scholars and critics have often written about this series from an art historical perspective. In the catalogue for the “Transience” exhibition, Wu has discussed its relation to the Scar Art and Native Soil Art movements that emerged after the end of the Cultural Revolution, as well as its “humanism” typical of Chinese art and literature from the twentieth-century.² This sense of humanism is similarly highlighted by the Taiwanese art critic Guo Lixin in his essay “The Story of Photography in Contemporary

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In “Documentary Photography- Selection and Representation of Theme,” Zhang Yajie further looks at the series’ unique visual language in presenting the theme of mental patients.  

Instead of examining these previously addressed aspects, this thesis aims to present a new multidisciplinary angle through questioning the discrepancy between the photographer’s intent and the subsequent reception of his work. By looking at China’s mental health policy progress from 1980s to 2000s, identifying the inherent generalization in Yuan’s statement, and exploring the possible biographical, art historical, political, and social factors at play, Yuan’s work serves as an access point that not only reveals one of the most restricted spaces in contemporary Chinese society, but also opens up a crucial discourse on the publishing of Chinese documentary photography after 1989.

Since its beginnings, photography could be seen as a double-edge sword for any authoritarian regime, used as both propaganda machine and a tool of resistance. In China, where the state controls a majority of the players in the photographic field, from artist associations and magazines to publishing houses, photographers who aim to enact change take on an especially daunting challenge of working against the omnipresent state apparatus and bringing the issues to the forefront. Looking at the case of Yuan, I argue that the artist’s position inside the establishment, the independent and apolitical nature of his photobook, as well as the heavy censorship of press and media by the Chinese government, are primary factors in affecting the content and reception of Mental Patients in China. Furthermore, I argue for the necessity of and potential in art historians to address not merely the aesthetics of a social documentary photographic series (as in the case of Yuan), but also, when given the intent of the photographer,

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4 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.
its respective impact (or lack thereof) in the society as a way to push forward the dialogue on social change in their writing.

The paper will be divided into five chapters. The first chapter will set the stage by delving into the background of the *Mental Patients in China* project, from Yuan’s biography, the initial concept, the working process, to the eventual publication of the photobook. A breakdown of the China Photographic Publishing House’s background, the reputation and mission of the *Nationality Pictorial*, Yuan’s intent on publishing the photos, and the format of the book such as the selection of text and images, will offer a broader scope in understanding how Yuan’s job at a state-run magazine could potentially and indirectly affect the direction of the photobook. The photobook’s reception will also be discussed with an analysis of texts written by art historians, as a way to tease out how the structure and content of a photobook could further contribute to the uncritical nature in its readers’ writings. By examining the working method and comparing it with his statement at the beginning, it is clear that his photographs’ failure in improving the lives of those in his work should not have come out as a surprise to the photographer.

Since the concept of documentary photography was introduced to China at a later stage, the second chapter will address the longstanding debates of documentary photography in the West and pin down key questions and issues surrounding this form with reference to seminal texts from the United States. Its goal is to trace out some inherent common pitfalls of the documentary photography form that *Mental Patients in China* could possibly fall into. We will specifically look at theoretical texts by three writers from the United States, namely: Allan Sekula, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Martha Rosler, and with a brief mention of an essay by David Levi-Strauss. Each of these essays is meant to tackle an issue pertaining to documentary photography such as forms of agency, aesthetics and politics, with definition of criticality,
relation between object and subject, and intent of the photographer. Three fundamental questions include: What is the role of documentary photography? What is its function within a capitalist or communist society? How is the photographer’s intent and its audience defined? By looking at these issues, we can have a better understanding about Yuan’s photographs, and realize that the failure to elicit change might after all not be related to his background or culture, but stem from the genre itself.

After exploring the biographical and art historical factors, Chapter 3 will dive into the social and cultural context of China. Divided into two sections, the first part starts off by providing a brief history of China since the nineteenth century up until the founding of the People’s Republic of China by the CCP. It then follows by exploring the state of Chinese photography and publishing during and after the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the beginning of documentary photography and its relationship to news photography in China since the 1980s. It is naturally impossible to discuss book publishing without exploring the political ideology of the state. Thus, historical events such as the April Fifth Movement, the Tiananmen Square incident and their impact on the development and dissemination of documentary photobooks will also be addressed alongside the Chinese government’s strategic role to control and “monopolize” the press and the photographic community through the founding of Xinhua News Agency, The General Administration of Press and Publication, and Chinese Photographers Association.

Under this framework, in the second part of Chapter 3, Yuan’s conscious decision to remain inside the establishment will be compared with other paths taken by his colleagues inside the documentary photographic community, such as Lü Nan, Yuan’s former co-worker who has arguably achieved greater attention for his photobook *Forgotten People: The State of Chinese Psychiatric Wards*. Lü’s success as a freelance journalist and member of Magnum Photos shows
other possibilities of disseminating photographs outside of the government system to a greater audience. Another comparison will be made with two successful case studies during the 1990s in China involving photography and social change, namely Lu Guang’s exposure of the AIDS crisis in a Henan village, and Xie Hailong’s photos for Project Hope on education support in rural communities. This part refers back to Chapter 1 and argues that the potential of Chinese documentary photography in enacting social change depends heavily on the stance of the photographer and the nature of his photographs; they must be either fully against or completely rely on the government to maximize the potential for real change. By placing one foot inside the establishment and one foot out, Yuan essentially ties his own hands and tapers the criticality in his project. On the other hand, Xie and Lu represent two opposite yet successful cases: Xie as an independent photographer who elicits the help of a semi-state run charity project to spotlight the plight of rural education, while Lu publishes his photos entirely outside of and against the establishment through winning global photojournalism awards. Some pertinent questions in this chapter include: What are the role and function of documentary photography in China? What are some of the restraints in publishing experienced by photographers in China? What factors could contribute to the efficacy of documentary photography in China?

In Chapter 4, Yuan’s case will be compared in depth with other photobooks on mental asylums from America and Italy, including Ward 81 by Mary Ellen Mark, Manicomio by Raymond Depardon, and Morire di Classe by Gianni Berengo Gardin and Carla Cerati. Since Depardon was especially cited by Yuan as a successful example on enacting social change which he hopes to emulate with his work, in here and Chapter 5, we will actually see how Yuan’s over-generalized statement disregards some of the nuances in Depardon’s case, one of which is

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that his project took place right before the passing of the Italian law for deinstitutionalized reform. Nonetheless, through analyzing the structure and content of Mark’s, Depardon’s and Gardin and Cerati’s photobooks, we are able to look at some common themes and aesthetics used by the western photographers that are missing in Yuan’s book. Each of these three photobooks also points to a different working method that could serve as an improved alternative for Yuan. In particular, Mark’s approach to include a text by a social scientist offers an intimate portrait of the patients’ stories and histories that could not be represented in photographs. Depardon’s focus on the relationship between doctors and patients also points to the often ignored humanity inside these sterile spaces. Last but not least, Gardin and Cerati’s propagandistic project and its longstanding legacy points to the inevitable role of politics for photobooks that do succeed in making change. Finally, we will also look at two reviews of Mark’s photographs by critics as a possibility for discussing social change in the writings of documentary photography.

The difference in the perception of mental illness and progress with deinstitutionalization between China, the U.S., and Italy will be addressed in Chapter 5. This involves the discussion of mental illness as a taboo subject in China from a historical perspective and more important, its skewed perception by the public and the government during the Cultural Revolution as reflected through policies and propaganda campaign implemented by the Communist regime. Statistical data and an overview of funding and state-supported treatment program for mentally ill patients will also be provided. Given the examples of deinstitutionalization in the U.S. and Italy, as well as the singular focus of mental hospitals in the series, this study will define “change” in Yuan’s statement as the concrete implementation of some sorts of mental health reforms and even the phasing out of mental hospitals in China by the government. It is in this part where I will concentrate on the progress of mental health treatment in China, especially in late 1990s to
2000’s, as a way to question Yuan’s statement that nothing has changed for these patients. Furthermore, the social and cultural context surrounding Mark’s and Depardon’s project will also be looked at to show that their works do not stand on their own, but rather are part of a larger dialogue in the growing deinstitutionalized movements.

In terms of methodology, the paper will rely on an art historical, social, and historical approach, focusing primarily on artist interviews, writings by art historians, historiography on Chinese contemporary photography since 1976 by scholars such as Wu Hung and Claire Roberts, essays on documentary photography by Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and David Levi-Strauss, research and catalogue essays on Yuan, Mark, Depardon, Gardin and Cerati. For social and historical materials, I will be looking at research articles directly relating to mental illness in China such as Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman’s “How Bodies Remember: Social Memory and Bodily Experience of Criticism, Resistance, and Delegitimation following China’s Cultural Revolution,” Arthur Kleinman’s “A Window on Mental Health in China,” along with “Observation and Asylum: Yuan Dongping’s ‘Mental Patients in China’” an article on Yuan Dongping and present state of the mental institutions in China today by Daniel Vuillermin, a lecturer at the Institute for Medical Humanities at the Peking University Health Science Center. By looking into the biographical, social, political, and art-historical factors that could possibly explain the reception of Yuan’s *Mental Patients in China* photobook, the multidisciplinary lens will provide greater understanding on the reception of documentary photography in China after 1989.
CHAPTER ONE

Yuan Dongping and the *Mental Patients in China* Photobook

After the photographs were taken, I have become an artist of Chinese avant-garde photography while their sad lives remain the same. This is quite ironic.7

Yuan Dongping

In his interview with renowned photography critic Li Nan in 2013, Yuan laments the fact that the publication of *Mental Patients in China* did not fulfill his original goal of enacting social change. As mentioned previously, rather than focusing on the social issue of mental illness or offering any criticism, according to him, critics have instead mainly praised the body of work for its aesthetics and humanistic value. The nuances in his statement open up the question of how various factors, from an artist’s own background, his working method, the actual work, and a state’s political system could possibly affect the reception and distribution of documentary photography. By first exploring Yuan’s position with a state-run magazine and the background of his photobook, in this chapter I argue that the ambiguous nature of the photobook as neither state-sponsored nor completely independent, is an essentially overlooked factor that contributes to the relatively uncritical lens of the project and thus its respective reception by art historians.

Born in 1956 in Guangzhou, Yuan Dongping grew up during the Cultural Revolution and joined the People’s Liberation Navy after high school. As a self-taught photographer who first experimented with the camera as a teenager, Yuan always knew he wanted to somehow work in a related career once he graduated with a history degree from the Beijing Normal University in 1984. After putting down “Central Agency” as his ideal career in the graduation form and informing his professor of his reluctance to follow the standard path of becoming a history

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teacher, he was recommended for a position at the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong that supposedly dealt with photography, video documentation and film. Yet, having worked there for three months, it was clear that his main responsibilities were simply crowd control and liaising with local and foreign visitors. In 1986, upon learning about the *Nationality Pictorial* magazine from a friend, Yuan boldly mailed in his resume while knowing he did not have an educational background in photography. Much to his surprise, he passed the test and was accepted for the position of photo editor (and later promoted to editorial director) responsible for both editorial work and field reporting, a position he holds till present day.

According to its official website, the *Nationality Pictorial* magazine was established in February of 1955 with its name penned by Zhou Enlai, the first Premier of the People’s Republic of China. The image-based magazine’s connection to the Chinese government is immediately evident from its tagline: “The only national publication in the world established by a government for minority groups.” Published in six different languages, it is designated as “one of Communist party’s most important vehicles to facilitate unified policies across minority groups in China,” with an emphasis on building understanding between *han* nationals and other ethnicities and documenting the achievements of various minorities’ work. The current publisher Zhang Weixing is also a Secretary of Party Committee of the Communist Party. Thus, just a glean of Yuan’s biography, from his response on the graduation form to his current position as editorial director of *Nationality Pictorial*, shows that Yuan’s career trajectory is very much intertwined with the agencies of the Chinese government.

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
It was at the *Nationality Pictorial* where Yuan first met and built rapport with the photographer Lü Nan who was then working as a technician in the office’s darkroom. Prior to attending the Chinese New Year’s performance in 1989, the two colleagues had already ruminated and worked together on a few independent project on subjects such as blind children, hutongs, and tenements (*dazayuan* 大杂院). The concept of mental illness was in fact suggested by Lü who was in part inspired by photos from Mary Ellen Mark’s *Ward 81*, which he first saw in the Taiwanese magazine *Lion Arts (Hsiung-Shih Mei Shu)* 雄狮美术. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, Lü’s decision to leave the magazine to become a freelance photographer and his subsequent fame as the first Chinese member of Magnum Photos publishing his own series on mental patients, also presents an interesting alternative to Yuan, leading to a comparison of their collaborative yet independent projects.

In their first visit to the Tianjin An Kang Hospital, Yuan was dumbfounded by the relatively clean and standardized environment. Both he and Lü had expected it to be “much worse,” which according to Yuan is a mindset that stems from a photographer’s need to “always look for something dramatic.” Perhaps it was this need that further brought them to another Tianjin asylum, the Zhang Guizhong Hospital, where the atrocious condition ultimately convinced Yuan to focus on the theme of mental patients as a long-term project. From 1989 to 1991, Yuan travelled extensively to different mental asylums across seven provinces in China, from Beijing, Tianjin, Sichuan, Hunan, Guangxi, Guizhou, to Xinjiang. Through his interaction with the patients, whose age ranges from 45 to 80 years old, he realized that they were not much

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different from those on the outside of the wall. “I found them eager to be understood by the people outside…. These invalids have such earnest, vulnerable fears. This awareness grew as my contact with them increased. They are human beings as well, but most people ignore this.”\textsuperscript{15} Thus, he has made it his goal to spotlight the problematic stigmatization of mental patients in the country through his series of photographs, stating, “in China, mental disease is something that is hidden and does not receive any attention, but once you get close to these people, you will realize they are more similar to you than you think.”\textsuperscript{16} Rather than following the traditional approach of capturing subjects from a voyeuristic point of view, he instead strives to humanize these individuals by speaking and engaging with them during the shooting process. As a result, the photographer’s presence could be felt in the picture plane through the facial expression of the patients, whether it is a smile or a gaze, as exemplified in the four women standing inside the ward (fig. 1) and the group of women washing their hair outside (fig. 2).

In terms of the project’s scope, I argue that the antithetical relationship between Yuan’s government-related position and the project’s independent nature has contributed to the relatively noncritical manner with which the shooting process was carried out. From its beginning, Yuan has clearly specified \textit{Mental Patients in China} as an independent project; it was a way for the photographer to develop his own practice outside of his daytime job and move away from the usual landscape photography he has done prior. After the first two visits in Tianjin, he would oftentimes carry out the project while on official work assignments across China by searching for local mental hospitals near the cities he worked in. Though art historians have praised the engagement he had with the patients, Yuan in reality only spent one to two days


at most in any given hospital not only due to his work schedule but also, I argue, to the part-time nature of the photoshoot. This certainly contrasts with other notable photographers who spent an extensive period of time with their subjects, such as Mark who stayed for thirty-six days in Ward 81, the maximum security section of the Oregon State Hospital, in order to familiarize herself with the unique temperament and stories of the patients.

