LUO YANG & NAGASHIMA YURIE:

Contemporary East Asian photography and the *Portraiture of the Common Ground.*

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A note on names

This text deals with Chinese and Japanese photography, and thus mentions many Chinese and Japanese names. It is customary to write names in those cultures with the surname followed by the given name. Thus, in Luo Yang's case, Luo is her surname, and Yang is her given name. The same goes for Nagashima Yurie: Nagashima is the surname and Yurie is the given name. However, the reverse order, more common in the West, has been preserved in quotes, citations, and titles of referenced publications.

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Introduction

In this dissertation, I will examine a certain type of portraiture and the associated aesthetic, through the lens of two female East Asian photographers. One, Nagashima Yurie, came to prominence in Japan in the early 1990s, and the other, Luo Yang, has been building a reputation outside of her native China with several exhibitions in the West since being selected as one of the "rising stars of Chinese photography" by renowned artist Ai Weiwei in 2012[1].

I will tentatively call the style these two artists work in the *portraiture of the common ground*, and, by the conclusion of this text, we will arrive at a definition of this style, within the historical, cultural, and social context in which it has evolved.

The portraiture style in question has blurred boundaries and is maybe easiest to talk about in terms of what it is not. It is not formal: the people are often portrayed in everyday situations and in mundane settings, and the stories told in the photographs are those of real people inhabiting the real world. It is not technically elaborate: photographers eschew complex studio lighting setups and rely on available light or simple on-camera flash to illuminate their pictures. It is not aggressive: even when the photographs are not candid, the subjects are rarely felt projecting any kind of hostility, and any strength displayed is often of the soft and quietly confident kind. However, the notion of the *portraiture of the common ground* goes beyond the visual style and relates both to the subject matter itself and the ways to approach it.

The research contained in this dissertation is coloured by my own background and interests, as well as by my professional practice. I am an immigrant, born in Russia and having grown up in France, with the notion of common ground omnipresent in my life and in my work. I am primarily a portrait photographer, and, having spent six years living and practising photography in Japan, this country and its portrait photographers were the start of the series of inquiries that led to me exploring this topic. I became familiar Chinese photography much later, and became so impressed with the work of Chinese photographers, and with that of Luo Yang specifically, that I have since travelled to China and have initiated several related photographic projects, the first of which will be produced in the summer of 2018.

In addition to exploring Luo's and Nagashima's work and the parallels between them, I will attempt to offer a brief overview of the emergence of these artists, and the social and historic context in which their work has developed in their native China and Japan.

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1 Ai Weiwei, 'Generation next: a photo essay', *New Statesman* (Ai Weiwei guest-edit), 22 October 2012 <https://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/world-affairs/2012/10/generation-next-photo-essay> [15 June 2018], (para 7 of 12)

Fig. 1: “A mother and her children wade across a river to escape US bombing”, 1965. © Sawada Kyōichi

Origins of Japan's photographic renewal

In the context of Japanese photography, the aesthetics shared by Nagashima and her peers are very much a product of their time and of social, economic, and political upheaval of the 1990s and 2000s.

Japanese photography after the end of the Second World War has a rich history, marked by three milestones: the renewal of the military alliance with the United States of America (安保, *Anpo*) in 1960, the Tokyo Olympic Games of 1964, and the bursting of the Bubble Economy in 1991.

The intense political confrontation around *Anpo*, which marked the end of American post-war occupation and set the framework for (among others) the presence of American military bases in Japan that continues to this day, infused a new and electrifyingly heightened political consciousness into Japanese photographers, artists and intellectuals. So strong was this influence that its echoes continue to be felt this day, not unlike those of the 1968 student protests in France.

The 1964 Olympic games were followed by a period of high economic growth, in which photography, as an art, developed significantly. Economic growth meant a rise in volume for advertising and commercial photography, leading to tackling of experimental techniques and experimentation on a much wider scale. At the same time, documentary work blossomed through photographers focusing on the newly emerging mass society and its contradiction, as well as through Japanese photojournalists sent to cover the war in Vietnam, most notably Sawada Kyōichi, who won the 1965 World Press Photo of the Year award and the Pulitzer Prize for his picture of a mother escaping a US bombing with her children (Fig. 1). The photojournalists having paved the way, more and more "Japanese photographers spent extended periods of time overseas and became active on the international stage".[2]

The emergence of mass society meant that photography became omnipresent: photographing and being photographed became a part of everyday life, and at the same time led photographers to join a growing, radical questioning of the post-war established political, cultural, and economic order. In the late 1960s, Japan was rocked by waves of student protests, which led to what could be considered the peak of Japanese post-war photography, and the decade that followed is probably what Japanese photography is best known for in the West.

In late 1968, Taki Kōji, Nakahira Takuma, Takanashi Yutaka, and Okada Takahiro established a

2 Iizawa Kōtarō, 'The Evolution of Postwar Photography', in *The history of Japanese photography*, ed. by Anne Wilkes Tucker (New Haven, Conn. : London : Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 208-259 (p. 220)

Fig. 2: photograph from Provoke vol. 3, 1969. © Taki Kōji

magazine named *Provoke*, and were joined a year later by Moriyama Daido.[3] The aesthetic developed by the *Provoke* photographers, also known as *are, bure, boke* (rough, blurry, out of focus) (see Fig. 2), has endured and became recognisable world-wide, along with the names of the magazine's founders — Moriyama, in particular, is arguably the Japanese photographer currently best known to the Western mainstream.

The *Provoke* aesthetic was born out of the furious anti-American, anti-establishment protest culture of the Japanese 1960s, and it served the purpose of the photographers who established the magazine: to bring down established conventions and to create a new visual language, "to rethink the rigidified relation between word and image".[4]

In the afterword to the first issue, *Provoke*'s Nakahira Takuma writes:

> *"How to fill the gap between politics and art? This is both an old and a new problem. . . . . My belief is to accept the contradiction between political matters and the act of creating something, and try to live with the tension between them. This is my personal position, and I would like to operate whilst considering the two things separately – to participate actively in the political struggle, and to take photographs, in a dualistic way".*[5]

To understand the context in which the work of Nagashima Yurie and her aesthetic has emerged, one must look at the political and economic history of post-war Japan, and what changed from the *Provoke* era. After the anti-American, anti-capitalist protests of the 60s and 70s, Japan's center-right-wing government has found an innovative way to de-claw the Left, and especially its more radical wing: by satisfying their demands. The emergence of the practice of lifetime employment meant that workers were assured of financial stability for themselves and their families, in exchange for loyalty to the companies employing them, which in turn became a secondary (and sometimes primary) family for them. This system helped bring about the Economic Miracle, which saw Japan's economy rise to be second only to that of the US. This, however, came to an end in late 1991 when the asset price bubble burst, triggering an economic decline that would last over a decade. The public protest culture having been largely lost thanks to the comforts of a growing economy and lifetime employment, photographers who came of age during this "Lost Decades" naturally focused more inward, exploring and finding beauty in a slower, more contemplative life, which in turn reflects the aesthetic they have developed.

The aesthetic of Nagashima and her peers started to work in in the 1990s stands in stark contrast to that of the *Provoke* photographers. It is, in fact, very much on the opposite side of the spectrum: muted colours as opposed to the intense, often violent, high contrast black and white, and a focus turned to private spaces instead of a revolutionary desire to bring down established conventions and to create a new visual language.

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3 Iizawa, p. 220

4 Iizawa, p. 220

5 Nakahira Takuma, Afterword to *Purovōku: shisō no tame no chōhatsuteki shiryō (Provoke No. 1)*, (Tokyo: Purovōku-sha, 1968)

Another defining characteristic of the style that Nagashima works in is the large part that female photographers played in its development. While in the *Provoke* era and subsequent decades Japanese photography was overwhelmingly male-dominated, many of the defining photographers working in this new aesthetic are female. Along with Nagashima, Hiromix (see Fig. 3), Ninagawa Mika, Kawauchi Rinko, Ume Kayo, and many others contributed to the development of this style, and paved the way to countless more photographers.

