

Being There: Norman Spencer and the Xianchang Aesthetic

By Chris Berry

Norman Spencer's photographs of figures from the world of the Chinese arts and academia, beginning from the 1990s, are very compelling to look at. But it is not easy for me to put my finger on what makes them so fascinating. Many of the subjects are celebrities, like the film director Jia Zhangke or the author Mianmian. But the pictures are not depthless icons, like Warhol's celebrity portraits. Nor are they like the documentary photography I often see coming out of China. Yes, they are very casual, but they are not shots of street China. Sometimes the subjects strike a careful pose and look at the camera, but in a manner too relaxed to be confused with publicity portraits shot by a commercial photographer. Some of the pictures are taken in clubs, or on movie sets, but they do not have the ambushed look of paparazzi shots, either.

The sense I get from looking at the people in Norman's photos is that they are at ease and even unguarded. Perhaps these photos were taken on social occasions, in the relaxed good humor that comes with wine and conversation. They seem to capture the moment from the perspective of someone who was there long enough to be part of the scene, not an outsider hovering around the edges. Of course, not many people get this close to celebrities, and even fewer non-Chinese speaking foreigners get to hang out in this way. I have been researching China for years, and I also recognize some of the people in this book as friends whom I have known for years. But I do not think I really pass time with them in the way that these photos suggest Norman does. Perhaps this sense from the photos of being there is Norman's contribution to what the Chinese call the "xianchang" aesthetic. Xianchang is a term you find on your television screen to let you know you are watching a live feed. It conveys that sense of being in the moment, of contingency, and experience. It is a term that

people have been using ever since the early 1990s. In *The Urban Generation* (Duke University Press, 2007), Zhang Zhen points out that young Chinese feature filmmakers turned away from legendary tales like *Raise the Red Lanterns*, and tried to capture life as it was going on around them. The same was true for documentary filmmakers and photographers. The result was this xianchang aesthetic. It has developed various different forms, as Luke Robinson has discussed in *Chinese Independent Documentary* (Palgrave, 2013), and it is somewhere in this ever growing range that Norman's work finds its home.

This is not the first time I have come across Norman's photographs. A few years ago, we got talking and Norman showed me a series of photos of people, places, and events on China's emergent tongzhi or queer scene from the same period. They had the same in-the-moment feel, and are a unique record of those times. Some of them appear here, and more were published in the journal *Positions: East Asia Cultural Critique* in 2012.

Norman's photographs also make me think about how and why we should remember the past, and specifically China's recent past. And what does it mean to take these seemingly private, even ephemeral moments, out of the photo album and publish them? Of course, part of it is the pure pleasure of looking at a photo of someone I know but have not seen for a while. There's documentary director Du Haibin, and how bright that smile of his is! And the man many see as the father of Chinese independent documentary, Wu Wenguang, is on the same page, surprisingly pensive for someone otherwise confident and even commanding. But is the pleasure of these photos only a sort of nostalgia? Is it only about turning the page and saying to myself with a sigh, "those were the days"?

I guess it is a sign of age that this is not the only time I have been involved recently in the process of taking personal memories of China and making them public. As I write this short reflection, I am in Los Angeles, where I have flown from London to take part in a series of events to mark the thirtieth anniversary of Professors Cheng Jihua and Chen

Mei's own "Journey to the West" to teach Chinese Film at UCLA in late 1983, followed by the "Beijing summer sessions" over the following years, when various American film professors went to meet their Chinese counterparts, give lectures on contemporary film theory, see Chinese films, and hear about the practices of Chinese film criticism. I was lucky enough to be a student in Cheng and Chen's class, and then I was working in Beijing in the years when some of the summer sessions were held. As we have recounted our experiences and memories before an audience of over a hundred people along with various cameras and microphones, we have also been putting what might otherwise be forgotten on the record.

A couple of years ago, I did some research that went back even earlier, to the Cultural Revolution years, to do something similar. Working with my friend Zhang Shujuan in Shanghai, we gathered together some groups of people ranging in age from the mid-fifties to the late sixties, and we showed them clips from Chinese and foreign films that screened in China during the 1966 to 1976 decade. We were not so much focused on the political tumult of the time. Instead, we wanted to know about movies and everyday life, and, to be specific, whether films and film stars played any role in people's choices about what to wear, how to do their hair, and so on. This was some of the happiest research I have ever undertaken, because most of the people we interviewed evidently had a great time remembering their youth, and it was a pleasure to see them so joyous. They even brought lots of photos with them, and when we published the results of our research in the Taiwanese *ACT Journal* (no.54, 2013), I am glad to say that we were able to include some of those pictures, too. When I think about it, all three of these examples – the publication of Norman's photographs, the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the Cheng and Chen's UCLA classes and the Beijing summer sessions, and the little research project on film and fashion during the Cultural Revolution – have some things in common. In each case, they put into the public record some things that might otherwise be forgotten forever with the passing of the people

involved. They take what might otherwise be seen as ephemera and give them the possibility of becoming more lasting. And, most important of all, in however small a way, they add an alternative element to the usual account of those times.