When asked whether he had real engagement with the patients, he admitted:

If you are talking about the two to three-day period, it was not possible to have any real connection. While I did get to chat with some people, when I think about it, the shooting process was actually quite dull. There was a long corridor with rooms on the left and right. I would walk and look around with my camera and take some photographs. If I felt that there was not much to chat about or to focus on, I would change to another room. After the project continued for three years, Yuan decided to take a break in 1991 primarily because he did not have the right opportunities to travel outside of Beijing and more important, he did not have a clear idea of what to do with all the images that were mostly left inside the drawer of his desk. In 1994 he was encouraged by a Taiwanese critic to include more group shots for the series, but after doing a few shoots he decided to stop the project for good due to a lack of “feeling and drive.” Following this, he turned to his second project on rural poverty.

As illustrated by the passivity of his working method that is highly dependent on his work schedule, the greater issue with Yuan and Mental Patients in China is that it has always been treated as an independent and almost recreational project. This goes perhaps along with the sensitivity of the issue, and it can help explain his lack of initiative in publishing the photos. “I did not have any purpose (for the photographs), so there wasn’t much frustration. At that time, I

17 Ibid.
did not know what to do with the them, let alone imagine publishing them into a book. It was just a project that I enjoyed doing.”¹⁹ This statement, though seemingly stands in direct contrast with his earlier quote on social change, effectively highlight the nuances of a photographer’s intent that could shift from one moment to the next, an important factor to keep in mind given the dominant role of intention in documentary photography which will be discussed in Chapter 2.

The first time his photographs were seen by the public audience was when his series “A Place Buried in Oblivion-Lunatic Asylums in China” (a selection of photos from the project) won an award of excellence at the prestigious Pictures of the Year (now Pictures of the Year International) award run by the Missouri School of Journalism in America. Yet, when discussing his reason for submission, it was not related to exposing the dire condition of the subjects, but rather, a way to test if he could gain recognition for his photos. As he explained, “I read about an open call for an award in America from a newspaper and it said that Chinese people could waive the entrance fee and submit their work via slide so I decided to give it a try.”²⁰ The award further set the stage for his transition from a photo editor into a photographer. This could be seen in his first exhibition participation in the 1995 “TOPIC ’95 Interpretation & Documentation: A Photographic Exhibition” held at The Culture Palace of East District in Beijing. In its invitation letter, the exhibition is described as the first annual exhibition of TOPIC, a “photographic society consisting of six ‘angry photographers.’”²¹ Furthermore, the fifty photographs showcased are meant to “reveal that they are proud of not belonging to the mainstream photographic arena in present-day China.”²² While the role “photographer” was now unmistakably used for Yuan,

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²¹ TOPIC ’95 invitation letter, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong
²² Ibid.
ironically enough, the ambiguous phrase “not belonging to the mainstream photographic arena” would shift in a few years, as the artist’s recognition grew and avant-garde photography carved its niche as a representative of China’s contemporary art.

It was one year later in 1996 when Mental Patients in China was finally published into a photobook with a printing of 1000 copies; among the hundreds of images taken, forty-one were selected by the artist for printing. When thinking about the printing of the book, it is difficult to ignore the background of the publisher, the China Photographic Publishing House. Established in 1980, it is the oldest national publishing house founded by the Chinese government (also the only one with “China” in the title) and is affiliated with the official Chinese Photographers Association, a national organization that includes over 13,000 individual members and 32 group members. Through its publishing of books on photography artworks, technique, education, and theory, its mission is to expand the photographic field and provide quality service for photographers and enthusiasts. Given the well noted censorship practice for books and mass media in China, which will be discussed in Chapter 3, it can be derived that the format and content of the works were largely screened by the publisher. Whether it is Yuan’s job title or the background of the publishing house, their connection with the Chinese government provides an adequate starting point to discuss the direction of Mental Patients in China.

When delving into the various facets of the photobook, from the format, layout, to the selection of essays and works, rather than focusing entirely on the subject of mental patients, it becomes arguably clear that the book is also very much about the photographer himself. This could be exemplified by the first page, which only consists of a portrait and biography of Yuan. Furthermore, in the preface “A Truthful and Absurd World” by notable Chinese contemporary

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art historian and critic Li Xianting, the entire essay is written unsurprisingly from an art historical perspective that positions Yuan within the recent development of Chinese photography after 1976. Beginning with a discussion of the first independent photographic exhibition organized by the April Photographic Society, Li describes the theme as “representing the author’s (Yuan) apt reflection of the society and era.” He follows by addressing the three visual styles he is most intrigued by in Yuan’s photos: close-up shots, group shots, and shots of calm bodies, and lastly concluding with an analysis of Yuan’s technical skills in heightening the relationship between human bodies and architectural backdrops through contrasts. Though it is unclear what role Yuan plays in the commissioning of the text, it should be noted that not once does it mention the actual living condition of mentally ill patients or the problematic stigmatization of mental illness in China.

Following the preface is a transcript of a three-way conversation entitled “Beyond the Mental Hospitals” between Yuan, Liu Zheng, a reporter from Labor Newspaper, and Sun Jingtao, a graduate student in Journalism. Instead of relating the stories of these mental patients or highlighting any statistics, the general flow of the interview very much resembles Li’s text by spotlighting the photographer himself, from his intent, his feeling during the photoshoot, the issue of photographer as a voyeur, to his view of what art should be. Considering the absence of the subjects in both Li’s essay and the interview, perhaps most ironic of all is when Yuan states, “I always believe art should focus on the society.” When asked if he believes that his photographs have the power to awake other’s conscience, he replies, “It seems photography does not have that much power, because the power of photography is dependent largely on how

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developed a society is. Photography relies on a society to achieve its goal.”26 This certainly adheres to the previously discussed passivity in Yuan’s practice that contributes to the uncritical nature of the photobook.

A conspicuous element of the book is the lack of captions, notes, or otherwise description of the mental patients or hospitals he portrayed. Instead, on the opposite page of every photograph, only the city and year are listed under the numbering. This problematic treatment not only removes any necessary context that connects the viewer to the subjects, but also, it further turns these individuals into anonymous bodies. The problem is indeed one of Yuan’s regrets, citing that his early-self had a misconception that a “good photograph” does not need an explanation.27 It was only later on when he recognized that text is able to decipher things a photograph cannot represent. This realization could be gleaned from his different approach for the second photobook The Rural Poor in China, where attention is paid to the inclusion of a journal note and detailed descriptions. Lastly, when looking at the forty-one images it is crucial to think about the selection process, which again follows a haphazard manner similar to his shooting method. According to Yuan, the forty-one images can largely be divided into three categories: “great, good, and there to fill up space.”28 In terms of the small number of works shown, he states: “I have seen many photobooks. When you have more photos it makes the reader tired of reading. So why not just keep it simple? Even the best photographers only have two to three photographs that are well-known. Some may just have one.”29 While we do not know exactly which ones belonged to the third category, what is clear is that the selection of photos is primarily based not on how well they tell the stories of the subjects, but rather a

26 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
practical concern. This leads to one of his own critiques for the book, which curiously echoes what this chapter has mentioned, that the series remains on the surface due to the short timeframe of the photoshoot. “If I could stay in each place for a longer period of time, it would be much better. At the very least one third of the photos wouldn’t be used to fill up space.”

From the brief photo-shooting process, the haphazard selection of the photos, to the art historical-based texts, it is then logical to trace how the reception and subsequent discussion of the *Mental Patients in China* manifest within the discourse of contemporary art. This study will address two texts that discuss the *Mental Patients in China* in the context of an exhibition and a survey of Chinese avant-garde photography respectively. The first text and arguably one that reaches a greater audience is the catalogue for the seminal exhibition “Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century,” curated by the highly prominent scholar Wu Hung at the University of Chicago in 1999. Touted as a foremost survey exhibition of experimental Chinese art from 1979 to 1999, the exhibition features twenty-two artists working in a variety of medium, from photography, video, installation, to painting. Its catalogue is subsequently reviewed as “the most thoughtfully and coherently organized overview of the subject published in recent years” by Julia F. Andrews from Ohio State University. In the catalogue, the artists are divided into three thematic categories: Demystification, Ruins, and Transience, with Yuan’s series belonging to the second theme along with six other artists. In the essay for Yuan entitled “Human Waste,” Wu praises how the photographs, with “their mixture of tragedy and humor, hope and despair, tell much about the intensity of the photographer’s

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30 Ibid.
engagement with his subject.”

It is also here where Yuan’s research on the taboo subject of mental illness is revealed in details. After attempting to find any published information to no avail, he began to search for archival materials and interview with “psychiatrists, nurses, and patients, as well as administrators in public health bureaus and police departments.” It is only after this that he gathered enough statistics to calculate a rough estimation of the support system, “one bed for every 140 patients, one doctor for every 1,100 patients, and one hospital for every 27,000 of them.” Furthermore, in his conversation with Wu, he listed three different systems of administration for mental patients in China: those administered by local welfare departments, the Ministry of Health, and by security departments, with the latter two providing better conditions.

While these statistics will be discussed further in Chapter 3, what is curious is the fact that all of these information remains unaddressed in his photobook. A reason, I argue, could in part be attributed to Yuan’s role with the *Nationality Pictorial* and in effect the state system in China. Aside from these two paragraphs, Wu’s essay then follows a relatively similar structure as Li’s text by positioning Yuan within a broader art historical timeline, in this case the twentieth century, where he writes that his photographs’ “humanism and social criticism in a realistic style” revives a long tradition in twentieth-century Chinese art and literature that was largely banned after 1949. What is more critical is the fact that only one sentence in the entire essay addresses Yuan’s intent: “Yuan Dongping has said many times that he hopes that by recording these

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
mental asylums his photographs can help improve their conditions.” I argue that, in this particular case, once a photographer’s intent is acknowledged, it is also necessary for an art historian to acknowledge whether this intent has been achieved. This is one of the ways through which discussion of social condition in China can be sustained through art historiography from the West (in this case a publication by a university in the United States), especially under the tight surveillance of the Communist regime.

The second text is Zhu Qi’s *Chinese Avant-garde Photography Since 1990*. As its name suggests, the book is a study of forty-eight artists who are representative of Chinese avant-garde photography since 1990, with essays by Zhu Qi, Karen Smith, Gu Zheng, and Yao Suizhong. Similar to Wu’s catalogue, the artists are divided under six thematic parts: Old Photo, City, Post-colonialism, Youth Art, Feminism, and New Realism. Placed under “New Realism,” Yuan’s chapter is essentially a rehash of Li’s preface from his photobook alongside a brief artist statement by Yuan that discusses his view on photography, from the selection of themes to the rise of conceptual photography. Indeed, a majority of artists in the book are part of the conceptual photography category such as Rongrong, Zhang Huan, and Ma Liuming, from the Beijing East Village. Perhaps one of the more interesting parallels between the two books is the relatively few numbers of documentary photographer represented besides Yuan, Liu Zheng, and Zhang Hai’er, suggesting a general divide between social documentary and avant-garde photography in China. This is further made evident by the general omission of Lü Nan, Xie Hailong, and Lu Guang, hence illustrating the subtle distance between Yuan and the social documentary scene.

36 Ibid.
As shown above, the antithetical relationship between Yuan’s position at a state-run magazine and the independent nature of the project that resulted in a short shooting process, the lack of critical information on mental illness in China, the inclusion of art-historical text, and the selection of subpar photographs, ultimately play a role in engendering the subsequent non-critical response from the contemporary art community. In the next several chapters, I will discuss the political and social factors unique to the Chinese society at the time that could further affect the reception of Yuan’s photographs.
CHAPTER TWO
Documentary Photography and Its Debates

My work is a form of documentary photography.\(^\text{38}\) Yuan Dongping

What is documentary photography? To explore the history of documentary photography and its many debates will probably require several book-length studies. In order to adequately discuss the context of Yuan and *Mental Patients in China*, this chapter focuses on a brief history and main arguments arising from the late twentieth century by post-modern and Marxist theorists in the United States who have considered the issues of definition, function, objectivity, and reading of this particular photographic form. Essays by Allan Sekula, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Martha Rosler and David Levi-Strauss will be critically reviewed to highlight the fundamental pitfalls of the documentary form that could in part explain the reception of Yuan’s project. While the four authors primarily discuss documentary against the backdrop of the United States and its political ties in a capitalist society, their essays are able to address a range of perspectives on the myriad universal issues involved. It is through this basic understanding can one begin to look at the even more complex context of documentary photography in China, a one-party system, at a time when the country first began to open up to the rest of the world.

Since the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839, photography has been used both as an artistic medium and a scientific tool.\(^\text{39}\) As early as 1844, a text by Henry Fox Talbot accompanying his photograph *Articles of China* (1843) (fig. 3) already implied a photograph’s potential function to serve as evidence and courtroom documents by stating “if the mute


testimony of a picture were to be produced against [a thief] in court, it would certainly be evidence of a novel kind.”  

The technology took on greater power in late 19th century America in exposing the inequality of a society with the work by Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine on the inhumane condition of city-slums and child labor. It was not until the 1930s during the Great Depression, one of the most devastating periods in the early twentieth century, when documentary photography became a popular form used by artists from both the left and right to advance various political and social agendas. According to the Art Term page on the Tate website, documentary photography is defined as “a style of photography that provides a straightforward and accurate representation of people, places, objects and events, and is often used in reportage.” Under this term, some photographers began to “see the camera as a tool for social change, using it to shed light on injustice, inequality and the sidelined aspects of society.” However, the page notes, not all photographers in this category “intend their images to aid the bettering of society.” Given the slight distinction, it is important for this study to establish that Yuan is a photographer who does intend on making social progress through his work.

Some of the most renowned documentary photographers in America include Riis, a police reporter at the New York Tribune who is widely regarded for his photographs’ role in pushing the city government to enact a series of social reforms for the Lower East Side slums; Hine, who was regularly commissioned by social work agencies to expose child labor violations;

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
and a group of photographers including Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, who were hired by the U.S. government’s Farm Security Administration (FSA) to document mass migration and the poor living condition in the American rural South affected by the Great Depression, as part of a propagandistic project that showcased the benefits of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal program. There were also artists, filmmakers, and writers from the Worker’s Film and Photo League, affiliated with the international Communist movement, who protested social class issues such as unemployment, disseminating films and images through the mass media. The various individuals and collectives listed above illustrate the diverse entities that could serve as the commissioning body of a documentary project, from press, government, independent agencies, to artist and political organizations, all of which were, except for the government, either non-existent or heavily controlled by the Communist Party in China, as will be explored in Chapter 3.