It is also not my intention to imply that the work of Japanese female photographers of the mid-90s is any less radical than that of the men of the *are, bure, boke* era: the battleground has moved from the streets to their own private spaces, and their own bodies within those spaces. The confrontation was no longer "an ideological clash with the state, but it was a political clash with the various media that construct female identity"[6].

For Nagashima and her cohorts, the act of photography "fostered the affirmation of social and self identities that they were comfortable with, a shield against the pressures to conform to social and familial expectations."[7] "To push their way through these barriers and face their inner selves for self-identification, they happened to have the tool of photography".[8]

6 Marco Bohr, 'Deconstructing Gender Identity & Non-Perfection in the Photographs of Yurie Nagashima' in *On Perfection: An Artists' Symposium*, ed. by Jo Longhurst (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), p. 368

7 Dana Friis-Hansen, 'Internationalization, Individualism, Institutionalization', in *The history of Japanese photography*, ed. by Anne Wilkes Tucker (New Haven, Conn. : London : Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 260-303 (p. 274)

8 Iizawa Kōtarō, "The Girls Are in the Room: Women Photographers in the '90s," in *Private Room II: Shinsedai no shashin hyōgen* (Photographs by a New Generation of Women in Japan), exh. cat. in Japanese and English (Mito: Contemporary Art Center, 1999), p. 16

Fig. 3: From “Girls Blue”, 1996. © Toshikawa Hiromi (Hiromix)

Fig. 4: "Expecting-expected", 2001. © Nagashima Yurie

Nagashima Yurie

Nagashima Yurie (長島有里枝) was born in 1973 and rose to prominence through a series representing herself and her family in the nude, winning the prestigious PARCO prize in 1993 while a student at the Musashino Art University[9].

Just as with Toshikawa Hiromi (also known as Hiromix, another female photographer figurehead of the 90s), Nagashima's visual style has initially been derided as simplistic and amateurish, "in sharp contrast with a type of photography, popular in the 1980s, in which image-making was considered a technical craft"[10]. Dismissively labeled by critic Iizawa Kōtarō as "girly photography" (女の子写真, *onnanoko shashin*), the movement spearheaded by Nagashima is characterised, from a technical point of view, by its welcoming of imperfection in photographs.

The photographers embraced film stock and cameras considered as amateur and eschew complex technical processes. They favoured small, compact cameras: easy to carry around, usually with a built-in flash, strong automation features, and a moderately wide angle lens, often around 35mm. Asked about the way she photographs, Kayo Ume (another prominent member of the movement) says: "I always set my camera at P mode. They say P stands for 'programme'[11] but I call it 'professional mode'."[12] The result is often featuring strong colours (sometimes accentuated even further by direct flash), natural light, and sometimes chaotic composition. Just like with the *Provoke* style, an immediacy and a participation in the moment is privileged over high-level technique or composition, what photographer John Sypal refers to as being about the "actual living moment and using the camera to interact with it".[13]

In another parallel to the photographers of the *Provoke* era, then, a rejection of photography as a highly technical craft is a strong feature of the style espoused by Nagashima. However, while the *Provoke* photographers focused on conflict with the state, Nagashima and the members of her movement turn their lenses closer to home: close friends, family, and loved ones are frequent subjects of their photographs. Quoting the famous second-wave feminist rallying slogan, Nagashima says: "I believe, 'Personal is political'"[14]

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9 Maho Kubota Gallery, 'Yurie Nagashima', *Maho Kubota Gallery* (revised April 2016) <https://www.mahokubota.com/en/artists/yurie-nagashima> [19 March 2018]

10 Bohr, p. 357

11 In programme mode, the camera automatically calculates appropriate exposure; all that is required of the photographer is to frame the picture and press the shutter release button.

12 "Kayo Ume, Life Cycle", *POCKO* <http://www.pocko.com/kayo-ume/> [21 March 2018]

13 Blake Andrews, ed., "Q&A with John Sypal", *B* (revised 21 November 2014) <http://blakeandrews.blogspot.co.uk/2014/11/q-with-john-sypal.html> [23 March 2018]

14 Gianpaolo Arena, ed., '"Where Now Are The Dreams Of Youth?"', *LANDSCAPE Stories* (2016) <http://www.landscapestories.net/interviews/94-2016-yurie-nagashima?lang=en> [19 March 2018]

Nagashima is widely considered to be the photographer whose work launched the *onnanoko shashin* movement, and it is that specific aesthetic that brought her stardom at home and, to some degree, recognition abroad. She, however, rejected term and resented Iizawa for coining it, as it implied a lack of agency and skills on the part of the photographers: "we didn't choose snapshot photography because of a lack of skills, or because we weren't physically strong enough to handle larger camera equipment. It was because the portability of those cameras suited our work, and this explanation made perfect sense"[15]. When Nagashima received the Kimura Ihei Award (one of Japan's highest distinctions for photographers) in 2000, the prize was given to three photographers together, the others being Hiromix and Ninagawa Mika. Nagashima felt that the Japanese art world felt "as if [they] all belonged in that [*onnanoko shashin*] category"[16], interpreting the work in a "light, pop-culture sense"[17] and ignoring its feminist message.

That feminist message is strongly present even in the début project that brought Nagashima recognition in Japan, her nude self-portraits with her family (Fig. 5). Talking at a panel at Art Basel 2018 in Hong Kong, Nagashima explains, through an interpreter:

> *I felt like I myself was a kind of object, therefore I thought that I had to change, I had to express something that was different. My body is my own, it's not the object of the male, that's what I wanted to express, and that's why I came up with the self-portrait series, which is the nude photos of my family. In the 1990s, in the United States at that time there was the Third Wave of feminism that started, for example the Riot Grrrl movement, in music, and in fashion, through these cultures there was a new feminism, and we get a lot of influence by these movements.*[18]

In the same panel, Nagashima Yurie clearly declares: "I am a feminist".[19]

The same assertions of agency and individuality permeate the projects Nagashima has worked on since, in which she continues to explore family, loved ones, and inner circles. In the monograph *Not six* (Tokyo: Switch Publishing, 2005), she shows seven years worth of photographs of her husband, reversing the more traditional photographer/model gender roles (Fig. 6). In *Pastime Paradise* (Tokyo: MADRA publishing, 2000), Nagashima's record of her life between her rise to fame and her return to Japan after a few years of studying in the US are reminiscent of one of her major influences, Nan Goldin, another feminist photographer. With *5 Comes After 6* (Tokyo: MATCH and Company, 2014), Nagashima chronicles her son's childhood and life as a single mother and a photographer, following a split with her partner.

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15 Jennifer Pastore, ed., 'Yurie Nagashima: And a Pinch of Irony with a Hint of Love', *Tokyo Art Beat* (Tokyo: 2017) <http://www.tokyoartbeat.com/tablog/entries.en/2017/11/yurie-nagashimas-and-a-pinch-of-irony-with-a-hint-of-love.html> [18 May 2018]

16 Jennifer Pastore, ed., 'Yurie Nagashima: And a Pinch of Irony with a Hint of Love'

17 Jennifer Pastore, ed., 'Yurie Nagashima: And a Pinch of Irony with a Hint of Love'

18 *Conversations | Artworld Talk | Feminist Aesthetics? Movements and Manifestations* [YouTube video], Art Basel, 30 March 2018 <https://youtu.be/hYDAIK7mTaw> [Accessed 19 June 2018]

19 *Conversations | Artworld Talk | Feminist Aesthetics? Movements and Manifestations*

Fig. 5: From the “Kazoku” series, 1993. © Nagashima Yurie

Moving forward, Nagashima is interested in exploring the stories of women who gave up dreams in order to take care of families and children.[20]

20 *Conversations | Artworld Talk | Feminist Aesthetics? Movements and Manifestations*

Fig. 6: From the “Not six” series, 2000. © Nagashima Yurie

Fig. 7: “People standing on top of unharvested grain in the ‘Sputnik’ fields of autumn 1959.” © Dāngdài Zhōngguó de Tiānjīn

The rise of unofficial photography in China

Luo Yang (b. 1984) is part of a new generation of photographers that is giving Chinese photography a well-established identity on the global scale. In order to understand the context in which she produces her work, a brief look in the history of Chinese photography in the 20th century is necessary.