The Cultural Revolution era is today excoriated as a time of violence, persecution, chaos, and suffering. And no doubt it was just that. But if it is only seen as that, then all other experiences are somehow invalidated and erased: the only possible thing to say in public is how one suffered, or to confess one's role in inflicting suffering on others. But precisely because fashion seems so apolitical, that little research project licensed the people we spoke with to remember other things, and especially the pleasures of life that went on despite of or in between all the troubles of the times. This too is a testament to human resilience. But it also complicates an all too simple, even caricatured, picture we have of that decade.

Both the celebration of Cheng and Chen's classes and the Beijing summer sessions and also Norman's pictures add something to the dominant narrative of the reform era—the time since the Cultural Revolution when China has opened up to the world and adopted the market economy with gusto. Remembering this era has recently become popular in Chinese culture, too. Blockbuster director Peter Chan's *American Dreams in China* (*Zhongguo Hehuoren*) was one of 2013's big hits, going back to the 1980s, the same era when Cheng and Chen came to the USA. And, in the same year, Chinese superstar Vicky Zhao (Zhao Wei) made her directorial debut with another box office smash called *So Young* (*Zhi Women zhongjiang Shiqu de Qingchun*). The film tracks back through the memories of four early middle-aged women friends, now jaded, as they remember their hopeful youth in the 1990s, the era Norman's photographs date from.

However, both Norman's photographs and the Cheng and Chen celebration put something quite different into the public record from the fictional memories circulated

through these mainstream film hits. Both films are obsessed with materialism. Their protagonists want to succeed in life, and success in these films is measured by material wealth and all its trappings, produced through success on the battlefield of the capitalist market economy. In Vicky Zhao's film, success has not necessarily brought happiness, which must be an apt theme as China literally chokes in the smog of its own success. In the case of Peter Chan's film, not only wealth on the Chinese marketplace, but also in the United States is at stake. The band of male college friends struggle through humiliating experiences as dishwashers during their student days in the USA, only to return as swashbuckling entrepreneurs who capture the education market with their English-language school company and list it on the New York stock exchange.

Whatever their variations, both films only imagine China's engagement with the rest of the world in terms of capitalist competition and the drive to accumulate wealth. Yet both my memories of Cheng and Chen's visit to UCLA in the 1980s and Norman's photographs suggest quite different dimensions to China's opening up. Film Studies in the 1980s was full of Western Marxists, and although Cheng Jihua suffered terribly during the Cultural Revolution, he was still a Communist Party member and committed to a socialist vision of the world. In the 1980s, China was only just beginning to experiment with the market economy, and it was by no means clear how far down the capitalist road the country would go, or what other kinds of social, political, and cultural innovations might be possible. What made Cheng's visit both surprising and stimulating for me was to realize how different the range of socialist visions could be. In the arts, for example, Western Marxists mostly saw realism as the enemy, the "illusionism" that had to be broken with to emancipate the mind and enable people to see new possibilities. For Cheng, realism was the bedrock of engagement with social reality through art.

Norman's own introduction to this book makes it clear that he places the art world that he has encountered in China from the 1990s in a lineage that goes back to his earlier experiences with the American counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Political opposition is somewhere between difficult and impossible in China, so there is no counter-culture. But alternative culture and diversity are thriving there today. The Chinese people are no longer "the masses," but an infinite variety of groups and individuals exploring alternative ways of living and understanding the world. And while many people may have dived headlong into the scramble for money and property, nobody chooses art primarily because they think it is a good way to make a fortune – even though it might turn out that way for the lucky few! In fact, it's the place for thinking about other possibilities of all kinds.

Norman's pictures are compelling for me because they remind me of alternative possibilities in the transnational era, something which, at this particular difficult moment seems more necessary than ever. But there is also something about the way in which they do this that adds to their magical power. That xianchang style captures a split second of experience. A posed studio portrait is a complete thing in itself, but in photography the xianchang style always invokes a host of other things that happened before and after the moment of taking the picture. Only Norman and the others present at the particular moment know what actually happened. But for the rest of us, it is not only the content of the photos but also Norman's xianchang style that makes them so full of possibilities. They invite us to imagine what was happening around this image, to conjure up what might have been as we dream about what might be to come.

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