More than a century since its invention, photography has indeed undergone a rapid and expansive evolution that could generally be encapsulated by Solomon-Godeau’s comment, curiously picking up where Talbot’s statement left off: “While photographs remain the only form of pictorial evidence routinely admitted in the courtroom, the once universal belief in the camera’s truth has been belied by everything from outright trumperies to the poreless faces of *Vogue* models.” However, as a rebuff to Talbot’s statement and the “universal belief” mentioned, from its beginning the camera’s truth is actually not as objective as it may seem. In his essay “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary” from 1978, Sekula raised the fundamental problems concerning the meaning and reading of photography by pointing out the inherent indeterminate meaning of a photograph, even (or especially) in a courtroom setting,

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which he viewed as a “battle ground of fictions.” In his example of a surveillance camera photo (perhaps the most “objective” form of image there is at the time) of a young white woman with a machine gun, he offered several possible readings of the woman, from a kidnap victim to a willing participant, and he observed how these readings ultimately lead to different conclusion of the woman’s story, from being brainwashed to representing rebellion, both of which can be equally plausible. Thus, he argues that the meaning of a photograph is contingent upon not only how it is presented but also how it is read by a particular individual, who could be driven by varying political and personal motives. In the end, the only objective evidence a photograph can provide is that it is a picture taken of someone or something in somewhere.

By citing Walter Benjamin’s description of Eugène Atget’s rather “nonexpressionist” streetscape photographs as being like a “crime scene,” Sekula further explored the “affective” character of documentary, which, rather than provide a critical view of the world, contributes to and borders on spectacle, voyeurism, and terror. It is here where he emphasized the role of what he called the “truly critical social documentary” to “frame the crime, the trial, and the system of justice and its official myths.” Looking at this definition, Yuan’s case living in a Communist regime with no clear distinction between the judiciary and legislative system, proves that it is, with obvious reasons, difficult to gauge to what extent he does or is able to achieve this task. What is clear is the intrinsically complicated relationship that exists between the artist, the documentary form, and the respective political system of a state. It is for this reason that Sekula stressed a political critique of the documentary form, further discussing the less-mentioned aspects of notable documentary projects in the 1930s like those sponsored by the FSA as well as

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47 Ibid.
48 Ibid, 864.
organized by the Worker’s Film and Photo League. His inquiry points to the close partnership between these artists and their projects’ affiliated political party, whether it be the government or the Communist party, and it raises the question of how to assess the relation between form and politics in their works. The culprit for the lack of critical scholarships or discussion on this aspect, he argues, could contribute to the understanding of documentary photography as an art form, which completely shifts the focus towards the mannerism, sensibility, and more important, “the physical and emotional risks taken by an artist.”

Thus, given what Sekula’s essay illustrates, the uncritical response to *Mental Patients in China* could equally be attributed in-part to the inherent fluid meaning and reading of photography shaped by the readers’ own background, in this case mostly art historians, and also the underlying ever-expanding function of photography from being referential to the real world to being expressive of an artist’s inner world, with the latter ultimately placing greater emphasis on authorship and auteurism.

For Solomon-Godeau, while some of the issues discussed in her seminal essay “Who is Speaking Thus?” overlap with Sekula, she begins differently by first highlighting the relatively late emergence of the category “documentary” in late 1920s within the language of photography. Speaking more broadly than Sekula, Solomon-Godeau demonstrates the prevalence of Talbot’s view by citing that prior to the regular use of the term “documentary photography,” all photography was seen to innately serve a documentary function. While in the essay she has raised several fields of inquiry into the notion of “documentary,” from analyzing it as a sign system to a historical construction, what is pertinent to the current study is her exploration of Sally Stein’s essay on the hidden meanings behind Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*. Most notably is Stein’s critique on the personal ambition and agenda of the photographer

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49 Ibid.  
50 Ibid.
to present a seemingly spontaneous snapshot of the unaware slum inhabitants, as demonstrated by his effort to avoid selecting photographs that captured the subject’s direct gaze. This, according to Stein, highlights the ongoing discourse on the precarious power relation existing between subject and object in this photographic practice.

In relationship to the case presented by Stein, one of the consistent praises Yuan received for his photographs is his direct engagement with his subjects and his move away from the fairly standard voyeuristic approach exemplified by Riis. The photographer not only claims that he spoke to his subjects, but also suggests that they were indeed aware that he was taking their photographs. In one instance (fig. 4), when he approached a girl who was a former student at the Central Music Academy (which he described as “looking like any other girl”), she said, “Let me untie my hair, I look more pretty this way.” However, given the unclear mental condition of the girl, we have no way of determining whether she was really aware of the photoshoot taking place. This anecdote by Yuan therefore could be seen to highlight the seemingly “normal” disposition of mental patients at best and to offset any accusatory claim against his voyeuristic act at worst.

Furthermore, here I argue that the asymmetrical power relation between the photographer and the subject does not end with the photoshoot. Rather, the photographer’s agenda can manifest into all other areas in the afterlife of the subject’s image, such as the staging of the photographs and in this case, inside a photo book. Following on what has been discussed in Chapter 1, the layout and design of the book, from the display of Yuan’s portrait in the first page of the book, the focus on Yuan’s artistic practice in the preface and interview, to the omission of any caption, very much amplify the dominant and active stance displayed by Yuan and the obviously passive role held by his subjects. This certainly echoes Solomon-Godeau’s thoughts

on how the subjects whose existence were supposedly to “testify to the injustice and abuses bred within a political and social system, now becomes testimony to the photographer’s eye and the photographer’s art.”52 Through the exploration of the correlative relationship between the content of Yuan’s photobook and its noncritical reception by art historians, I further argue that Mental Patients in China is a case that exemplifies of how documentary projects are capable to “speak” of both explicit and latent agendas by the photographer or an institution, which can be manifested into the content of the work and subsequently “mediate our reading of them.”53 Most important, the art historians mentioned at the end of Chapter 1 did not achieve what she argues is their responsibility to attempt “to excavate these coded and buried meanings, to bring to light those rhetorical and formal strategies that determined the work’s production, meaning, reception, and use.”54 In the case of Chinese documentary photography, I take this one step further and state that it is through the deciphering of the coded meanings where one can bring to light not only the photographer’s intent, but also the larger social issue and any possible social change.

As if responding to Solomon-Godeau’s essay (though it is impossible since Solomon-Godeau’s was written later), Rosler’s groundbreaking article “In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)” at one point asks, “are photographic images, then, like civilization, made on the backs of the exploited?”55 This brings us to another dimension of understanding the complicated nature of documentary photography, namely its affiliation with class and politics. In this essay, the word “victim” is at one point used for subjects and replaced with the “documentary” half of documentary photography (victim photography) to illustrate the issues of

52 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Photography at the dock: essays on photographic history, institutions and practices (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 179.
53 Ibid, 182.
54 Ibid.
objectivity, intent, and target audience in “liberal” photography. Unlike photojournalism which presents a social issue purely from a sensational perspective, documentary photography aims to rectify the situation through a subjective presentation of images with other forms. However, according to Rosler, this intent is already problematic as it assumes an inherent disparity between the class of the reader and the subject, the former of which is the privileged and the latter is the powerless. A similar question is raised by Levi-Strauss, when he asks on behalf of the photographer in his essay “The Documentary Debate: Aesthetic or Anaesthetic?”: “What right have I to represent you?” As such, he argues that every documentary photograph is an act of negotiation and communication.

Similar to Solomon-Godeau’s and Sekula’s argument, Rosler highlights the attention and praise that are often attributed to the photographer. In the numerous examples presented by the author, she especially highlights the case of David Burnett photographing the capturing of prisoners after the putsch in Chile in 1973, where instead of discussing about the subjects in the photograph, the review of the work is focused on Burnett’s courage and the award his photographs have won. This certainly echoes the context of Yuan and Mental Patients in China, highlighting some of the intrinsic similarities of documentary projects from varying geographical regions.

Lastly, through tracing a series of social and photographic trend shifts in the United States, Rosler points to the dangerously blurred boundary documentarians found themselves in

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57 Ibid, 177.
between “exposé, the compassion and outrage” and “exoticism, tourism, voyeurism, psychologism and metaphysics, trophy hunting---- and careerism.”  

This is respective of liberal photography in America, the last of which, careerism, could potentially explain the trajectory of Yuan’s path. In fact, his photobook does fit with one of Rosler’s definitions of liberal documentary by not blaming either the victims or the oppressors for the misfortunate condition. What is ironic, however, is considering Rosler’s (sarcastic or not) remark, “unless they (oppressors) happen to be under the influence of our own global enemy, World Communism.”  

Similar to Sekula’s article, it is here where we also see the extremely intertwined relation between political ideology, regardless of it being communism or capitalism, and the critical lens in works produced by documentary photographers, which is clearly also related to the photographer’s working location, whether they are physically within or outside of a political system. While I do not view Yuan’s practice to resemble the other definitions of the liberal documentary trend described by Rosler, his case of working both for (his daytime job) and against (his independent photobook) the system does succeed in providing interesting nuances in thinking of other potential reasons for a photographer to produce documentary projects that are non-critical of the oppressor or “perpetrator” responsible for the social issue besides a reason to, as Rosler states, reassure the privileged readers of their relative comfort and social position away from the powerless class depicted.

Coming back to an interview Yuan had with Zhou Yan, when asked about his view on the function of documentary photography in a contemporary society, Yuan responded:

In the beginning I was quite optimistic. I believed that it could at least push the society to resolve some social issues. […] Originally I had very high hopes for myself; my photographs should also have the same effect [as Raymond Depardon]; the ‘mental

60 Ibid, 178.
61 Ibid, 179.
hospital’ series should have an impact in improving the living condition and treatment methods for mentally ill patients in China.62

Through examining the arguments by Sekula, Solomon-Godeau, and Rosler, we can see that the scope, function, and definition of documentary photography are never cut and dry matters. Rather, they are built upon an intertwining network of active and passive agents, predispositions, historical relations, and fundamental subjectivity that constantly expands and contracts. Thus, to simply speak of a direct cause and effect relationship between documentary and society on Yuan’s part is not only inadequate but also, as he later points out, naïve and overly optimistic. As theorists have also pointed out the omnipotent role played by political parties, government, and social class within the history and discourse of American documentary photography, in the next chapter we will see how a one-party system could form the distinctive landscape and equally complex narrative of documentary photography in China after the end of Cultural Revolution.

CHAPTER THREE

The State of Photography and Publishing under the Chinese Communist Regime

This chapter will be divided into two parts, with the first section focusing on the historical and art-historical narratives pertinent to the development of photography in China after the end of Cultural Revolution and particularly in the period after 1989. Through looking at the changing role of photography, three historical events and their impact on the documentary form, and the various methods of censorship including the “hijacking” of publications and press by the Chinese government, we will have a better understanding of not only how the CCP monitors and controls the output of a vast network of photographers, press, and publishing houses in the state, but also, of the ambiguous and fluid guideline of state censorship, often shifting. I argue that the successful release of Mental Patients in China through a national publishing house in Beijing could serve as an exemplar of how subduing critical components such as captions and descriptions in a social documentary photography project and rendering it as an artistic project could be one way of evading the Chinese government’s strict censorship applied to journalism, which, as Yuan’s case shows, inevitably also elicits noncritical reception by the readers.

In the second section I will compare Yuan’s photobook with Lü’s The Forgotten People and discuss how the different background of the two photographers affect the content and approach of the books. Finally, I will also look at two other documentary photographers, namely Lu and Xie, who have achieved much greater attention with their photographs in China and the West and succeeded in facilitating changes in the society through their photography, whether it is forcing the government to address the AIDS crisis in a little known Henan village or generating massive donations to the Project Hope initiative and igniting social awareness on the issue of rural education respectively. These three case studies illustrate key options and ways a
documentary photographer in China could disseminate their projects to mass audience, either by completely bypassing the censorship machine or joining forces with Chinese government agencies.

3.1 Brief History of Photography in China

In terms of tracing the historical lineage, it is inarguably impossible to include everything that happened since photography’s first emergence in the region. Thus, this section will first introduce an extremely concise history that illustrates the early introduction of photography in China in parallel to the chaotic history that led the country to become a one-party state in 1949. This will be followed by an examination of three key historical events and their impact on the development of news and documentary photography and state censorship: namely the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1946 and the censorship of images and publications in the Communist regime that heightened during the Cultural Revolution, the April Fifth Movement in 1976 and the reemergence of documentary photography, and finally the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 and the abrupt end of the “New Wave Movement.” Through the view of these three turning points in history, the intertwining relationships between the government, the press, and the photographic community will also be examined. Since there is only a fine line between social documentary photography and news photography in China, with the latter under much heavier surveillance by the government, the section will also look very closely at the CCP’s extensive authority over press freedom. This would provide us with better context to further explore how the images and theme of Yuan’s photobook could pass through the government’s ambiguous censorship apparatus.
It is generally agreed that photography was introduced in China during the 1840s shortly after the daguerreotype was invented. While its early usage was primarily portraiture used for officials and diplomats similar to the West, its course of development differs dramatically from its European and American counterparts particularly due to the unique social and cultural history the country went through. Since the nineteenth century, after embroiling in a series of external conflicts such as the First Opium War against western imperialist forces including the British and the French which resulted in the signing of treaties and foreign occupation in several main port cities, China not only began (albeit forcefully) to have greater presence in international trade with the West, but also underwent extreme political transformation that saw the toppling of a 2,000-year-monarchy of imperial dynasties, the Sino-Japanese War, the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists that lasted well over 20 years, and the subsequent establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 under Chairman Mao Zedong, ruled by the CCP till today. Similarly, the use of photography also took on several drastic turns with the end of each ruling era and especially during the Communist regime. In the following section I will discuss first the emergence of documentary and news photography in China during the Republican Era and the changing role of photography and press censorship under the Communist regime and during the Cultural Revolution. This will be followed by the reemergence of the documentary form that came to prominence in the 1980s, and finally, with the end of the avant-garde photography movement after the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989.

The beginning of documentary photography in China is interestingly intertwined with news photography, which first emerged along with the introduction of printing technologies after the republican revolution in 1911. By the 1920s and in the two decades since, magazine and

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newspaper publishing especially underwent a rapid development due to news agencies’ wish to attract readership, with photography becoming a standard feature in many press outlets.\textsuperscript{64} Given China’s unstable political and social climate in the early twentieth century brought on by a series of civil and external wars, most notably the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, intellectuals in the country began to use documentary photography as a way to expose war atrocities such as the Nanking Massacre to the world. One of the most influential pictorial magazines at this time was the monthly \textit{The Companion Pictorial}, founded in 1926.\textsuperscript{65} Combining photography and essays that discussed a wide variety of topics from current affairs to science and literature, its mission was to “disseminate education and enhance culture to the end and not retreat from the goal because of difficulties and commercial lure.”\textsuperscript{66} This statement reflects very well the relatively open attitude towards publishing during the republican era, which contrasts all the more drastically to what would come after 1946 with the founding of the New China by the CCP. In this same year \textit{The Companion Pictorial} would cease its publishing on mainland China, testifying to the tightening control of press freedom in the new authoritarian regime.