During Mao's era, in the upheavals of the Great Leap Forward (1959-1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) photography was given a purely propagandist role, serving the state's goals of generating popular compliance with party policies.

In one striking photograph[21] (Fig. 7) taken during the Great Leap Forward famine — which claimed upwards of thirty million lives — a group of children are depicted apparently standing on top of unharvested wheat in a "Sputnik field"[22], apparently so densely grown that it could support their weight. The children were in fact standing on top of a bench concealed by the especially arranged stalks.

Unofficial photography started to emerge into the public view in the aftermath of the death of Premier Zhou Enlai in 1976, with amateur photographers spontaneously documenting the public mourning for the popular politician on Tiananmen Square in Beijing, a mourning officially forbidden by the authorities. Wang Zhiping, Li Xiaobin, Wang Miao, and the other photographers of the *April 5th Movement* — as the event became known — later became the leaders of the Photographic New Wave of the 1980s.[23]

Though the work of these photographers began outside of the system, they unexpectedly found themselves thrust into the mainstream of Chinese photography: a compilation of photographs of the *April 5th Movement* the photographers published in 1979 under the name of "People's Mourning" (人民的悼念, *rénmín de dàoniàn*) received an unexpected endorsement from China's top leadership following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the fall of the Gang of Four[24], with the new Party Chairman, Hua Guofeng, authoring a dedication on the book's title page, and the editors being invited to join the mainstream Association of Chinese Photographers.[25]

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21 Dāngdài Zhōngguó cóngshū biānjí bù (ed.), *Dāngdài Zhōngguó de Tiānjīn* [Tianjin in Contemporary China], vol 2. (Beijing: Zhōngguó shèhuìkēxué chūbanshè, 1989), p. 113

22 A "Sputnik field" is a field usually created by transplanting ripe crops from a number of fields into a single artificial plot. See Jon Halliday, Jung Chang *Mao: The Unknown Story*, (New York City: Random House, 2012), p. 520

23 Wu Hung, Christopher Phillips, *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* (Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press), p. 15

24 The Gang of Four (四人帮, *sìrén bāng*) was a faction composed of four senior Communist Party officials who came to prominence during the Cultural Revolution. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, they were largely blamed for its excesses and prosecuted.

25 Wu, Phillips, p. 15

Disillusioned with the official hijacking of their project, the *April 5th* photographers turned away from politics and towards more aesthetic pursuits, organising several unofficial exhibitions on the theme of *Nature, Society, and Man*[26]. While the first of those was held only in Beijing, its success prompted the following two editions to appear around China, triggering a nationwide movement known as the Photographic New Wave in 1981. This movement saw the creation of a large number of photography clubs and publications, a widespread interest in works of Western photographers and the documentary genre, and the emergence of photographers such as Mo Yi (fig. 8) and Zhang Hai'er (fig. 9), who responded to the rapid transformation of Chinese cities by developing "new concepts and languages that allowed them not only to represent an external reality but also to respond to reality".[27]

Towards the end of the 90's, the New Wave movement has allowed a new kind of photography to emerge, "that allied itself with the burgeoning avant-garde art"[28]. That caught the attention of the international art world, with Zhang Hai'er and others being invited to the Arles festival in France in 1988. However, this period of growth was cut short by a political event: the violent suppression by the government of the pro-democracy student demonstration in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989 (also known as the *June 4th movement*). Following the crackdown, avant-garde art was banned and for a few years no controversial work could be shown.

The new generation of photographers, defining what would come to be known as *Experimental Photography* (实验摄影, shíyàn shèying), emerged in the early to mid-90s. They had developed completely outside of the mainstream institutions — schools, research institutes, galleries — of Chinese photography. These young photographers were outsiders and "constituted a sub-group within the camp of experimental artists (...) they lived and worked with experimental artists, and showed their work almost exclusively in unofficial experimental art exhibitions."[29]

One of the defining events of this experimental age was the appearance of new types of experimental art publications, one of the most important ones being *The Book With a Black Cover* (黑皮书, hēipí shū) published in 1994 by a group of experimental artists including Ai Weiwei. (Fig. 10) The book introduced the new generation of Chinese experimental artists to the world, with photography being featured as the most important medium of experimental art.

Conceptual photography developed, relying on theories of postmodernism, which led Wu Hung to compare this emphasis on concept and display with American conceptual photography of the 1970s, described by the poet and art historian Corinne Robins in these words:[30]

> *Photographers concentrated on making up or creating scenes for the camera in terms of their own inner vision. To them . . . realism belonged to the earlier history of photography and, as seventies*

26 Wu, Phillips, p. 16
27 Wu, Phillips, p. 21
28 Wu, Phillips, p. 21
29 Wu, Phillips, p. 22
30 Wu, Phillips, p. 25

Fig. 8: “Street Face No.6 (Tianjin, 1988)”. © Mo Yi

Fig. 9: “Miss Lin, Guangzhou 1989”. © Zhang Hai’er

Fig. 10: “Study of Perspective, Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China, 1995”. © Ai Weiwei

> *artists, they embarked on a different kind of aesthetic quest. It was not, however, the romantic symbolism of photography of the 1920s and 1930s, with its emphasis on the abstract beauty of the object, that had caught their attention, but rather a new kind of concentration on narrative drama, on the depiction of time changes in the camera's fictional movement. The photograph, instead of being presented as a depiction of reality, was now something created to show us things that were felt rather than necessarily seen.*[31]

With Ai Weiwei's rise to prominence, conceptual and experimental art continued to develop, leading to the seminal 2000 exhibition *Fuck Off* (不合作方式, bù hézuò fāngshì ["Uncooperative Attitude"]) curated by, among others, Ai. In a conversation with Chin-Chin Yap, Ai Weiwei links the exhibition with the *Book With a Black Cover*:

> ***Chin-Chin Yap:*** *When you curated* Fuck Off *in 2000, was there a similar concept behind it as with the books?*[32]
>
> ***Ai Weiwei:*** *Yes, after these three books we stopped, and a few years later there were quite a lot of art events happening and interesting works around, so people suggested having a show with a similar sort of attitude as that of the books. So we thought about putting on an exhibition. It wasn't necessarily the best show because we had to put it together in a very short time, and the conditions were such that the police could shut it down at any moment and everything taken away. But the artists were very cooperative and interested and the attitude was there. The show's still being talked about today, because it's an attitude that still matters.*
>
> *So maybe* Fuck Off *was most important because of what it represented. The concept was clear; and we were very clear about what we wanted to say towards Chinese institutions as well as Western curators and institutions and dealers; their functions are all similar in one way or the other. It's all about the deal, about labour, how to trademark different interests. We had to say some thing as individual artists to the outside world, and what we said was "fuck off."*[33]

Fuck Off was shut down by the Shanghai police before the closing date, but the exhibition went on to acquire a legendary status among China's younger artists. It was followed up on in 2013 by *Fuck Off 2*, which Ai co-curated in Groninger Museum in the city of Groningen in the northern Netherlands. This exhibition was introduced by the museum as a "show, which includes 37 contemporary Chinese artists and artist groups, [that] contemplates and questions the current sociological, environmental, legal, and political climate in China today."[34]. The museum's blurb goes on: "The exhibition is a sequel to *Fuck Off*, the ground-breaking show staged in Shanghai in 2000 by Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi, which was quickly censored by the authorities as it was con-

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31 Corinne Robins, *The Pluralist Era: American Art 1968-1981* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 213

32 The *Book With a Black Cover* was followed by two more books, with a grey and a white covers.

33 *Ai Weiwei: Works, Beijing 1993-2003*, ed. by Charles Merewether (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003), p. 51

34 Groninger Museum, 'FUCK OFF 2. Curated by Ai Weiwei, Feng Boyi, Mark Wilson', *Groninger Museum*, (2013), <http://www.groningermuseum.nl/en/exhibition/fuck-2-curated-ai-weiwei-feng-boyi-mark-wilson> [17 June 2018]

sidered too sensitive with its radical content. Thirteen years later, the lack of artistic freedom in China and the repressive attitude toward individual actions by the government make *Fuck Off 2* especially relevant today."[35]

Along with other contemporary Chinese artists — some, such as Ren Hang (Fig. 11), already internationally acclaimed — *Fuck Off 2* introduced international audiences to the work of Luo Yang.

35 Groninger Museum

Fig. 11: From “Photography 2013 II”. © Ren Hang

Fig. 12: From “Girls”. © Luo Yang

Luo Yang

Luo Yang (罗洋) was born in 1984 in Shenyang, capital of the northern Chinese province of Liaoning. She studied graphic design at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, from which she graduated in 2009. Luo started photographing in 2007 while in university, taking pictures of her friends — "the life of those girls who were around me".[36] Out of this process came the project *Girls*, which Luo developed over the next decade, and which was published as a book by Edition Lammerhuber and MO-Industries in 2017.

Having been born a few years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Luo grew up at a time when China was just starting to open up to Western influences: "Luo's generation grew up in a realm of confused cultural constructs, with strong traces of traditional culture intermingling with new and invasive Western ideas — all at a pace that was far surpassed by the speed of economic change swirling around it".[37] The effects of this uneasy time are well visible in the work of Luo's peers: photographers Ren Hang, Lin Zhipeng, and Chen Zhe (all of them fellow participants in *Fuck Off 2*) and novelist Chun Shu (Fig. 13), whose novel, *Beijing Doll* (Riverhead Books, 2004), chronicles growing up in Beijing of the 1990s.

In the introduction to the "Girls" book, art historian Eva Morawietz writes:

> *The term GIRLS in Luo's work thus refers to young women who are in the process of forming their identity. It denotes a state of mind, rather than a specific point in life, although Luo prefers to shoot women who are close to her own age. She started the project in 2007 when she was attending university and considered herself a 'young girl'. The series has evolved alongside Luo and her life, spanning a timeframe of ten years until today. Her models have grown from girls to women and even to young mothers, who joined the series most recently. Just like herself, Luo's GIRLS have often migrated from rural areas to the large cities, from Norther China and Liaoning, Luo's home province to Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu or Chongqing. Today, Luo travels all over China to photograph women from various backgrounds and ages.*[38]

The time scale and geographical reach of Luo's work makes *Girls* a pioneering project. According to Morawietz: "To date, Luo's GIRLS series is a first long-term venture into the portrayal of young Chinese women created by a Chinese woman, showcasing the plurality of female identity in contemporary China."[39] That is not to say that Luo is the first female Chinese photographer working

36 Marianne Jacquet, 'GIRLS by Luo Yang - An Interview', *KALTBLUT.* (revised 20 May 2016) <http://www.kaltblut-magazine.com/girls-by-luo-yang-an-interview/> [18 June 2018]

37 Eva Morawietz, 'LUO YANG GIRLS Ambiguous Identities', in *Girls*, (Baden: Edition Lammerhuber, 2017), pp 15-21 (p. 17)

38 Morawietz, p. 15

39 Morawietz, p. 19

Fig. 13: Portrait of novelist Chun Shu, from “Girls”, 2017. © Luo Yang

on questions of femininity or representing a female point of view. Some notable precursors are artists Xing Danwen (b. 1967, *Born with the Cultural Revolution*) and Chen Lingyang (b. 1975, *Twelve Flowers Series*).

The aesthetics of Luo's work, as well as those of her peers, can be reminiscent of Western photographers Wolfgang Tilmans or Jürgen Teller. Luo also considers Rineke Dijkstra, Ana Mendieta, and Nan Goldin as having had influence on her work, as well as Japanese photographers Moriyama Daido and Nagashima Yurie.[40]

Like Nagashima's work, Luo Yang's photography is done with film, and eschews technical perfection in favour of a sense of reality and of strong connection with her models, the eponymous Girls. Even though *Girls* is a portraiture project, focusing on both friends and strangers rather than herself, the connection and the relationship the photographer has with her models brings out the autobiographical qualities of the work.

The women in *Girls* belong to the same generation as Luo — with the same post-Cultural revolution roots — and have grown up together with her over the ten years the project has been unfolding. Eva Morawietz describes the project as focused on "the tough process of inner growth in a reality ground in friction, full of hope and latent crisis"[41].

In an interview with *Spiegel Online*[42], Luo mentions that she "always has the feeling that she's showing something of herself when (she) portrays other women"[43]. She goes on to mention the kind of personalities that attract her for the project: "Women who are different, who rebel against the rules and who don't live a standard life, women who have ideals",[44] qualities the photographer — beyond associating them with herself — wants to showcase as the main point of her project. Morawietz writes:

> *"GIRLS are about pure female ego, about showing oneself as a woman, expressing individuality and pursuing an independent life based on one's own choices, regardless of traditional expectations, stereotypes or modern-day social pressures.*[45]*[...] the disarming display of the GIRLS' fragilities becomes a powerful marker of unrelenting personal autonomy. Their evident candour presents itself as a metaphor for freedom and independence."*[46]

When asked about the political aspect of her work, Luo and her peers are eager to insist that their

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40 See Annex: Interview with Eva Morawietz

41 Morawietz, p. 17

42 Following two quotes from *Spiegel Online* translated from German by Elena Helfrecht

43 Maximilian Kalkhof, ed., 'Chinesische Fotografin Luo Yang "Wäre es okay, wenn du dich ausziehst?"' (21 May 2016) *SPIEGEL ONLINE* <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/girls-ausstellung-von-chinesin-luo-yang-okay-wenn-du-dich-ausziehst-a-1093368.html> [15 May 2018]

44 Maximilian Kalkhof, ed., 'Chinesische Fotografin Luo Yang "Wäre es okay, wenn du dich ausziehst?"'

45 Morawietz, p. 18

46 Morawietz, p. 18

work has "nothing to do with politics directly"[47], and that they are focused on the individual. According to Morawietz, Luo's work is "very personal, it's intimate, it's about individuality, it's about emotions, it's about expressing individuality and authenticity",[48] which, in a country with a history of suppressing the free expression of personal opinions[49], can be seen as an intensely political position in itself.[50]

In the future, Luo Yang plans to continue working on the project and to develop it further, to include other media, notably video, and collaborations with other artists. She is also interested in focusing on the subject of mothers: "When we were little, in the1980's, mothers in China went through incredibly hard times, but nobody ever took note of that. The time of our mothers will pass in a near future, it would be a pity to not document their lives."[51] A hint of this can already be seen in the work that's included as part of Girls, including in a photograph of the twins Wan Ying and Snow Ying (Fig. 14):

> *This photo was shot in Chongqing. Chongqing is a very magical city, a city with a river of such magnitude, it always fills people with the presence of lots of stories. Of the twins, the younger is a mother whereas the elder sister is still single. They share the same blood, but have significantly different personalities and went in very different directions in life. The relationship between these twins is fantastic, loving one another but also seeing a different version of oneself in each other.*[52]

47 Patricia Luiza Blaj, ed., 'Luo Yang's "GIRLS" Shows The Beauty Of Vulnerability', *THE OUTSIDERZ* (16 March 2017) <http://www.theoutsiderz.com/luo-yangs-girls-shows-beauty-vulnerability/> [15 June 2018]

48 See Annex, Interview with Eva Morawietz

49 Beina Xu, Eleanor Albert, 'Media Censorship in China', *Council on Foreign Relations* (Revised 17 February 2017) <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/media-censorship-china> [10 June 2018]

50 See Annex, Interview with Eva Morawietz

51 Julian Lucas, ed., 'LUO YANG: An Exploration of the New Chinese Woman', *Mirrored Society* (7 September 2016) <https://mirroredsociety.com/interview/luo-yang-girls> [18 June 2018]

52 Tom Arnstein, ed., 'Beijing-Based Photographer Luo Yang Shoots to Smash Stereotypes of Chinese Girls', *The Beijinger* (27 September 2017) <http://www.thebeijinger.com/blog/2017/09/27/luo-yang-photographer-shoots-smash-stereotypes-chinese-girls> [20 June 2018]

Fig. 14: Wan Ying and Snow Ying, from “Girls”, 2017 © Luo Yang

A portraiture of the common ground

The intention at the beginning of writing of this dissertation was to define a certain visual style common to Luo Yang and Yurie Nagashima, as well as other artists working with the same sensibilities and on similar subject matter. However, what has emerged from researching these photographers and examining their work was beyond mere visuals. The connections between the portraiture work of Luo and Nagashima go beyond the aesthetic similarities and become only deeper when we consider the approach to their subject matter used by the two photographers.