\subsection*{3.2 Photography as Propaganda During the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976)}

Even before the imminent victory of the Communists, the possibility of news photography becoming an exclusive instrument for the state could already be seen in \textit{Jin-Cha-Ji Pictorial}, one of the first propaganda magazines published in a communist-controlled region in 1942. The photographs inside not only painted an idealistic portrayal of a “liberated life” and homely scene in schools and villages such as Li Tu’s \textit{Evening in a Farmer’s Home (Spinning

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\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, 34.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid, 33.
(fig. 5), but also depicted full-page portraits of Mao who had just been appointed the Chairman of the Central Committee of the CCP, eerily echoing the propaganda portraits used in the Soviet Union. Indeed, under the Communist regime and especially during the Cultural Revolution, photography has taken on only one single purpose: to advance the agenda of Chairman Mao and the Communist Party. Lasting from 1966 to 1976 and organized by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing and her three comrades together known as the Gang of Four, the Cultural Revolution was a nationwide political effort to transform China into a modern nation through perpetuating a series of reforms that destroyed and replaced old values with new Communist customs, including books-burning and tortuous purging and exile of elites to the countryside in order to relearn from farmers and peasants.

During this era, propaganda photography and printed materials took on an especially crucial role in the dissemination of the Communist Party’s ideology. Strict limitations on the use of images and language were imposed on all official publications, which were the only materials allowed to be printed. Published by a network of national publishing houses under the control of the Central Propaganda Department and the General Administration of Press and Publication, these publications and printed images included millions of copies of Mao’s portraits as well as posters and books that heavily featured staged portrayals of happy hardworking everyday workers. If one was in possession of a state-published book, he or she could also be accused of being a “rightist” if they did not swiftly deface images of party leaders who fell out of favor with Mao, such as his second-in-command successor Lin Biao. This illustrates the level of control the CCP has over every act and presumably thought of its populace. Looking back in history, it is

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69 Martin Paar and WassinkLundgren, *The Chinese Photobook: From the 1900s to the Present* (New York: Aperture, 2016)
important to note that censorship of books by the state is not a new phenomenon in China nor anywhere else. Since at least the third century BCE with the emperor Qin Shi Huang, there have already been historical records of books burning and the burying of scholars to suppress opinions at odds with the ruling state.\textsuperscript{70} So it is sufficient to say that while photography was no longer an exclusive tool used by the state after the death of Mao and end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, censorship in press and publication is very much still ingrained into the rubric of the Communist regime operating under several key agencies, as it will be discussed below.

### 3.3 Censorship and Press in China

Given the intertwining relationship between social documentary photography and news photography, it is important to discuss the modes of censorship for press and publication, which are directly related to the dissemination of documentary photography in the 1990s. This thesis will not delve into the full depth and breadth of media censorship in China including the rise of the Internet, which inarguably deserves its own study. What it provides is a critical look into three major state-run bodies formed after 1949, which dictate, to various degrees, the freedom of press publishing and the dissemination of photography. These are the General Administration of Press and Publication (新闻出版总署), the state-run Xinhua News Agency (新华社), and the national Chinese Photographers Association (中国摄影家协会). Their entangling connection and overlapping roles are most clearly indicated by the fact that they were all at some points in the 1950s led by the same figure: the propaganda photographer Shi Shaohua, who served as the first director of the News Photography Bureau at The General Administration of Press and

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
Publication, becoming the director of the News Photography Department at Xinhua in 1952, and finally in 1956 appointed as the first Chairman of the Chinese Photographers Association.\textsuperscript{71}

According to the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China, the General Administration of Press and Publication is one of nine state agencies responsible for censorship in China today.\textsuperscript{72} Its scope of screening and investigation includes all printed, electronic, and Internet publications and news publishing in China, with every activity of printing, copying and distributing by book publishers and Internet sites subject to possible prosecution by the bureau if deemed illegal. The agency’s absolute authority is best summarized in the \textit{Notice Regarding Resolutely Clamping Down on Illegal Publishing Activities}, which states:

\begin{quote}
In accordance with State regulations, no entity or individual may engage in publishing, printing, copying or distributing books, newspapers, periodicals, or audio-visual publications without authorization from the General Administration of Press and Publication.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

It is thus easy to understand the general difficulties photographers face should they wish to publish undesirable images disapproved by the state. Yet, this also brings us to the question of what is the exact definition of undesirable or forbidden materials in the eyes of the government? In the case of Yuan, given that the book was published by a state publishing house, it is ever more curious to determine how the theme of mentally ill patients is situated within the multilayered censorship system, which, as we will explore later, turns out not to be a cut and dry matter.

In terms of news photography distribution, the Xinhua News Agency is one of two legitimimized national news agencies (the other being China Central Television, CCTV) that form the center of Chinese news media distribution. It is important to recognize that any photographer

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
working with Xinhua is expected to serve the CCP. According to Mao Songyou, a photographer who previously worked there, the responsibility of a news photographer is essentially inseparable from politics by “reflecting glorious scenes of struggle by the Chinese people to create a new historic epoch.”\(^\text{74}\) This can be achieved through “applying artistic processes [to the photographs] in order to influence the thoughts, feelings, and actions of viewers.”\(^\text{75}\) Furthermore, all photographs that were accepted would automatically become the property of the agency subject to standard manipulation and re-editing that range from brightening Mao’s teeth to literally cutting out unfavorable figures. In the 1980s, while there was a “decentralization” of news media which saw an increase in local newspaper publishing and on the surface may seem like a move towards granting greater press freedom, it was in fact a strategy to expand the power of the national news agency given the concurrent implementation of a central policy that forced every local newspaper to publish Xinhua’s official release on “sensitive events and international news.”\(^\text{76}\) Furthermore, another major role taken by Xinhua is to serve as a mediator between foreign news agencies such as Reuters, AP, AFP, and the local press, thus forbidding any direct access between the two. What is most important is the fact that there is no specific law on media in China, which allows the CCP to change policies and regulation as it sees fit.\(^\text{77}\) This illustrates the insulated environment in press publishing in China and presents numerous obstacles for mainstream news photographers to disseminate their works beyond the border.

While the CCP’s control over the dissemination of information can be seen with Xinhua’s manipulation of the press bodies, its involvement in the mainstream art scene, and in


\(^{75}\) Ibid.

\(^{76}\) Xin Xin, “Xinhua News Agency and Globalization: Negotiating Between the Global, the Local and the National,” *Communications Media, Globalization, and Empire* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2016) 115.

\(^{77}\) Ibid, 118.
this case the photography field, is demonstrated through the establishment of the Chinese Photographers Association in 1956. Operating directly under the directive of the Party with its headquarter in Beijing, the association’s mission is to provide opportunities to photographers by holding exhibitions (solo, group, national, regional, and overseas), publishing a national magazine (which became the *China Photography* magazine), and organizing annual exhibitions of photography.\(^78\) As of today, its official website has listed sixty institutional members and over 23,000 individual members throughout thirty one provinces and autonomous regions in China.\(^79\)

The close ties between the association and the party could be seen in a photograph of their second annual meeting, where a portrait of Mao was hung behind the chairman (fig. 6). Indeed, as part of the application requirement, besides being over 18 years old, one must agree to the statute of the association. Just a brief glance at the latest version from September 2017, it is already clear that members are expected to closely follow the ideology of Marxism, Maoism, and Deng Xiaoping, and implement the thoughts and strategies advocated by President Xi Jinping. These include: promoting one's love of the country, following the rule of law, and realizing the Chinese Dream, just to name a few.\(^80\) In return, members are able to enjoy the many benefits of promoting their works in nationwide and overseas exhibitions and competitions, contributing to the online platform and printed magazine, as well as forming networks with other photographers from the local community and abroad, essentially being part of an insulated ecology formed by the CCP.

\(^78\) Ibid, 107.


In terms of the actual censorship guideline, it is important to understand that since the end of the Cultural Revolution, there is no longer a clear black and white divide between what is deemed appropriate or forbidden by the state. Especially during a period of economic reform when China must to a certain degree maintain dialogues with the West, except for a few highly sensitive topics such as the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen Square Incident, and the Tibetan struggle for freedom, the state of publishing remains a nebulous territory where censorship is used as a subjective measure that can be shifted and applied freely by the government. Factors that affect censorship could range from the level of sensitivity in a topic, the level of social unrest at any given moment, to a particular time of year. For example, during any especially “sensitive” period, such as the annual anniversary of the Tiananmen Square incident on June Fourth, in the months leading up to any major events such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and whenever the country was embroiled in any global geopolitics conflicts, censorship would often heighten in response. Perhaps this sentence by Peter Lorentzen best encapsulates the Chinese government’s censorship strategy: “When social tensions are high, more news must be censored, whereas when tensions are relatively low, censorship can be loosened.” Curiously enough, according to Lorentzen, permitting some levels of independent investigative reporting would be more preferable than complete censorship for an authoritarian government, since it can serve as a supporting tool to more efficiently govern local officials, should a (low level) corruption case is exposed, appease and stabilize discontent in the society. Even when censorship occurs, there are myriad ways besides a total ban for the government to control and manipulate the content of a

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publication to serve its own benefit, as we will see in the case of one of the earliest anti-government projects in the next section.

3.4 Documentary Photography After 1976

Shortly after the end of the chaotic Cultural Revolution era, independent social documentary photography began to reappear as the first wave of unofficial photography in 1977. This was largely precipitated by a historical event that happened a few months before Mao’s death in October 1976, namely the April Fifth Movement with the crackdown of the first ever large-scale public demonstration in the capital of People’s Republic of China— the weeks-long mass mourning of Premier Zhou Enlai’s death that brought hundreds of thousands of people to pay tribute and voice their discontent of the government at the Tiananmen Square. For many Chinese, Zhou was a popular figure for his crucial role in stabilizing the extremist viewpoints inside the CCP. His power struggle and unfavorable relationship with the Gang of Four who was still in power at the time thus prohibited any sort of public mourning or memorial. The suppression of the political movement, according to Wu Hung, would contribute to the formation of an underground network of brave amateur photographers who, unaware of one another at first, individually took hundreds of photos of the public mourning and later preserved these negatives during a period of prosecution when government officials attempted to stop the circulation of these sensitive images by systematically confiscating films from photographic studios in Beijing. Some of the most powerful photos were later selected and secretly compiled by a

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84 Ibid.
seven-member committee into a single volume that was in the end published as the photobook *People’s Mourning* in 1977.\(^{85}\)

What is interesting about this book is its transition from an anti-government endeavor to a government project officially endorsed by the new CCP Chairman Hua Guofeng. As a way to publicize the Party’s reversed stance of the movement and condemnation of the Gang of Four (who were arrested shortly after Mao’s death), Hua even authored a dedication on the title page.\(^{86}\) This publication not only helped to promote the Party and Hua’s public image, but also raised the profiles of the anonymous editors, who were invited to join the national Chinese Photographers Association. The curious turn of events marked by the government’s “official hijacking” ultimately lead to the formation of the first unofficial artist collective, April Photo Society.\(^{87}\) No longer wishing to partake in any political projects that could potentially be endorsed again by the government, this group of photographers would focus exclusively on salon and landscape photography, staging their first exhibition *Nature, Society, and Man* in 1979.\(^{88}\)

The case of *People’s Mourning* is an exemplar that provides a glimpse into one of the ways a documentary photography project can be controlled and manipulated by the Chinese government, and more important, how artists could act in response. Indeed, as mentioned in the previous section, with the many guises undertaken by the government in the photographic community, the “hijacking” or interference of a project critical of the state could be carried out in a variety of manners and degrees, whether it is through monitoring artist organizations, controlling content from publishing houses, or censoring through news agency.

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85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
With the formation of the April Photo Society in 1979, in the 1980s China further saw a blossoming of more than 100 photographic societies and photo clubs across many cities such as Xi’an, Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. The period from 1980 to 1989 generally known as the “New Wave Movement” was in part attributed to the opening of China under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, when the country received an unprecedented influx of information from the West for the first time under the Communist regime. As a result, young photographers had access to a diverse range of translated scholarly essays and reproductions of images in newly established photography magazines, and had relative freedom in staging unofficial exhibitions, all of which were censored or banned during the Cultural Revolution.

The explosion of photography magazines under the more liberal environment especially pushed forward several key developments in Chinese documentary photography, namely the first translation for this particular photographic form and the introduction of essays that focused on its rise, function, and issues in Western art history. While Chinese intellectuals first used photography as a way to document social and political changes during the Republican period, it was not until the 1980s when the concept “documentary photography” was first translated and explained as *jishi sheying* (纪实摄影, literally recording reality, a standard term that would be in use till today) in an essay in the June 1981 issue of the *International Photography* magazine (国际摄影) by its esteemed editor Wang Weimin. It was also during this period when Chinese photographers began to familiarize themselves with works by Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Ansel Adams, most notably through exhibitions of their works held at the China National Art Gallery in 1985 and 1987. This also echoes back to the story of Lü, who first saw

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images of Mark’s *Ward 81* from a Taiwanese photography magazine *Lion Arts*, which would not have been possible in the previous restrictive environment.

All of these progresses would lead to an increasing interest in the documentary form that dominated the latter part of the “New Wave Movement,” engendering a new group of documentary photographers working between 1989 and the 1990s, including An Ge, Yang Shaoming, Hu Wugong, Lü, and Yuan. What is striking about this group of photographers is their background in photojournalism and more importantly, their ties to the CCP. An, who was part of the Everybody Photography Society, and Yang, the son of PRC president Yang Shangkun who collaborated with the April Photo Society, were both working for the Xinhua News Agency. At the same time, Hu, a member of the Shaanxi Group, worked as an army propaganda artist and photographer upon his college graduation. And as we know, Yuan and Lü both worked at the *Nationality Pictorial* magazine in 1989. The similar backgrounds of the documentary photographers reflect the CCP and Xinhua’s success in “monopolizing” news media and subsequently the documentary photography field, which explains the extremely close link between Chinese documentary and news photography. This could also be attributed to the relatively expensive cost in making photography at the time, which allowed the agency to provide invaluable incentives and resources such as cameras and darkrooms for many photographers. Indeed, the close ties between the photography community and the government is further demonstrated in a major exhibition *An Arduous Passage* organized by the Shaanxi Group at the National Gallery of Art in 1988, celebrating the 40th anniversary of the founding of the PRC and showcasing over 20,000 works in news photography, documentary photography, and

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91 Ibid, 139.
creative photography, created in the last four decades from across the nation. The government’s lax attitude is also striking given the inclusion of sensitive subjects such as Cultural Revolution and fake propaganda art. However, this “New Wave Movement,” which was a critical step for China to “catch up” with the rest of the world in treating photography as an art form and engaging in dialogues with western photography, ultimately proved to be short-lived. All these unprecedented advances were abruptly cut short along with other experimental artistic practices with the Tiananmen Square incident in Beijing on June 4th, 1989.

The violent crackdown of a widespread pro-democratic student protest on Tiananmen Square that resulted in numerous casualties is a deeply consequential historical event that have serious repercussions for both the history and art history of China. Almost as if retreating back to the time of the Cultural Revolution, the state has banned all forms of exhibitions and experimental artistic practices including photography in the next two years. The publishing of photography magazines and books were only allowed with a discussion of non-political artworks. And, according to Wu, “in this atmosphere, art photography and documentary photography were both tamed to become part of the official establishment.” Indeed, this is where we return to the beginning of Yuan’s _Mental Patients in China_ project in 1989. Under this political context, the over-loomong impact of Tiananmen Square incident and heightened state of censorship certainly cannot be dismissed when thinking about the production of the photobook.

3.5 Debates on Documentary Photography in China

What does Wu mean by “tamed to become part of the official establishment”? This question can be a starting point in looking at the different strands and views of documentary photography in China.

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92 Ibid, 142.
photography already in China at the time, beginning with Yuan’s. When asked what is documentary photography, Yuan responds:

This question has already been debated over the past ten twenty years. Given the very opposite views it is difficult to come to a consensus. Some people believe that any form of photography that is documentary in nature can be documentary photography. There are also others who think that documentary photography must be made in a series and reflect deeply and holistically on a social concern. Even some people see Chinese documentary photography as a unique form of photography that is directly stemmed from western documentary photography. I am leaning towards the latter two.94

Unlike the western photographic circle where individual theorists have the power to freely publish and voice their views on the genre, discussion and debate pertaining to the individual styles of mainstream Chinese photography are held in a major meeting called “National Photography and Theory Symposium” (全国摄影理论年会) hosted every few years by the Chinese Photographers Association since 1980 and attended by mainstream photographers and scholars.95 According to scholar Wang Jing, in a span of roughly ten years from 1988 to 1999, Chinese documentary photography was discussed and debated on three separate occasions in 1988, 1994, and 1999, to reflect changing trends in the style.

On the first occasion, this form was primarily discussed in relation to news and art photography, with the photographer Jiang Beizhan stating that documentary photography differs from the other two in that it has a specific cultural value that is distinctive from both news and aesthetics. In the 1994 symposium, scholars reviewed the different aspects of documentary photography at the time in relation to the West. One of the presenters, Chen Xiaoqi, lamented the fact that Chinese documentary photographers were “too fixated on aesthetics which weakened

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95 Wang Jing, Social Documentary Photography Research in Twentieth Century China (Shandong, Shandong University, 2009): 15.
their observation and understanding of their subjects. This not only limits the involvement of the society in the picture, but also make their works to be shallow and undefinable.”

According to him, perhaps the biggest difference between Chinese and western documentary photographers is their approach in capturing their subjects: the former relying on a sentimental and aesthetics lens, while the latter resorting to a logical approach. In the last discussion in 1999, one of the key takeaways is from the photographer Hou Dengke’s essay “In the Name of Documentary,” when he states that there are no official documentary photographers in China, due to the restraint of the state. It does not matter whether the photographers were working to enact social change or simply for the sake of art; they were deemed amateur and unprofessional. While these observations reflect the general topics and concerns in Chinese documentary photography from late 1980s to 1990s, perhaps those made by Chen Xiaoqi in 1994 can be most appropriately applied to Yuan’s series, in terms of addressing both the shallowness and vagueness of its content.

In her essay, Wang further divided Chinese documentary photography into three categories. The first type is concerned with spotlighting social issues and advancing reforms in the society, which includes Yuan, Lü, Xie Hailong, and Lu Guang. The second type focuses on documenting vanishing cultural heritage sites and traditional culture, and the last one, which came of age in the 1990s and 2000s, acts more or less as a personal visual diary that records events and places from everyday life. Coming back to the question in the beginning of this section, we will explore how photographers working in the first and second categories compromised their work (or not) amidst a period of heightened control by the official establishment after 1989.

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96 Ibid.
97 Wang Jing, Social Documentary Photography Research in Twentieth Century China (Shandong, Shandong University, 2009): 16.
3.6 Chinese Documentary Photography After 1989

In order to have a sense of what was deemed appropriate by the Chinese government after 1989, one way is to survey a list of photobooks published in the 1990s. One of the most groundbreaking photobooks published at the time is Xu Yong’s *Beijing Hutong- 101 Photos* (fig. 7). Published by the Zhejiang Photographic Publishing House in 1990, it is one of the earliest independent photobooks to be professionally published and distributed by an individual photographer. As the title suggests, the book consists of 101 images taken by the photographer between the summer of 1989 and the spring of 1990 of empty old narrow alley (*hutong* 胡同) neighborhoods in Beijing built during the Ming and Qing Dynasties that were gradually being demolished with the rapid construction of high-rise buildings and new roads. Other published projects include Zhu Xianmin’s *People of the Yellow River*, where he records the life of peasants in rural China, Hou Dengke’s photographs on migrant farm workers in Shaanxi, and An Ge’s recording of urbanization in Guangdong, just to name a few. In this sense, it is clear that the theme of documenting vanishing heritage sites, city development, and forgotten communities are both popular among establishment photographers and fare well with the CCP. Through this, I argue that Yuan’s publication of mentally ill patients by a Chinese national publishing house in 1996 is branded in a similar vein; rather than pressing for social change, it is in fact a documentation of hidden communities in China, period. This would corroborate well with Yuan’s position at the *Nationality Pictorial*, a magazine that focuses on highlighting various minority groups in China albeit in a positive light. Furthermore, as we will see later, by focusing solely on the aesthetics of the photographs (as illustrated by the preface written by an art

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98 Martin Paar and WassinkLundgren, *The Chinese Photobook: From the 1900s to the Present* (New York: Aperture, 2016)
historian rather than a sociologist) and the lack of descriptions, the photobook could safely avoid the strict surveillance imposed on news photography. Yuan’s photobook serves as a prime example of what it takes in order for a photographer’s independent publication to be published in China. As observed here, this must necessarily sacrifice its criticality and thus minimize impact on the society. However, there are indeed other ways for photographers to completely bypass the Chinese government to reach mass audience and potentially ignite a change inside the Communist regime, as we will see below.

In the chapter “Reportage and New Wave” in her book *Photography and China*, Claire Roberts traces the development of photography up till the few years after the Tiananmen Square incident, when she writes that many independent documentary photographers began to turn “their cameras onto marginalized and dispossessed people, responding to the failure of investigative journalism and in the process systematically exposing dark, controversial or shocking aspects of Chinese society.”

Considering the overlapping circles between documentary and news photography during the 1980s as discussed in previous sections, it is after 1989 when we begin to see a clearer break between the two genres, precisely when many news photographers decided to leave the establishment to become freelance photographers. In the following section, we will look at Lü, Xie, and Lu’s practice and trace how their works present an alternative scenario to Yuan.

3.7 Mental Patients in China and The Forgotten People: The State of Chinese Psychiatric Wards

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Though he has worked in the same office, visited some of the same mental hospitals, and took on the same theme for his personal project, Lü’s career trajectory and the level of recognition his works received could not be more different from Yuan. I argue that this stems from the fact that Lü took on the path of an independent photographer, gaining greater freedom and flexibility in working with foreign press and associations. After resigning from *Nationality Pictorial* in October 1989, Lü began to travel extensively to photograph his subjects living on the margin of the society. Not limiting his scope to mental hospitals, he would also visit mentally ill patients and their families at homes and on the streets across ten provinces as a way to present a much more in-depth image of their lives. As the photographer states, “My job is caring about people; my focus is also people.” With the help of Juan I-Jong from the leading Taiwanese bilingual magazine *Photographers International*, the mental patients project’s excerpt was first published in its inaugural issue in 1992, where it immediately caught the attention of foreign media.

In fact, as early as 1993, his photographs were already featured in *Aperture* magazine and Magnum Photos, with the latter further inviting him (the only mainland Chinese photographer ever to have this privilege) to be a member of the prestigious international cooperative. It was in 1995, one year before Yuan’s publication, when Lü first published *The Forgotten People: The State of Chinese Psychiatric Wards* in Japan. While we will not delve into the specific details of this publication, what Lü’s case shows us is the possibilities of working outside of the CCP’s vast network. Although his photographs were not exhibited on any public occasions in China until 2005 at the Pingyao Photography Festival and in 2007 at the Songzhuang Art Museum, they have arguably achieved much greater attention and recognition than Yuan’s on the international

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100 Ibid.
101 He later becomes a correspondent instead of a member.
stage. It was in February 2008 when *The Forgotten People* was finally published in China, with the help of Intergallery at 798 Art District in Beijing and the China Tushu Publishing Limited, a private publishing house founded in 1996 in Shenzhen and headquartered in Hong Kong.

On first view, the similarities between *The Forgotten People* and *Mental Patients in China* are just as striking as their differences; most notably is the fact that the introductions in both photobooks are written by Li Xianting. Given his drastically different career path, the time difference in his publishing, and the recognition he received as a member of the Magnum Photos, it is arguably befuddled to find a similar art historical-based introduction in Lü’s photobook. It is in Roberts’s essay where the conundrum of Li’s nuanced role in this photobook is explained. As she writes, as Li was the director of the Songzhuang Art Museum at the time, his conscious decision to frame Lü’s photographs as art was to “provide a space where visual narratives that run counter to the mainstream can be presented, unlike the outlets available for journalism, which remain closely controlled.”

With the almost identical theme in the two photobooks, as mentioned before, I suggest that this same strategy was also applied to Yuan’s *Mental Patients in China*. However, while this tactic certainly highlights the CCP’s continued iron-clasped control on journalism and the ambiguous boundary between news and documentary photography in the 2000s, other aspects of *Forgotten People* crucially reflect Lü’s more critical approach to presenting the issue of mental illness in China, from the content, format, to the overall aesthetics of the photographs.

To begin, from the title and cover of the two books alone we can already tell textually and pictorially that *Forgotten People: The State of Chinese Psychiatric Wards* is much more clear in conveying the message of the book (fig. 8). By showcasing one of the most powerful

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images on the cover-- a group of seemingly unaware patients wandering inside a Sichuan mental hospital with one dominant figure staring directly at the camera and acknowledging the photographer’s and thus the viewer’s presence, Lü’s intent in capturing this forgotten community is clearly delineated. Here we should also note that, except for the English translation, its cover design is almost identical to the 1995 Japanese edition (fig. 9). On the other hand, by including only the Chinese and English titles and not even the photographer’s name, *Mental Patients in China*’s cover is much more ambivalent. Second, just in terms of sheer scale, Lü’s book is also much larger than Yuan’s, and includes a broader range of photographs that expand beyond the setting of mental hospitals, such as images taken at family homes and on the streets. This presents a wider context in understanding the pervasiveness of the illness in a rapidly developing nation. Finally, the most crucial distinction between the two books is that besides the standard caption of location and year, on select photographs, Lü especially made an effort to include the story of the individual depicted. These anecdotes, however short, include the names of the subjects which, in Lü’s words, serve as his respect to them. For the reader, they also offer an in-depth view of the inhumane treatments and trauma these individuals and their families go through.

For example, in *Photo 13, Mental Hospital, Sichuan, China, 1990* (fig. 10) and *Photo 14, Family, Sichuan, China, 1990* (fig. 11), the first one captures a patient named Xie Qunying lying on a bare wooden bedframe among broken pieces of wooden beams, who was transferred from the hospital ward to an abandoned room filled with debris and left to die because her family ran out of money to pay for her medication. It is in the second photo of Xie’s family back home, where we get to understand her family’s situation better. Her father is holding a picture of her

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103 Except for one young girl, whose name Lü Nan decided remove at the last minute given the possibility that she might recover in the future.
diseased brother while her mother sits on the left. Both her brother and mother were also mentally ill, illustrating the financial burden of a family succumbed to mental illness. This also reveals the reality experienced by many poor families who were unable to seek help for their loved ones, thus helplessly resorting to their own device to protect the sick one and themselves. As illustrated in Photo 20, *Family, Sichuan, China, 1990* (fig. 12), we see a man and an elderly woman sitting outside a stone hut. Upon closer view, a hand is seen sticking out of a makeshift window. The boy inside is 22 year-old Tao Shimao, the first college graduate in his village who became sick during his winter holiday back home. After killing his mother and hurting his father (the man on the left), he has since been placed inside the stone hut while his grandmother (the elderly woman) delivers food and water to him every day. In Photo 21, *Family, Guizhou, China, 1990* (fig. 13), the woman Zhang Runxian suffers a similar fate. After being sent to the hospital twice, her family ran out of money and due to the fear she posed to others, decided to lock her in a cave one kilometer away from the village, where she has been living for two months. As Lü’s photobook shows, these descriptions are tremendously important to reveal the government’s lack of support for mental illness and its serious emotional impact on families. Thus, the description’s absence in Yuan’s book is certainly one reason that makes it ineffectual in inspiring change.

A close comparison can even be made between Lü’s and Yuan’s photograph of the same patients taken back in the beginning when they were still traveling together. Taken in 1989 in a hospital in Tianjin, both Lü’s *Photo 43, Mental Hospital, Tianjin, China, 1989* (fig. 14) and Yuan’s *Photo 3, Tianjin, 1989* (fig. 15) portray the same brawny male patient standing nude inside a hospital ward. In Yuan’s photograph the man appears standing on a bed with his head bend downwards and his side facing the camera. The shadow that is casted on his body highlights the contours of his extremely malnourished body frame, contrasting with the brighter
wall in the background. Yet, the same shadow also obscures his own facial features, thus reducing the man to be an anonymous body mass. In Lü’s version which was taken when the man was standing on the floor next to a window in full frontal view, light from both sides of the photo shines on both his face and body, revealing greater complexion in his facial expression and body features. In the description, Lü writes that his name is Han Min, whose father deposited half of his salary every month to support his hospitalization. Yet it was right before the picture was taken when Han’s brother was diagnosed with liver cancer. Lü ends the anecdote with a lament by Han’s father: “I really don’t know which one to save.”