That is not to say that the technical aspect is not important for this *portraiture of the common ground*. Both Nagashima and Luo are primarily users of film cameras. Luo says that "there is a humanising impression in film; it's rich in both texture and colour. Shooting in film encourages (her) to contemplate more."[53] They both use an array of cameras, in both 35mm and medium format, and they both produce pictures that are candid and others that are carefully constructed. Another characteristic of this style is that neither photographer attempts to construct images beyond what is possible with the model and the environment at hand. Luo, the more directive of the two, might arrange her models in ways that she considers more interesting, but says that "usually the shooting takes place at an environment that they [the models] are familiar with, no preparations or particular settings."[54] This lack of artifice (be it in location, lighting, make-up...) gives the bodies of work produced by the two photographers a sense of spontaneity, a sense of a realism of the everyday, which is used in the service of emphasising an intimacy.

Intimacy is a key component of the *portraiture of the common ground*. Both Luo and Nagashima photograph people close to them. Nagashima photographs her family, her friends, her husband, her son; Luo her friends and girls with whom she feels a sense of kinship, and although she has no blood ties to her subjects, one could imagine them as a sort of extended family she has constructed for herself. The closeness to the subjects that permeates both photographers' work allows the pictures to emphasise a common ground, a humanity shared on several levels.

That humanity is shared first, via mutual vulnerability, between the photographers and the subjects. Looking at both photographers work, it's hard not to be struck by the basic human connection between two people that flows through the camera. Thus, the act of photographing becomes an act of acknowledgement and of acceptance from both participants, and, to resort to the old cliché, each photograph becomes a self-portrait.

Beyond this amalgamation between the photographer and the subject, both photographers

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53 Tom Arnstein, ed., 'Beijing-Based Photographer Luo Yang Shoots to Smash Stereotypes of Chinese Girls'

54 Clara Hernanz, ed., 'Luo Yang's photos show women rebelling against classic Chinese femininity', *Dazed* (18 June 2018) <http://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/40161/1/luo-yang-photos-women-rebel-against-classic-ideas-chinese-femininity-ai-weiwei> [19 June 2018]

compellingly highlight their subjects' individuality, and, through it, their own — quite literally in the case of Nagashima's self-portraits, and by implication in the case of Luo's portrait work. This inexorable insistence on personal identity has the effect of pulling the viewer, without necessarily soliciting his or her consent, into the bond of vulnerability, acknowledgement, and acceptance between the photographer and the subject.

Herein lies the might of the *portraiture of common ground*: the viewer is forced to extricate the person in the photograph from any kind of grouping that preconceived notions about gender, age, ethnicity, or appearance might have placed her in, and to consider her as an individual, with her own hopes, vulnerabilities, successes, failures, and dreams. In other words, to find a common ground with her.

When it comes to the subject matter pursued by Nagashima Yurie and Luo Yang — questions of femininity and the female point of view — this relentless affirmation of individuality can only be political, clashing as it does with the established order in countries that have long traditions of patriarchy and collectivism. The measure to which this feminist attitude is claimed — vocally by Nagashima and implicitly by Luo — could be seen as a barometer for political freedoms in their respective countries, however, the fact that it permeates the work is crucial. The work of Nagashima, Luo, and others working in the same direction is thus, in an era of increased global trends towards xenophobia and isolationism, playing a role not unlike that of golden age photojournalism of the 1950s-70s: promoting a deeply humanist message of peace, acceptance, and a shared humanity that goes far deeper than any differences possibly could.

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Annex: Interview with Eva Morawietz

Dr. Eva Morawietz is an art historian, an expert on Chinese photography, and the director of *MO-Industries*, a gallery representing, among others, Luo Yang. This interview was conducted over videoconference on 27 May 2018. No transcript is available for the first question because of a recording malfunction. The questions are followed by the unedited transcript.

Prepared questions

1. Besides Luo Yang, can you recommend any photographers working in China these days who are doing similar things? I'm interested in Luo's peers: photographers from about the same generation, working with straight on portraiture, not really manipulating photos. I'm also interested in any precursors working in a similar style.
2. Can you see any connections between Luo's work and that of the *onnanoko shashin* style of photographers in Japan in the 90s/2000s? Has there been any influence from that generation of Japanese photographers on Luo and her peers?
3. In the introduction to Luo's "Girls", you write that her works have no deliberate political agenda and that the political power of her images is basically a by-product of the unquestioned/uncompromised independence and individuality of her subjects as show in her work. Was this a deliberate decision on her part? How are other Chinese photographers working with similar topics handling this friction with established social norms? Comparing Yurie Nagashima'a generation of photographers to that of the radical protest photography of Provoke magazine in the 60s/70s, Marco Bohr writes: 'the battleground has moved from the streets to their own private spaces, and their own bodies within those spaces. The confrontation was no longer "an ideological clash with the state, but it was a political clash with the various media that construct female identity"'. Does this hold true for Luo and her peers?
4. How do you see the growth of Chinese photography going forward? It seems like everywhere photography is becoming less male-dominated, but this is particularly visible among my classmates at RCA: out of my 10 Chinese classmates, 9 are female.
5. A respected photographer/teacher running a gallery in Tokyo (Arimoto Shinya) has recently said that the age of Japanese photography is over and that Chinese photography is now at the forefront in Asia, and soon worldwide. What do you think of this statement? What are some factors that make this the age of Chinese photography?

Transcript

Gueorgui Tcherednitchenko: We were talking about WeChat and how that's maybe the primary platform for the Chinese art world to communicate within itself, kind of. Right?

Eva Morawietz: Yeah. Social media in general.

GT: And so you said that as a gallery you couldn't really have a page.. a business account in WeChat?

EM: Yeah, because my gallery is registered in Singapore, and in order to have a business account, you need to have a business up and running in China. I'm pretty sure there are ways around it, um, but for now we're fine with this situation because (...) for our next exhibition we are actually collaborating with a Chinese gallery, so they can help us promoting the exhibition via WeChat, which is cool.

GT: So WeChat is basically kind of like Facebook Pages in the West that galleries use to promote their events and so on.

EM: Well, I think the equivalent to WeChat in the West would be WhatsApp, except that I think WeChat is a lot better, has a lot more functions.

GT: Right. But is there any follow functions on WhatsApp? For me WhatsApp is basically just a chatting platform, you can't really follow any business or people on there.

EM: Yeah exactly. I think you can upload tons of (...) on WhatsApp, for which you have these little chat moments.

GT: Ok. Alright, so maybe let's move on to the next one.

EM: Let me look at the email again. Oh, interested in precursors, working in a similar style.

GT: Yeah, precursors.

EM: So in the essay, I mention Xing Danwen, who has a series, "Born with the Cultural Revolution", which is a step into experimental photography, and at least I know that Luo Yang is very much familiar with her work. Then we have Chen Lingyang, also mentioned in the essay, and her series "Twelve Flower months", this is especially relevant with regard to any kind of topic related to feminism and, just when it comes to the focus of femininity, I guess that's the point here.

And, also important, at least for Luo Yang's images, is the work of Zhang Hai'er, he's a male photographer, and he's very well known in the canon of Chinese photography if you will, for his series of prostitutes; it's a black and white series of prostitutes in Guangzhou, very intimate images. And also, when compared to earlier Chinese photography, very much concern (...) straight on

portraiture as well. You might want to look into that.