The case of Yuan and Lü is an interesting study that presents to us the different approaches by a mainstream and an independent photographer with similar intent on tackling the same subject matter. Given Yuan’s disappointment on the outcome of his own photographs, Lü’s departure from the magazine suggests a possible option, albeit a bold one, that could affect the quality and criticality of his photobook and potentially make a difference in the reception of his work. Indeed, Yuan, and in fact many others, are well aware of this alternate path. When asked of his opinion on the general trend of mainstream photographers leaving establishment to pursue an independent career, he replies,

Actually I have also pondered about this, but there are several things. First, you might feel like you are free after you leave the establishment. But in reality you are still bounded by other things, such as making a living in order to have a house to live in and food to eat. Second, I believe everyone is different, some things are easier to accept for some and harder for others, and vice versa. I feel it is better for me to be in the establishment, since I am not someone who will sacrifice everything just to do photography.

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This statement reflects the fundamental difference between Yuan and Lü, and also adheres to this paper’s main argument that his position in the establishment essentially compromises the working method, quality, and production of his work, which is why Yuan’s original intent should also have been questioned; whether he was merely pursuing a recreational project or truly dedicating his time and effort to highlight the plight of mental illness in the society. To Yuan’s credit, his second project on poverty taken in the 1990s appears to be much more pointed and ambitious. To discuss briefly, he managed to publish his photos of the poor minorities living on the margins of society in four issues of *Nationality Pictorial* until they were stopped, presumably due to their negative connotation. Furthermore, instead of relying on a national publishing house, he decided to publish the photobook through the Fellows Press of America, a Chinese publishing house founded in 2003 in America. The content of the book also shifted to include much more detailed descriptions and context. This demonstrates the photographer’s own awareness of the insufficiency in his first project, and more important, it reflects the general state of photobook publishing in China after 1989. In looking at its audience reach, the photobook arguably pales in comparison with the news media (for example, Yuan’s book only printed 1,000 copies). In the next section, we will move on to focus on two Chinese photographers who are able to cause ripples in the society through ways other than a photobook.

### 3.8 Beyond the Photobook, Chinese Documentary Photography and Social Change

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106 Sun Jingtao, “It is Unfortunate to be a Chinese Documentary Photographer,” China News Digest International, Last accessed: Oct. 21, 2018, http://hx.cnd.org/2007/03/%E4%BD%9C%E4%B8%80%E5%90%8D%E4%BD%8F%E5%9B%BD%E7%9A%84%E7%BA%AA%E5%AE%9E%E6%91%84%E5%9D%B1%E5%9F%9F%82%E5%82%A8%E5%9B%BD%E5%9B%BD%E8%80%88%E5%9B%BD%E9%99%A6%

Perhaps two of the most successful case studies involving documentary photography and social change in China are Xie Hailong’s photos for Project Hope and Lu Guang’s project on the Henan AIDS crisis, both first started in the 1990s. In exploring the two photographers’ drastically opposite background yet successful outcome in their projects, this section aims to present two alternate scenarios from Yuan. Specifically, I argue that a documentary photographer in China must either rely fully on or completely reject the establishment in order to reach mass audience and cause social change. Xie, a self-taught photographer like Yuan, began to research on poverty in rural China during the late 1980s and travelled across twelve provinces with his own funding to document the dire condition of education for the poor in 1991. As we are now familiar with the CCP’s censorship system, we can understand why his photographs were mostly rejected by press agencies for displaying negative aspects of the society. It was not until he contacted and was later endorsed by Project Hope, a new semi-official charity project initiated by the Youth Development Foundation that focuses on providing poor children in rural areas with basic education, that his photographs began to circulate both locally and internationally.

Among these photographs, one particularly stands out. It is of Su Mingjun, a young girl with big eyes staring into the camera while writing (fig. 16), accompanied by a caption that says, “I want to go to school.” The image was a viral hit by the 1990s, and by 1994, it has been published more than 100 million times in newspaper and other printed materials with people calling and writing to ask about Su. Within eight months, the project has raised 100 million yuan. Since the photograph’s debut, it has become one of the most iconic images in the first fifty years of the

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109 Ibid.
founding of the PRC, and arguably it has contributed to the improvement of rural education by eliciting awareness among the population. Unlike Yuan, Xie took on an interesting path from an independent photographer and became a news reporter, joining the Chinese Photographers Association.

The other example is Lu Guang, a freelance photographer who took photography classes at the Fine Arts Academy of Tsinghua University in Beijing. With most of his projects being self-funded, he is widely regarded both locally and internationally for his in-depth approach to portray grave social subject matters. The project on the Henan AIDS village began in 1995, when he first read in the newspaper about an eight-year-old girl diagnosed with AIDS who sought help from a Beijing hospital. From the story of this girl, over the years, he travelled across the many villages in Henan to uncover the plight of the AIDS crisis. In the 1990s, it was very popular for villagers to donate blood in exchange for money to support their family. With the un-sanitized procedures and poor regulation conducted in the blood-drawing stations, many inhabitants were infected by the HIV virus as a result.\[111\] For a period of three years from 2001 to 2003, he travelled extensively to visit over 100 villages and document the stories of individuals and families affected by the AIDS crisis. Upon releasing his photos such as 10/12/2001 (fig. 17) in 2004, his photographs swiftly won the First Prize in the Contemporary Issues category in the 2004 World Press Photo Contest.\[112\] The unprecedented attention and outrage the project elicited on both the national and global stage not only forced the premier to be involved, but also pushed the Henan Provincial Government to act by delegating over 76 designated officers to oversee the rescuing and rehabilitating effort and setting up health stations to provide free medication and preventive measures for the villagers. The success of Lu’s project demonstrates the autonomy

\[112\] Ibid.
and independence he is able to retain, which allows him to participate in prestigious competitions overseas and subsequently push for change in China from the outside in.
CHAPTER FOUR
Theme of Mental Hospital in Western Documentary Photography

As we have learned, the mental hospital is not an uncommon theme in western documentary photography. Yuan himself and his colleague Lü have cited the projects by Mary Ellen Mark and Raymond Depardon and their effects on the Italian and American societies respectively. This chapter will closely analyze and compare Yuan’s photography with Mark’s and Depardon’s, as a way to understand how the themes of mental hospital and mental illness are portrayed by these three photographers. Since Depardon’s photobook did not get published until 2013, the comparison of the photobook format and style will primarily focus on Mark’s Ward 81. At the end, Gianni Berengo Gardin and Carla Cerati’s Morire di Classe, a groundbreaking Italian photobook representative of the reform movement will also be looked at in order to illustrate the necessary role played by politics in social documentary publications. Through this comparison we hope to trace out the message behind the aesthetics of Yuan’s photographs that is independent of the introduction and interview in his photobook, and see how it is different or similar to the more successful photographic series in the West.

We will begin by looking at a range of photos and the narrative in Yuan’s photobook. Since there are forty one images, naturally not all will be discussed. The comparison will focus on individual and group portraits, as well as images of the surrounding inside the mental institutions, as a way to determine the general style and message in his work. Four distinctive themes could be seen in the book: portraits, group interaction, daily activities, and confinement. The first category includes photographs of individuals or groups who are directly looking or posing for the camera, while the second and third group involves some sort of shared action between the subjects playing games or eating meals. Finally, the fourth theme is usually taken
from a more removed and voyeuristic perspective that highlights the confined condition of the
patients.

Indeed, the very first photo seems to set the tone for a majority of the photographs and
inform the reader of Yuan’s primary approach of engaging directly with his subjects. Labelled
*Photo 1, Guizhou, 1989* (fig. 18), the woman in the center with slightly disheveled hair stares
directly into the camera lens, clearly acknowledging the photographer’s presence. In her
interview with the photographer, Li Nan characterizes this image as visually representing the
essence of “abnormality.” I argue otherwise as I believe that the completely empty background,
the common wardrobe (at least for her top), along with her calm facial expression in reality make
this more a generic portrait that could be of any individual. In fact, this adheres to one of Yuan’s
main attempt in his project, which is to capture these patients’ normal and however mundane
expression and state of being, rather than dramatizing their abnormalities for visual impact.

This explains the inclusion of other portraits such as *Photo 7, Guangxi, 1994* (fig. 19), *Photo 18,
Beijing, 1991* (fig. 4), and *Photo 33, Tianjin, 1989* (fig. 20). While there are certainly other
images that are visually more disturbing, such as *Photo 2, Tianjin, 1989* (fig. 21) and *Photo 3,
Tianjin, 1989* (fig. 15), their relatively few appearances also explain a major aesthetics difference
between his and Lü’s book.

Furthermore, unlike Lü’s or those by other photographers as we will see, a lot of the
photographs such as *Photo 9, Tianjin, 1989* (fig. 22), *Photo 13, Beijing, 1989* (fig. 23), *Photo 20,
Tianjin, 1989* (fig. 24), and *Photo 30, Sichuan, 1990* (fig. 2) actually show patients smiling. Most
notably is *Photo 14, Sichuan, 1990* (fig. 25), where a man and woman are seen smiling and

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113 Li Nan, *Effect: Contemporary Chinese Photography Records of Exchange* (Zhejiang: Zhejiang
Photographic Press, 2013)
114 Yan Zhou, “Yuan Dongping fangtan 袁冬平访谈,” Siyuefeng.com, access date: Oct 21, 2018,
http://yuandongping.siyuefeng.com/wap/article/216
looking at the camera, with the man naked and leaning behind a row of bars. Given the lack of description, we do not know exactly what their role and relationship is with one another in this photo, and if it wasn’t for the metal barrier we would not have thought any more of the peculiarity of the setting. As could be seen in the other mentioned images, it is also not clear whether their smiles are their usual demeanor or a conscious front they put on when in the presence of a camera. This pervasive sense of ambivalence indeed runs throughout the rest of the pages in the book, which I argue essentially undermines Yuan’s original intention to spotlight the issue of the problematic treatment of mental patients.

Speaking of treatment, there are also no images of how patients are actually being treated. From all the images seen so far, their hands are not bound and they are seemingly free to roam around the inside and outside of the hospital ward. The notorious high wall that barred patients from the outside world is only conspicuously seen in two images: *Photo 26, Guizhou, 1989* (fig. 26) and *Photo 32, Guizhou, 1989* (fig. 27). Even so, in these instances the patients are concentrating on jumping rope (with someone who dresses like a staff) and strolling through the courtyard. In fact, a majority of the images are so focused on the patients that they cannot effectively present the supposedly unlivable condition of the mental hospitals save for a few bare beds. This is very different for example from Lü’s *Photo 13, Mental Hospital, Sichuan, China, 1990* (fig. 10) that was discussed in the last chapter. Given that a majority of the Chinese population have never before seen images of what goes on behind mental hospitals, Yuan’s project certainly succeeds in documenting this “secret, forbidden territory,” but not necessarily conveying the message that its condition needs to be changed.

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In 1975, after being assigned by The Pennsylvania Gazette to create a story on the making of Milo Forman’s film One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, the photojournalist Mary Ellen Mark travelled to the set location at the Oregon State Hospital, where she first met the group of women from Ward 81, considered as the most dangerous in the entire state of Oregon at the time. Immediately afterwards, she spent a year obtaining permission from both the hospital and the patients to enter and document the living situation inside the ward. In February 1976, she and Karen Folger Jacobs, a writer and social scientist ultimately spent thirty-six days living alongside the patients while documenting their lives and recording their stories. The photographs from this extended stay were later published as the photobook Ward 81 and shown in a solo exhibition at New York’s Leo Castelli Gallery in 1978. In terms of her approach, it is clear that Mark’s goal is to assimilate herself with the patients, finding an intimate access to not just their living condition, but also their thoughts and stories. The fact that she brought along a social scientist to textually record their experience also reflects a multidisciplinary approach to understand these patients beyond relying on pure visual cues. She has stated explicitly that her goal was not to focus on the issue of mental illness but rather to simply connect these women with the outside world, and interestingly enough, in an interview, she also remarked similarly as Yuan, “I didn’t want to show them as exotically crazy.” Nonetheless, the photographs and content of the photobook are arguably much more poignant and revealing than Yuan’s.

On first glance, we could already trace out several distinctive differences between Ward 81 and Mental Patients in China. The first of which is of course its cover (fig. 28), which shows an image of a girl whose body is submerged and hidden in a tub of soap water. This creates an illusion that her head is simply detached from the body with her hair resting on the tub. The

contrast between her deadpan expression (compounded by her eyes not exactly looking into the camera lens) and the playful optical trick with the tub creates an uncanny portrait that informs the reader of what lays inside the rest of the book. There is also a subtitle that reads “Photographs by Mary Ellen Mark and Text by Karen Folger Jacobs with an Introduction by Milos Forman.” As we can see just by the people who are involved, the book is not focused on art history or even the photographer herself, which greatly differs from author-centric approach in Yuan’s photobook.

In Forman’s introduction, he relayed a story he heard about two women in a small town in Czechoslovakia near the end of WWII who went out to the street to attack the retreating German tanks. One was shot and killed on the scene while the other one who survived became hysterical and locked away into a mental hospital. Later on, the dead woman was claimed as a hero on the front page of many newspapers and in textbooks. The other lived for five years in a mental institution, completely forgotten by the public. Among other things, this illustrates three main points: the frequent misunderstanding the general public might have on mental patients, the thin and often blurred line between the definition of mentally healthy or ill, and the infamous stigma of mental hospital as a prison of the forgotten. As a preface to the photographs, it is a reminder that every mental patient is a unique individual with their own story and history to tell, and that mental patients should not be stereotyped with a single description such as crazy or lunatic. This reminder is enforced by Jacobs’s text, which chronicles the stories of some of the patients and events inside Ward 81.

While her essay does not include any statistics of mental patients and hospitals in America, Jacobs succeeds in providing an intimate portrait of the various relationship dynamics, hardships, and thoughts, and even funny moments experienced by the patients and aides inside
the ward. She starts off by stating that on first view, these women could pass off as any other individuals living inside a regular hospital ward (I believe this is paradoxically what Yuan hopes to portray through his photographs). However, immediately after, she begins to describe their various abnormal body features, which include pot bellies (even for extremely slender girls), missing teeth, eyes that do not focused, and most importantly, scars from physical abuse. As the essay goes on, we will come to find that these scars are mostly self-inflicted, which was the reason why they were sent to the hospital in the first place. Having met some of the patients, Jacobs continues by describing the general condition of the ward, such as the diamond pattern and steel used for the barred windows and bolted doors. What is crucial to the reader is the patients’ reaction to these secluded measures, with one saying: “A beautiful black crow just flew by this window. I love those birds when they come flying by and nestle in the trees. They’re so cute! But I’m gonna close the curtains. I don’t want to see the birds through bars. If I can’t be out in nature’s beauty, I don’t want to see it!” while another said to Jacobs, “You know, yesterday I wrote a poem about freedom. I was gonna read it to you. But I decided not to, ‘cause freedom doesn’t have any meaning in a nut house!” This illustrates the great sense of awareness displayed by these patients, supposedly the most crazy individuals, of their own living situation and the stereotypes associated with the mentally ill. In fact, some of them have even tried to repeatedly escape, with one even resorting to using a lawyer to fight for her freedom.