By the way, I think via Facebook we talked about recommendations for literature earlier, and you find all of these in the book which I think I already mentioned to you, which is "Contemporary Chinese Art" by Wu Hung. You know this one? And there you find... this is for example Zhang Hai'er /shows book via video chat/.

GT: Nice.

EM: And also, two essays, which give quite a good overview, also history of contemporary Chinese photographers, also written by Wu Hung. I'm not sure if he's the only one who's working on this topic, it almost seems like it, I'm sure he's not, but at least from my Western perspective, and not speaking proper... or not being able to read Chinese, that was the most accessible for me. Wu Hung also, "Between Past and Future, a brief history of contemporary Chinese photography". You should be able to download it on Wu Hung's homepage. He's teaching at the University of Chicago and I think you can download all of his essays there.

GT: Oh, great. Ok. I've been looking at his books at the SOAS library in London.

EM: At least I found these essays on his homepage at the University of Chicago, and I just downloaded them. The other essay is about, also "Between Past and Future", that was an exhibition actually, and it's called "New photography and video from China", so that might be interesting for you as well.

GT: Cool, thank you!

EM: Then, going back even further when it comes with precursors, are you familiar with the work of Mo Yi?

GT: No.

EM: I think he was working in the late 70's, after opening the Wu Hung book in order to take a look again... late 80's actually. He's very much... he's well known for his series Expression of the Street. These are also black and white images, and spontaneous snapshots of... just... pedestrians in the street. Also belonging to the experimental photography of the time.

GT: Right. So would you say that... ah... how influenced are Chinese photographers by foreign photographers? Is there a lot of foreign work available for people to look at?

EM: Yes.

GT: Because... most of the influences you mentioned just now... all of them are Chinese photographers basically. What about foreign influences?

EM: I think very much. I think these matter more than the Chinese precursors, in the case of

Luo Yang and in the case of the others that we talked about before, we have to consider Wolfgang Tilmans, I know that Luo is a huge fan of Wolfgang Tilmans, also Rineke Djikstra, Ana Mendieta, Yurie Nagashima, Nan Goldin is a huge one as well, Jürgen Teller. In the case of Luo Yang, I know that these were all influential to her work as well.

GT: So I'm glad that my brain didn't make up the connection with Yurie Nagashima (laughs).

EM: Not at all (laughs). That's always one of the first names that Luo mentions when it comes to inspirational precursors, so to speak. And especially you've been mentioning Japanese photographers. Luo has not spoken to me about the onnanoko shashin style, the girl photographers, which would be, especially by looking at those images, it would make so much sense that these are direct influences, but I've never heard Luo Yang mention them. I think, or from my perspective, the snapshot aesthetic, and the blurry out of focus aesthetic that defined a lot of Luo's images for instance, is very much influenced or could be very much influenced by Otsuka Chino, for example. I think that's the first name that comes to my mind here.

GT: Ok.

EM: Other than that, the Japanese photographers, Luo has been mentioning Daido Moriyama...

GT: Makes sense.

EM: and, of course, Yurie Nagashima, yeah.

GT: I guess, when I brought up the onnanoko shashin thing, it's... I mean of course it's about the aesthetic itself, but for me, it seems like... I mean... that was a very political movement despite the fact that it didn't have any openly professed political goals, maybe... but in the context of Japanese photography at the time it was the first time female photographers were really strongly emerging to the forefront of the art scene, and saying that, um. Difficult to find the right words here... but as Marco Bohr, wrote: "moving the battleground away from the streets and into their private spaces". And, even though you say that there is no deliberate political agenda in Luo's work, this is also something that she's doing.

EM: Absolutely.

GT: Would you say that... is she the first to do that in the Chinese photography scene, or is that an established kind of tradition already? I'm sorry, I'm not articulating that very well.

EM: Hmm, well, when it comes to photography, I think that Luo's generation of photographers, so all the photographers we've mentioned so far, I think they're all kind of doing the same with this undeliberate political context. All of them claim that they have no relation to any political issue, and any political subject matter whatsoever, it's not part of their work, it's not

something that they consider. At the same time, they are very eager to point that out all the time (laughs).

GT: So is it more for the benefit of the "state", or?

EM: Well, I think... how could I say this. So basically Ai Weiwei, for instance, in this case he would say, "how unpolitical can your work be when you live in a country that suppresses the free expression of opinions?"

GT: Right.

EM: So basically what they are doing is they are proclaiming that their work is not political at all, and at the same time this, you know, in the negative sense, so to speak, their work is almost political again. I cannot express myself in a better way but do you somehow understand what I mean?

GT: Yeah, I mean... proclaiming that you're not political is a political act in itself.

EM: In itself, basically. And...

GT: And it sort of puts the work outside of this system, and gives it more freedom to express those ideas that might in turn affect the system.

EM: Yeah, they are using the whole range of possibilities for expression, and they stop at the political subject matter to not, you know, offend anyone or offend the authorities... although you know, at the same time, Ren Hang, for example, he was arrested several times for claims of pornography, you know, he on the other hand was then offending the authorities in a different way, just not in the political context.

GT: Right.

EM: No, but for example, I can speak for in Luo's case, we've been talking about this over and over again. Luo says: "I don't have any political agenda whatsoever. I don't care about politics, I'm not involved in any government organisation, or with any government people, all I care about is the individual, and when I work this is something that is the focus of my work. It's very personal, it's intimate, it's about individuality, it's about emotions, it's about expressing individuality and authenticity. Nothing around that, or nothing further than that."

GT: That's already a hugely political thing.

EM: Exactly, and that's my point. If you are a woman in China, and a woman photographer in China, and a young photographer in China, as Luo still is, although she might not be considered young; I mean she's in her mid thirties now, for a Chinese woman that's not young anymore... If you're a woman in China and having women as models and as subject matter, and having these women freely express themselves, women from various backgrounds, your work will be interpret-

ed against the context of politics, against the subject matter of femininity and the entire range of issues that goes with that. It's an inevitable reading. And especially when you look to the West, when we exhibited Luo's work in the West, these are always the questions that come up: What about the situation of women in China? Is it okay for them to have these images exhibited in open context, these nude images, for example that Luo oftentimes has.. so yeah, there is an inevitable political context, although Luo will always say, and rightfully so, that she doesn't have a political agenda. I think the same is true for Ren Hang, and Lin Zhipeng, and Chen Zhe also.

GT: That's very interesting. So I wonder how comfortable or uncomfortable she is when exhibiting abroad with those questions arising about her work? Does she want her work to be seen in a different way? Is this something that she wishes didn't come up?

EM: No. I think that this is something that startles her a little bit, because one thing that's very clear that in the West, at least, these questions come up all the time. Whereas when she exhibits in China, it seems that at least the Chinese audience doesn't ask these questions, I mean it's only natural because they know, they know about the situation of women in China and it's something that's not interesting to them. For Western audiences, Luo's work is exotic in a kind of way, because it's a different culture, a different context, a different aesthetic etc. so of course the Western audience is much more interested in the political aspect, the hidden political aspect of her work.

GT: Okay.

EM: And also the Western audience is only very much familiar with Ai Weiwei, if you ask anyone in the West about Chinese artists, I think people might only be able to name Ai Weiwei and nobody else.

GT: Ai Weiwei is also a very... much more overtly political artist than...

EM: Absolutely.

GT: Is there anyone like that in the photography world, or any other artists who are as overtly political as him that you can think of?

EM: Hmm. His former assistant, and now I have to think of his name... hold on.

GT: That's ok, we can follow up on that later if you want.

EM: What's his former assistant's name... he has somewhat also a political agenda to his work, although he's not that controversial. I think Ai Weiwei really paved the ground for that. And I also believe truly that the Chinese government does not care that much anymore, about Ai Weiwei or about any kind of anti-governmental expression in the art world. Depends of course on the reach that an artist has worldwide, on a global basis, but I don't think it's that important to them

anymore, or at least that's the impression I get from that whole Ai Weiwei issue.

GT: Is it because the government has gained confidence in its power, or what do you think is the factor there?

EM: Well, I'm just guessing here, but I would think it's more about the fact that China is a globalised country now, and that's how they want to be perceived, within the restrictions that they set for their citizens, of course, but I think China's perception in the world as a modern society with global values is quite important for them. And also maybe they realised that the expression of art, in the end, is not that powerful when it comes to the perception of China in the world, so it might not be relevant to them. It's not like some political leader is formulating anti-government statements here, it's an artist with limited reach, so I'm not sure how much importance the Chinese government gives to that these days. But I think they have a much more relaxed attitude now than they had 10 years ago, certainly.

GT: Would you say that that's contributing to the growth of the Chinese art scene, are artists more free to develop and show their work abroad than maybe 10 years ago?

EM: I think so, yes. Could be.

GT: That's something that's still quite unclear to me, maybe because I don't really have an art world background in the West either, so I don't have a frame of reference for comparing the development of the Chinese art world to the Western one. When I look at Russia, for example, which is also a quite authoritarian government, and it is much harder to grow an audience and have a reach as an artist when your work is obviously about the themes of individualism, human rights, feminism, and so on. And it's much easier if your message is more in line with the government's, in that case the government will actually help you to create the reach, but will expect something in return.

EM: Yeah. I'm sure that's very true of China still, also. I'm sure of it, of course.

GT: I guess that brings me to the question of how do you see things growing, moving forward for photographers in China. For me, when I look at Luo's work, with its unpolitical politicalness, that for me seems to be filling the same role nowadays as golden age humanist photojournalism was doing in Europe and the States in the 50s-60s. It's the same kind of... spreading a humanist message in a way that's effective at that time in that place.

EM: Yes.

GT: So do you think this is going to continue, or is it going to evolve somehow?

EM: I fully agree. I think that when it comes to the Chinese art scene in general, we can maybe talk about something of a cultural jet lag that has somehow still taken place over the last 10

or 20 years. The Chinese art scene has now, for quite a while... and, the most important thing is, the Chinese art scene was looking to the West, a lot, and admiring Western precursors, especially of post-modern art. Experimental photography, for instance, was very much focused on Western predecessors of post-modernism, for instance. They used the theories of the post-modernists to develop their own language, etc. And what I think is happening with Luo's generation of photographers, now, is that... I kind of want to be a little bit careful here with overgeneralising statements... but I think what's happening here is that, this actually is the first time that Chinese photography has its very own language and its very own style, also distinct from Western predecessors. Even though you might argue that you can see the influence of Tillmans, and Teller, and all of the Western photographers as well, it's also quite clear as well that these young Chinese photographers have found their own style and their own visual voice, so to speak.

Any projections for the future? Hmm, difficult. At the moment, I have the feeling that it's stagnating, a little bit. I have been working with Luo now for 2 years or so... longer, almost 3 years. And I know that Luo is struggling a little bit with finding new ways of expression, finding new topics to work on. I know that the Girls subject is very much important to her, but she wants to evolve it, but still doesn't quite know how. She is looking into video art for instance, that's one way of developing the topic further, but she's sort of missing an overall theme for a next project, so to speak. It has been over 10 years now for her Girls project, actually a nice closing point to do something else.

And for the other photographers, I also have a little bit the impression that it's stagnating in the sense that style and subject matter pretty much remains the same for quite a long period of time now, and I'm curious about how this will develop and what will come next.

We're working with a young Chinese photographer at the moment, her name is Silin Liu, and she works with manipulated photography, for example. This is something entirely different, but she is for me the young fresh voice of the next generation. But, yeah, I would refrain from making any projections for the future of Chinese photography.

GT: I guess my question was more about wether you have seen any new developments that might indicate the way things are headed. I guess specifically Chinese. One analogy I can make here is that recently hip-hop music has developed in China in quite a big way, and even though of course at first it was influenced by Western... American hip-hop and so on, it very quickly took on a very distinctly Chinese quality and has started to grow almost completely outside of the influences from the outside world, and became this really huge movement that is now leaving China and spreading worldwide. So I was curious wether...

EM: Wether there was something similar...

GT: Yeah.

EM: Yeah... hmm. That's a good question too. What I definitely noticed is that the Chinese art scene is definitely developing very very quickly, and it's like a self-contained universe in a way, that's not yet totally visible to the West. I think that the Chinese art world in general is very much up and coming, just like the entire development of the country, and the speed of the development surpasses that of any other country at the moment, in the world. So that goes for the economy and the same is true of the art world. But if you ask me about a distinct, you know, the hip-hop example, something similar to the art world... nothing that I see at the moment, but I'm also not an insider in the Chinese art scene.

GT: Alright. I guess, to follow up on that... you talked about western influences on Chinese photography, do you see any Chinese influences on Western photography now? Obviously, maybe people like me, who are maybe more familiar with the work of Asian photographers in general are of course influenced, but do you see that on any kind of bigger scale? Can you see that the influence is starting to go the other way around?

EM: Hmm, that depends on the kind of influence that we're talking about. We could speak about subject matter or style. When it comes to subject matter, I certainly think that China in general is getting more and more attention from photographers all over the world. For instance, another photographer that we are representing is Patrick Wack. He's a French photographer and he basically devoted his work to China, and its inhabitants. He's been working on his series for more than 10 years. He lived in China for a very long time, travelled all over the country, and made really really great portraits of Chinese people in every province. This is still something that fascinates him, and I think there are more and more photographers like him, working in this way. I'm sure that you're familiar also with Nadav Kander. Amazing work. Just amazing.

So I think when it comes to subject matter, China is certainly in the focus. When it comes to style, I simply don't know. This is something that you know better than me, probably, when you say you were inspired by Luo Yang's work, for example, you would be an example.

GT: Although, for me, as I lack a lot of knowledge, and I'm not exposed to the work of all Chinese photographers, it would be much easier for me to say that I'm influenced by her work specifically than by the work of Chinese photographer in general. Uh... so... yeah... I'm not sure where I was going with this. (laughs)

EM: (laughs) Well, I think the point is, it remains to be seen. Luo's generation of photographers and the worldwide reach that Chinese photography has been reaching via Luo and her generation of photographers is quite new, so it remains to be seen how important their influence is going to be for young photographers in the West.

GT: Well, I guess that's the important development to watch going forward.

EM: Maybe that brings us directly to the topic regarding Japanese photography, and... I re-

ally had to think about this question, because... Japanese photography has been established for several decades in the world-wide canon of photography, whereas Chinese photography is fairly new, or the genuine Chinese modern contemporary photography is fairly new. But I think for me, the most important factor, I would agree, this is the age of Chinese photography, not necessarily Japanese photography anymore. I would agree with that. And I think it's because first of all, Japanese photography is very well established, and it's time for something new, for this simple plain reason. And the next thing is, it's because of the subject matter, again. It's not so much about style, that there's a particularly Chinese new style of photography, but I think that it's about subject matter and about the mere fact that everything in China is developing so swiftly, and the entire world is looking on China now for its fast, speedy development in every area of life. I think this directly translates into the art world as well, and into photography. I think that, for a Western audience at least, it's also, you look at these photographs of Chinese youth, hedonistic youth, you know, of those surrealistic images, and you actually get a glimpse into the youth culture in China, into the world of young urban adults in China. This is something that's just really interesting to a Western audience, I think that's the main factor.

GT: Right. That totally makes sense. I guess the reason I asked this question, in contrast with Japanese photography is that, well first of all, within the Japanese photographers that I do know there is a real sense of that "Japanese photography is now over and it's time for Chinese photography". There is that real kind of feeling that Chinese photography is taking the place of Japanese photography, it's not just another thing that's kind of evolving in parallel to it, but it's replacing it. And also, when you look at online bookstores specialising in Japanese photography, more and more of it is now about Chinese photography as well. So it seems like for Western audiences that feeling kind of exists also, so people who are interested in Japanese photography are now also getting interested in Chinese photography, which is my case, totally. So I wonder what that says about about us, is it just because that's two Asian countries, or...? I don't know. These two different perspectives, one from Japan and one from the West, and the fact that they kind of align is interesting and weird to me.