After revealing some more qualities of these patients such as their educational level, Jacobs moves onto their treatment program, which includes medication and the use of shock therapy, a horrifying episode that repeatedly punctuates throughout the essay, at one point a

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118 Ibid, 7.
patient is heard yelling, “I’m frightened! I don’t want to get shot with a gun!” One patient Ellen who had stayed inside the ward for thirty years, the longest at the time, initially received weekly shock treatments and medication four times a day, which according to Jacobs, turned her into a “‘dud’ - a totally passive person.” Throughout the essay, these stories are intertwined with anecdotes of TV-watching, yarding (when the women were allowed to go out and help broom the leaves), and social hour where they were allowed to dance and interact with the male patients from Ward 83. Jacobs’s text is an important component of the photobook that conveys the nuances and multilayer qualities of these individuals that run the risk of being left behind in a visual narrative. Mark’s photographs, on the other hand, reveals a more poignant look at the physical quality of both the patients and their environment, beginning with the first photograph (fig. 29), which shows a girl peeping out of the small opening of the bolted door. This physical barrier between them and us is clearly emphasized as it blocks out almost all features of the girl except for her eyes and part of her ear, in effect also effacing her facial expression. Ambivalence here is used differently from Yuan’s case, as it highlights mental institution’s role in the barring and anonymizing of individuals.

In other pictures, the diamond pattern window bar is frequently depicted, with one photo showing a patient staring longingly at the outside world (fig. 30). Another patient is seen smiling while being chained to the bed (fig. 31). The contrast between her smile and the extremely uncomfortable position further continues the uncanny representation seen on the cover of the book, and is much stronger than the ones seen in Yuan’s photographs. Furthermore, there are also other close-up shots of the restraint device used by the aides, such as a photo of the leather handcuffs worn by one patient (fig. 32). After comparing the content and the images in both

119 Ibid, 11.  
120 Ibid, 8.
photobooks, it is clear that Mark’s *Ward 81* offers a much more in-depth look than Yuan’s *Mental Patients in China* in documenting the lives inside of the mental hospital in terms of the aesthetics, textual content and approach.

Two years after her extended stay, Mark’s photographs were not only published into a photobook, but were first shown in Leo Castelli Gallery in 1978. The responses to these photographs were, unlike the ones received by Yuan, focused primarily on the lives of those inside the ward. The renowned art critic Robert Hughes from *Time* Magazine even acknowledges the art community’s lazy comparison of any female photographers working with marginal community to Diane Arbus, which he states is “not very useful” in Mark’s case, because “the general character of the photographs is to convey sympathy with these trapped lives.”

Further using a photograph of a woman relaxing in bath as example, he remarks that in other cases it might seem like voyeurism, but here the image conveys the same “elegiac sweetness” as any other bathers. Concluding his review, Hughes simply writes, “After seeing the show, it is hard to think about madness and confinement in the same way again.”

In another review by art critic Douglas Davis from *Newsweek*, he also mentions that, if one is not paying enough attention to the works, one would run the risk of comparing Mark with Arbus. While he further includes an analysis on how the photographs are framed around the subjects and the details of individual images, Davis ends on a similar note drawing a parallel between these patients’ lives and our own by writing, “Now we look not only at the photographic subject – with compassion – but into ourselves, with care.”

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122 Ibid.

first name “Brenda” in his review, highlighting the vital role of text and description in drawing a personal connection between the subjects and the wider public. In this next section we will look at Raymond Depardon’s photographs of Italian mental hospitals, which are aesthetically distinctive from Mark and Yuan.

As will be discussed in the next chapter, the circumstances between Depardon, Mark, and Yuan are quite different, with Depardon being invited by the asylum director Franco Basaglia to document the living situation in the different hospitals, which already contrasts with Mark’s single ward setting. As we will also see, with the documentary project undertaken before and after the passing of the Basaglia Law (which will be explained in depth in the next chapter) from 1977 to 1981, what Depardon’s photographs capture is not just the interaction between the patients themselves but more importantly, their connection with the doctors of the institutions. This relationship between the patients and those who are supposedly the closest to them is something that is missing in both Mark’s and Yuan’s photographs, and presents another side to the human dynamics inside these sterile environments.

Though his photobook was published in 2013, some of the photographs and text still offer an interesting comparison with Mark’s and Yuan’s. The cover photo is similar to Ward 81, this time with an uncanny portrait of a headless person clutching himself and sitting at a table (fig. 33). Dedicated to Franco Basaglia and other asylum directors, the book is sprinkled throughout with personal anecdotes by Depardon, with the first photograph marking his first encounter with a patient while on his way to the hospital in Trieste (fig. 34). Through his description of the experience, which recalls open gates and absence of guards, it already provides a glimpse into the changing environment of these traditionally secluded institutions. Indeed, in one of the next descriptions, we read that Basaglia had already in fact “dismantled the Trieste
hospital and moved the most able patients into apartments in the town center.”

In another description, Depardon chronicles the hot weather and how some young psychiatrists decided to let the patients remove their clothing to enjoy the summer sun. In the corresponding photograph (fig. 35) we see a nude man sitting on the bench smiling at the camera while another fully dressed man stands upright and looks at the camera. Another younger nude man is seen staring off in space behind the bench. As mentioned above, this relationship between the patients and staff is not only described in words but represented by the ubiquitous white lab coat that appeared in images such as Italy. 1979 (fig. 36) (fig. 37) (fig. 38). While some of these photos portray a staff’s role as a caretaker, as exemplified with two consecutive shots of a doctor performing some sort of checkup on a patient (fig. 39 and 40), they in general more so display an unbalanced power dynamic between staffs and patients as highlighted by an image of a fully clothed doctor overseeing a group of nude patients in shower (fig. 41). This contrast between light and darkness is frequently seen in other photographs in the series, with the light often coming from the windows, while the shadows of the figures inside are elongated across the floor, as seen in Italy. Piedmont. Turin. 1980. Psychiatric hospital. (fig. 42), Italy. 1980 (fig. 43), and Italy. 1980. (fig. 44). This particular aesthetics is distinctive and a much more concerted approach than Mark and Yuan, visually representing the dichotomy between the outside and inside, light and dark, and freedom and confinement.

Another notable documentary project on Italian mental hospitals is the photobook Morire di Classe by photographers Gianni Berengo Gardin and Carla Cerati. Working in 1968, almost ten years before Depardon, Gardin and Cerati were two photographers who were also requested by Franco Basaglia, then the director of the asylum in Gorizia, to photograph the living condition

124 Raymond Depardon, Manicomio (Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 2013)
125 Ibid.
of mental patients inside his and some other hospitals. With its photos taken between April and October 1968 across three asylums in Colorno, Gorizia, and Florence, the photobook was later published in May 1969. Roughly translates as “to die because of your class,” the book is considered to be a radical and key publication in the Italian deinstitutionalization movement during the 1960s both in terms of its content and design.\textsuperscript{126} Edited and prefaced by Basaglia and his wife Franca, according to scholar John Foot, the book itself was carefully planned and designed as a clear propaganda tool used on behalf of the reform movement. This presents yet another alternate agency, which is different from Yuan. What stands out in its design is the lack of page number and captions, while the images also do not associate with a photographer, which “rejects an authorial and ‘artistic’ view”\textsuperscript{127} in their reading, unlike Yuan’s book.

Furthermore, content-wise the photographs were taken and selected subjectively by the authors and editors to promote some of the worst situations inside these hospitals, at a time when actually some of the institution such as Gorizia were already unlocked and undergoing drastic reforms. Images of bars, filthy toilets, and high walls are frequently seen to highlight the unlivable environment, while the use of strait-jackets also appeared. Its political implication to push forward the reform movement is made clear by the collaboration between Basaglia and Mario Tommasini, a communist politician in Parma, who contributed to the Basaglian movement by staging an exhibition of photographs documenting a demonstration in 1968 when temporary nurses in mental asylums protested against the horrifying working/living condition by wearing strait-jackets on the streets of Parma.\textsuperscript{128} The underlying political goal of this book which guides its aesthetics and content could thus explain its legacy in contributing to the passing of Law 180

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid, 26.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
in May 1978, the so-called “Basaglia Law” that ordered the closing of mental hospitals in Italy. As Cerati said, “I am convinced that out photographs helped Franco Basaglia to get a law passed which closed down the psychiatric hospitals in Italy … the power of an image is very different from that of a written text. Words can be countered, images can’t!” Even till today, art historians agree on its role in the deinstitutionalization movement. For example, Denis Curti writes that, “Morire di Classe was to prove fundamental in the process that would lead to the passing, in 1978, of Law 180.” Morire di Classe is an exemplar that illustrates the intrinsic role played by politics in photobooks that succeed in enacting social change. Considering this, Yuan’s Mental Patients in China seems all the more destined to fail given his background and the political context in China.

129 Ibid.
CHAPTER FIVE
Mental Hospital Reforms in China, U.S., and Italy: History and Statistics

After delving into the art historical and political aspects relating to the *Mental Patients in China* publication, this chapter will focus on the theme of mental illness, specifically its history and the differences in its perception in China, the United States, and Italy at the time of the release of *Mental Patients in China, Ward 81*, and *Manicomio*. Through familiarizing with the social context surrounding the three projects, we will have a better understanding on the reasons behind the differences in their reception and outcome. A major part of the chapter will be dedicated to the history of mental asylums in China, which was in fact introduced by foreign missionaries near the end of the nineteenth century. By exploring its development in China alongside the stigmatization of mental illness throughout Chinese history and by the Chinese Communist Party, it will be clear to see what are some of the other difficulties faced by Yuan in enacting social change during the early 1990s and progress (if any) since. This investigation is also a way to question Yuan’s statement claiming that “nothing has changed” since the release of his book, which might have disregarded the nuances in the gradually changing policy implemented by the Chinese government.

What is mental illness? On the American Psychiatric Association website, mental illness is defined as “health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior.”\(^\text{131}\) It is a common illness that is largely associated with distress in work, social, or family activities, which is now also seen as hereditary. What also stands out in the description is that it is considered treatable with a combination of psychotherapy, medication, and other forms of treatments. Going back in history, however, this definition is certainly not the mainstream perception at least until

the twentieth century, and is closely pertained to Western culture. Even in the United States in the twenty-first century, the effectiveness of psychiatry continues to be a debatable issue in the medical field. Thus, this definition is more of a starting point to look at how various interpretations of mental illness are formed by both the specific culture and social context. With its existence being as old as the human civilization, mental illness and its perception and treatment has gone through radical transformation since 5,000 B.C.E., with one of the earliest “treatments” being seen in artifacts of “trephined skulls.”\(^{132}\) Some of the explanations of mental illness in ancient civilizations range from considering it as a supernatural form of demonic possessions that could only be “healed” by drilling a hole into the victim’s skull and releasing the demon, to finding its medical correlation with the activities of the brain by the Greek philosopher Hippocrates in fifth century B.C.E.\(^ {133}\)

One form of treatment related to the present study is the asylum where the mentally unstable individual is sent by their families to live with other patients inside one building with a team of keepers. Its history can be dated back as early as the Middle Ages in Europe when it was considered to be a “madhouse” where physical restraints such as iron cuffs and chains were commonly used. It was not until the 1790s when asylums in Europe began to move away from coercion and physical force with the help of William Tuke, a Quaker businessman who introduced a method known as moral treatment, where instead of placing them in isolation, the activities of the patients are being closely monitored instead.\(^ {134}\) In the United States, the moral treatment is a form that gained popularity in the nineteenth century, which advocated quiet


environment alongside “opportunities for meaningful work and experience.” Its implementation was first introduced through new private hospitals located in secluded settings in the countryside, and later expanded to state hospitals by the government which allowed poorer patients to be admitted and treated in the same manner. However, by the early to mid-twentieth century, for financial, practical, and ethical reasons, especially in the post-war period in the 1950s, inpatient care at state hospitals has largely fallen out of favor with the government and the public. With the invention of new drugs such as chlorpromazine that proved to be effective in curbing symptoms, deinstitutionalization became the widespread norm in the US throughout the century. A look at the statistics shows that at its peak, there were 560,000 mental patients in state hospital in the 1950s, which dramatically decreased to 130,000 by 1980. In the 2000, there were only 22 mental hospitals for every 100,000 people, down from 339 in 1955. 

In thinking about Mary Ellen Mark’s Ward 81 and the state of mental hospitals in the US, it is important to note that by the time her photobook was released in 1979, the nation was well into a period of deinstitutionalization reform and the actual Ward 81 has since been integrated to a coeducational treatment ward. This is dramatically different from Yuan’s case, where China was just coming out of a chaotic era marked by the government’s heavy surveillance of its population. Furthermore, in the decade prior to the release of Mark’s photobook, there were already other notable pioneers in the cultural field who succeeded in highlighting the inhumane conditions of mental patients. The best example was Ken Kesey’s book One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest published in 1962, a groundbreaking literature work that spotlights the tortuous treatment in inpatient psychiatry such as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) frequently used in the

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Its hugely popular film version released in 1975 starring Jack Nicholson as its main character further ignited the issue among mainstream American audience. According to the renowned psychiatrist Dr. Frank Pittman, Kensey’s book not only contributed to the ongoing criticism of shock therapy being used for societal purpose rather than the benefit of the patient, but also helped improve the trend in administering more effective anti-psychotic drugs at the patients’ homes and community centers. Riding on the wave of the general calls for mental institutional reforms, Ward 81 certainly benefitted from the already heightened attention and awareness of the American public. The Oregon State Hospital where the filming of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and production of Ward 81 took place would later both reduce their patient numbers and give additional rights to their patients. While the visual power in Mark’s photography is certainly undeniable, what her case reveals is the important role played by public opinion and the impact of popular culture in swaying government policies in the U.S., both of which are missing in Yuan’s case.

Mental hospital reforms in Italy occurred around the same period as the U.S. in the second half of the twentieth century. Prior to the deinstitutionalization reform, the general condition of mental hospitals in Italy is similar to the rest of Europe, as the leading radical psychiatrist Franco Basaglia wrote in 1971:

The manicomio is a deposit where people believe the mad are sent, where intellectuals believe the lunatics are sent and where doctors believe mental patients are looked after and treated. For the mad, the lunatic and the mental patient it is a locked, oppressive and total institution where punitive, prison-like rules are applied, in order to slowly eliminate its own contents. […] Its role is to explicitly isolate and control socially disturbing subjects, the illness being only a very marginal element.  

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139 Ibid.

Indeed, since the early 1960s, there were already social movements by students, women, and trade union criticizing the “old-fashioned, restrictive and custodial way” of treating patients in mental asylums, which was part of a larger mission to promote health as a “right for all.”\textsuperscript{141} Among the opposing voices, the most important and widely regarded figure is certainly Basaglia, who succeeded in actually enacting reforms by pushing through Law 180 just two years before his death, which was passed by the Italian Parliament and became part of the National Health Reform that brought on the National Health Service in Italy.\textsuperscript{142} The reform ordered the phasing out of all psychiatric hospitals in Italy within twenty years and an introduction of community-centered program for treating mental health. According to Michele Tansella, this gradual elimination of mental hospitals is different from the U.S., which saw an abrupt end to institutionalization.\textsuperscript{143} What is interesting is that in fact, a series of experimental deinstitutionalization models were already taking place in Italy between 1961 and 1978 across several cities, from Gorizia, Arezzo, to Trieste. These programs some of which implemented by Basaglia, the director of the asylum in Gorizia and in Trieste from 1961 to 1970, and 1971 to 1979 respectively, have proven that a community-based approach is plausible in replacing the traditional method used by mental hospitals.\textsuperscript{144}

It is here where Raymond Depardon comes in. Having understood the landscape of Italian mental institution reform, it is clear there are major differences between the context behind the projects of Depardon, Mark, and especially Yuan. While Mark spent a year obtaining the permission by the patients’ family and hospital to conduct her photoshoot, Depardon met

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{141} Ibid, 665.
\item \textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Basaglia in 1977 and was invited by the director to document the condition of the asylums. As what Basaglia said to him:

You’ll photograph patients here who you won’t see anywhere else, but it’s exactly the same in France and America. The psychiatric hospital made them that way; now it’s too late, there’s nothing else I can do for them. Take your photographs… otherwise people won’t believe us.\footnote{Alyssa Coppelman, “Raymond Depardon’s Inside Look at Italian Insane Asylums Before Their Demise,” Feature Shoot, Last accessed: Oct 21, 2018, https://www.featureshoot.com/2014/06/raymond-depardons-intense-photos-italian-insane-asylum/}

With the backing of Basaglia, he was able to freely roam around the different hospitals in Italy in the time before and after the passing of Law 180. On one occasion he was also introduced to Sergio Piro, another director of a mental asylum in Naples, who smuggled the photographer into the Leonardo Bianchi Hospital. Depardon’s relatively unrestrained access to the hospitals and network with the group of asylum directors is a key privilege and separates him from Mark and Yuan. On the other hand, similar to Mark, the timing of his project is also at the cusp of the deinstitutionalization movement, which in a way minimizes the correlation between his project and social change that was mentioned in Yuan’s statement. As we will see below, the state of Chinese mental hospitals is fairly different in Europe and the United States, which illustrates the mammoth difficulties faced by Yuan.

In China, the mental hospital as we know it today arrived almost a century after its first implementation in England, before which the responsibility of taking care of the patient remains with the family during the Qing Dynasty, as in the West. However, it should be noted that based on the Great Legal Qing Code, the family would also be fined and punished should the mentally unstable individual commit a crime, illustrating the heavier burden and collective guilt shared by the entire family of the individual. The first asylum was the John G. Kerr Refuge for Insane established in Guangzhou in 1898 by the eponymous American medical missionary and
sponsored by the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. The program is largely a personal effort by Kerr who, after appealing to the Medical Missionary Society for over twenty years, finally upon their approval purchased the land with his personal funds. Since its founding, the center was open to all patients with no cost. Over the next several decades, mental hospitals would slowly spread to major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, and by 1949 become common institutions across most cities with large foreign populations in China. However similar to the situation in the West, these mental hospitals were often underfunded and also lacked the necessary knowledge in effectively treating patients with psychotic symptoms.

With the CCP’s control over China, there were continuous progresses in the establishing of mental hospitals across provinces as a security measures. In 1958, the first National Mental Health Meeting was convened to jumpstart a series of community work to train workers in Beijing, Shanghai, Sichuan, and other cities in order to create plans on preventing and treating mentally ill condition. However, with the onset of the Cultural Revolution, the attack on the psychiatry field and academic system would heavily shape the Chinese public’s perception of mental illness throughout a major part of the twentieth century. For one, the CCP’s propaganda materials relies on idealistic images of healthy hardworking proletariats to promote their agenda. This could even be seen in their ubiquitous slogans such as “Build a good physique for socialism!” Those who are stricken with mental illness (or any other forms of sickness for that matter) are thus rarely seen in official publications and images. During the Cultural Revolution, an era of ideological reeducation, mental illness was even considered as an “ideological illness”,

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147 Ibid, 594.
or wrong political thought, and not an actual disease.\textsuperscript{150} Thus, officials would often claim to foreigners that mental illness was not a pervasive problem or even flat out deny the existence of mental hospitals and patients. For university professors, they were deemed enemies of the state along with other elites during the revolution and became the main targets by Mao’s radical Red Guards who were ironically often their own students.

According to Arthur Kleinman in his conversations with the former dean of the Hunan Medical College, of the six psychiatry professors, “two committed suicide, two were exiled to the countryside and forced out of psychiatry; and two barely held on as general physicians in Changsha.”\textsuperscript{151} Medical research and experiments that began from the 1950s were also put to an abrupt halt for a decade. It was only by the early 1980’s with a series of reform under Deng Xiaoping when new ideas and empirical research concentrating on the biological, psychological, and societal aspects began to emerge in the psychiatry field. There were also a series of policy changes on a national level, such as the Twelve Regions Survey organized by the World Health Organization and a group of Chinese researchers, the first of its kind to determine the pervasiveness of mental illnesses throughout China.\textsuperscript{152} With the economic reform, hospitals were expected to generate their own income, resulting in the transformation of many psychiatric rehabilitation centers into smaller psychiatric hospitals.

Kleinman’s visit during this period also discover key variations in the diagnoses of similar symptoms between Chinese and American doctors, with the Chinese popularizing a medical term, “neurasthenia,” which stemmed from nineteenth-century America and was no

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid, 22.
longer in use in the U.S. by the 1980s. This syndrome, Kleinman wrote, which is marked by “chronic pain, sleeplessness, fatigue, dizziness, as well as sadness, anxiety, and anger” etc. is in fact commonly diagnosed by Chinese doctors as a way for patients to channel and subtly process their lingering pain, suffering, and critique of the Cultural Revolution. Thus it is clear to see how the Cultural Revolution’s impact extends to all levels of the society and directly relates to patients suffering from mental illness. Perhaps what is most different between China and the West is their perception of mental illness. While people in the U.S. debated about its treatment program, most generally agree that it is a medical condition. However, according to Veronica Pearson, Chinese people widely believe that it is a “punishment for the ancestors’ misdeeds visited on the present generation, effectively shaming several generations of the family simultaneously.” The feeling of shame and fear is thus a major reason why images of the mentally ill did not appear in China until the late 1980s, when Yuan and Lu began their project. This context is drastically different from the situations we have learned about for Mark and Depardon in America and Italy respectively, where portrayals of mentally ill patients were already in the mass media, and discussions were underway for the closure of mental hospitals.

In terms of the management and state of mental hospitals in China, according to Kleinman, all mental hospitals were under the governance of the Ministry of Public Welfare prior to the 1980s, after which universities and medical colleges began to have their own affiliated hospitals alongside provincial and district hospitals. In a research done by Yuan in the

late 1980s, there were only 444 mental hospitals and asylums, with 86,000 beds and 11,000 licensed psychiatrists, in comparison to 12 million “seriously ill mental patients.”¹⁵⁶ (For comparison, the number of diagnosable disorders numbered at 173 millions in late 2000s) The mental hospitals and asylums were also ruled under three separate administration: local welfare department, Ministry of Health, and security bureaus. The ones that are in the most dilapidated conditions were managed by local welfare departments with limited funding by the government. These places called yuan (asylum) is different from yiyuan (hospital) in that the patients were sent by their families to stay here until they die because their diseases were so serious that they were deemed incurable. Inside these locked up asylums, only the most essential furniture was seen. This corroborates with Pearson’s similar observation of the hospitals, where she found them to be “bleak and profoundly institutional. Wards were and are routinely locked, lacking in personal space (e.g., lockers) and devoid of anything that might remind patients of a previous life, like a photograph.”¹⁵⁷

Coming back to Yuan’s statement at the beginning where he states that “these mental patients lives remain the same,” here we will look at whether there have been any changes to government policy on treating mental illness since the book’s publication in the 1990s. On first glance, it could be argued that in fact a lot of changes took place throughout 1990s to 2000s. In 1999, a major meeting was convened by ten Chinese Ministries and the World Health Organizations in Beijing to especially discuss mental illness in China. During this meeting, a series of policies were implemented, such as declaring the inter-cooperation of all ministries to support mental health care, “establishing mental health strategy and action plan, facilitating the

¹⁵⁶ Wu Hung, Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 96.
enactment of a national mental health law, and protecting patients’ rights.” The last of which would forbid the taking of images of patients inside state hospitals, thus affecting the activities of outsiders such as photographers like Yuan and Lü. While there certainly seems to be many initiatives and strong intention by the government to improve the condition of mental illness, what is also crucial to note is whether actual actions were taken after these series of high profile conventions.

The facilitation of the enactment of a national mental health law was in fact first proposed and drafted in 1985 by the Sichuan and Hunan Provincial Health Department under the directive of the Ministry of Health. It was only two decades after in 2007 when the law was finalized and submitted to the State Council. After a series of meetings with various stakeholders and the WHO, the law went through in 2011 by the State Council and submitted to the National People’s Congress Standing Committee. After rounds of revision to include comments by the public, the law was finally passed in late 2012 and took effect on May 1, 2013. This illustrates the slow pace in policymaking and China’s generally behind position on mental health policy compared to developed countries in the West. Furthermore, a look at the specific terms related to the present study, it merely states that institutions should “carry out relevant registration procedures according to the administrative regulations for medical facilities and meet some conditions, improves the diagnosis, treatment, admission, discharge and other procedures on mental disorders.” According to Yang Shao, Jijun Wang, and Bin Xie, the vagueness of the terms with no specifics in the end makes the law more of a theory than practice. This also reflects another problem in measuring the improvement of mental health treatment in China.

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160 Ibid.
when it lacks clear drastic changes such as Italy and the U.S.; is the passing of the law enough or are there other ways of quantifying (and even standardizing) the living standards of mental patients across the whole China? The intricacy of this question probably deserves another research study in the medical and social discipline.

What is crucial to this study is that contrary to Yuan’s statement, there was indeed progress (albeit very slow) after the publishing of his photobook. The question is whether these changes were in effect related to the book. The answer from Yuan is negative as he states: “It’s not because of my work that changed Chinese mental hospitals. I think the government intended to do it.”¹⁶¹ Objectively, I agree with Yuan that the government’s policies were implemented in gradual stages that did not particularly shifted with the release of his photographs. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that the photobook could have landed in the hands of government officials or stakeholders. After all, when he finished the project he was introduced by a friend to the China Disabled Persons’ Federation, who later invited him to do an internal exhibition when they started a new initiative on establishing 100 county-level family wards for mentally ill patients similar to western approach. This illustrates the slight similarities with Yuan, Mark and Depardon, except for a case like *Morire di Classe*, it is ever difficult to disentangle the causal relationship between the release of a documentary project and actual social change.

CONCLUSION

With the publishing of his photobook *Mental Patients in China* in 1996, Yuan Dongping, then a relatively unknown magazine photo editor, had become a representative of Chinese avant-garde photography during the 1990s by using photography to portray a novel subject matter. With his photographs capturing the attention of local and international art historians, the photographer frequently states in his interviews throughout the years that instead of achieving his original goal of improving lives of those living inside the mental institutions, the book has instead turned him into an avant-garde photographer of Chinese contemporary art. When asked about his thoughts on the failure of his photographs in eliciting change, Yuan responds, “I think it had to do with the general atmosphere in the society; A basic lack of caring and respect for people. We are in reality unequal, so it is very difficult to understand what other people go through, especially on a mental level.”

By studying the various factors, from the artist’s own background, the aesthetics and content of the photobook, the Chinese state censorship system, to the social perception of mental illness in China, that could possibly contribute to the “undesirable” outcome of his project, this thesis illustrates that Yuan’s reasoning explains only one small part of the equation. Taking this one step further, given that the photographic series *Manicomio* by Raymond Depardon and *Ward 81* by Mary Ellen Mark were cited by the artist and his initial collaborator Lü Nan to be original inspiration for their projects, this study also explores their differences in aesthetics, approaches, and circumstances surrounding the publishing of the photobooks as a way to tease out China’s unique social and cultural context under the ruling of the CCP since 1949.

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Having explored the social, art historical, and political factors, this thesis argues that a major reason is attributed to Yuan’s ties to the Chinese government via his position at the state-run *Nationality Pictorial* magazine, which results in the uncritical nature of the production of his photobook marked by art historically-focused essay and interview. Given the multilayered and often ambiguous censorship apparatus set in place by the Chinese government, while there are certainly clear limits to publish photographs critical of the regime, Yuan’s ex-coworker Lü’s decision to resign from the magazine and become a freelance photographer crucially presents an alternative route for the photo editor in moving away from the state’s control and utilizing the freedom and power of foreign press and agencies in gaining greater attention on the issue from abroad. Furthermore, other examples such as Lu Guang and Xie Hailong, both independent photographers (for Xie, at least at the time of shooting for *Project Hope*) illustrate key ways to strike up alliance with either overseas communities or local organizations to amplify their message to the public. Indeed, this further complicates Yuan’s statement that “Things cannot be changed by my willpower.”\(^\text{163}\)

These are all the different approaches Yuan could take in order for his works to have a greater potential in reaching more audience. The fact that he decides to consciously stay inside the establishment instead of following a similar path as these other freelance photographers points to not only the pervasive control the CCP has on the press and photographic field, but also to the necessity for documentary photographers who wish to enact social change to work outside of the establishment. This is because not only they can more easily bypass the censorship system in China, but also, as demonstrated by Xie, they have the flexibility and freedom to engage with other organizations or charities who could perhaps be working on the same social issues.

Lastly, as the last chapter illustrates, there were indeed changes in mental health policy after the release of Yuan’s photobook. This highlights another issue in determining the causal relationship between a documentary project and actual change in the society. Through an in-depth look at the various gradual progresses made throughout the 1980s to 2000s, we are able to not only understand better the unique social context surrounding the perception of mental illness in China, but more importantly, critique the generality in Yuan’s statement from the beginning. After all, from various perspectives, it is clear that with the exception of a few notable cases, it is difficult to determine the relationship between documentary projects and actual social change especially in China. In Yuan’s case, if a deinstitutionalization movement was actively formed specifically because of his photographs, the question is given his role with the establishment, could he handle this credit? The publishing of Mental Patients in China certainly presents an interesting scenario in looking at the publishing of documentary projects in the 1990s, and this study is by no means exhaustive with more questions than answers offered. What it still hopes to achieve is to expand the discussion of Chinese documentary photography projects from a pure art historical point of view, and in a way serve as another crucial channel in spotlighting the social issue at hand.
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FIGURES

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