EM: Well, maybe I don't know enough about Japanese photography, but for example can you think of a contemporary Japanese photographer who is about the age as you are, or Luo's generation in general, who has that much impact worldwide?

GT: Not really.

EM: Yeah. That's the point. And, with somebody like Ren Hang for instance, who certainly, you know, is much broadly known that Luo still is, you got a visibility for a Chinese photographer all of a sudden, that young Japanese photographers at the moment just don't have. When I think about it, I can't think of a young Japanese photographer at the moment who has that much impact.

GT: No, I can't either. In the first draft of my dissertation, I wrote up a list of three photographers for each country I was considerin**GT:** someone who was very famous, someone who was on the verge of becoming famous internationally, and someone who is working but hasn't achieved that level of notoriety yet. So for China that was really easy, I chose Ren Hang for the really well known person, Luo for someone who's getting there, and... I'm always forgetting her name... a Chinese documentary photographer who grew up in the Netherlands...

EM: Ah, Pixy Liao!

GT: No, good guess but no. (laughs)

EM: (laughs) Pixy Liao is also not really a photographer.

GT: That's right. Oh, Xiaoxiao Xu. Yeah. She made this amazing documentary series called Aeronautics in the Backyard.

EM: Ah, it rings a bell. I think I've seen this series before.

GT: Yeah. It's about farmers, or people in rural China who build their own airplanes. I think it's an amazing, amazing piece of work. I forget how I found out about this work, but yeah.

So it was easy to come up with those names for Chinese photographers, but for Japanese, not so much. I put Yurie Nagashima at the top, even though I don't think she's anywhere near as well known as Ren Hang outside of Japan.

EM: Yeah.

GT: And my other two people were Shin Noguchi, whom I don't think anybody knows at all, he's a street photographer in Japan, who is maybe quite popular in the West as well, but to a specialised audience. People who care about street photography and Japanese photography will know about him, but not many others.

EM: Right.

GT: And for someone who is not so will known, there is Mai Tanaka, whose work is quite similar to Luo's work actually, but not really near the audience size at all. So that was a struggle to find those people for the Japanese part of the dissertation.

EM: I think that the main problem is that... in the Western perception at least, Japanese photography is very much connected to Daido Moriyama, and to this aesthetic.

GT: The Provoke aesthetic.

EM: Yeah. And this puts Japanese photography maybe also in a kind of a box. "This is what Japanese photography looks like", and ever since there has been no further noticeable change or development. I mean Daido Moriyama has certainly had a huge following of people who some-

what imitated his work...

GT: I've been accused of that myself (laughs)

EM: (laughs) Oh. But for good reason!

GT: Yeah, totally, totally. No shame here (laughs)

EM: Yeah, exactly. And also, the onnanoko shashin movement is not very well known I think in the West, I'm not sure. I feel that's something that is more for...

GT: I mean yeah, yeah, the perception of Japanese photography is in my experience definitely more centred around male photographers, I don't think many people know many female Japanese photographers at all, in the West. Which is too bad, because they're definitely amazing and have a lot to share.

EM: By the way, there are two more Chinese photographers whose work I really admire, I mean they are not portrait photographers, so I'm not sure if it's... but I will mention them anyway. One of them is Chen Wei, I just saw an amazing exhibition of his work here in Singapore, and this is also... very stylised, well-composed images, that have me thinking a little bit about Jeff Wall

GT: Alright, yeah.

EM: But much darker, and at the same time beautiful images as well. I know that he's represented by Ota Fine Arts, and also by another Japanese gallery whose name I forgot now. But he is very well known as well, very expensive too, he's much more expensive than Ren Hang, which came as a surprise to me that he is. I really admire his work, I think it's really really good. And then, a young Chinese photographer as well, let me get the book out... her name is You Li, or Iris You. She's a landscape photographer, and wonderful images, very atmospheric, a little bit like Nadav Kander, but I mean, Nadav Kander with the Chonqing river series etc, you know that certain type of aesthetic.

GT: That's beautiful.

EM: Winter landscapes like this (holds up book to video chat) and it's very much.. it's all Chinese, as well.

GT: Is that the title of the book? Pang Huang?

EM: I think... I'm not sure! I know that her name is You Li, or also called Iris You. So in this I think Pang Huang is the name of the book, or I know that maybe for this book she collaborated with somebody. I bought this book at Three Shadows actually.

GT: Nice, I'm looking forward to visiting that place.

EM: Yeah. Ah, we talked about Three Shadows before, right?

GT: Ah, one of my classmates used to intern there, so she introduced me.

EM: Ah, perfect. Yeah. And they have a marvellous bookstore as well. Definitely worth a visit. And by the way, when it comes to new photographers, I would definitely follow Three Shadows on social media. I mean, Three Shadows, in general, from my impression, they are quite conservative from their outlook and also the kind of exhibitions that they do, so maybe their work is not really representative of really young Chinese photography, up and coming Chinese photography, but Three Shadows certainly represents the canon of Chinese photography. It's still a very very important institution for photography in China.

GT: How do you feel about... maybe you know this store in Shanghai called Closing Ceremony?

EM: No, I don't.

GT: Closing Ceremony... they have another name as well. Hold on just a second, let me Google it real quick. Same Paper, does that tell you anything?

EM: No.

GT: Alright, well... Alright, I can introduce you to something! (laughs)

EM: Please do.

GT: It's a wonderful little bookstore in Shanghai, in the French Concession...

EM: Say the name again please.

GT: Closing Ceremony, I'm just gonna send you the link to their website. They don't just carry photography, but all kinds of art books, and the owner was a friend and collaborator of Ren Hang, so has a lot of stories to share about that. They tend to carry much more experimental things, it seems like they're a big outlet for self-published work, zines, and so on. So next time you're in Shanghai you should check it out, it's great. And have a chat with the owner.

EM: Thank you for the link, I just saw it.

Yeah, so these are the two Chinese photographers I wanted to mention, they're really really great, even though it's not portraiture.

Again, it's quite telling that I picked these books at Three Shadows, Three Shadows also has a vast collection of Japanese photography books, but yeah, it's quite telling that I picked up these two young Chinese artists, and not young Japanese photographers.

GT: Makes sense. I'm also going to Tokyo this summer and I'm looking forward to seeing what's in store at the bookstores there.

EM: Maybe you can get some new insights on young Japanese photography as well, what's going on there, I mean that's a very relevant question, as I mentioned, maybe I don't know enough about the Japanese photography scene at the moment in order to evaluate this properly, so I'm curious what your impression is.

GT: Well, it will be too late for the dissertation, but I'm going to talk to some Japanese photographers after you as well. I mean, I'm happy to send you a copy of my dissertation if you're interested in that.

EM: Well, if you need me to read something, let me know.

GT: I mean, I feel like I take up way too much of your time and resources already.

EM: Don't worry about it, it's all fine. I'm learning too, and it's very very good to always ask myself these questions.

GT: That's very kind of you.

EM: And by the way, if you want to talk to Luo at any point, just let me know. You probably need a translator, if you want to... I don't know how well you speak Chinese yourself...

GT: Not well at all, just started learning.

EM: Yeah, me too. Luo's English is somewhat limited, but if you have a translator it could be very worthwhile interviewing her too.

GT: Ok, I could... that would be actually really awesome, I would have to see if one of my classmates could do it, maybe...

EM: Or you could definitely also communicate via email with her, send her questions, and I'm sure she will be happy to answer.

GT: Cool. Is she based in Shanghai these days or is she in Beijing?

EM: She's in Shanghai.

GT: Oh, she's doing that residency, the Shanghai Swatch whatever?

EM: Yeah, that's starting in November, but she's nevertheless living in Shanghai.

GT: Okay, that's good to know, I will try to figure out the logistics and maybe bother you once again.

EM: (Laughs) No problem at all. It's fun to talk about this, and I find it very interesting too. I'm learning new stuff as well, so that's very good.

GT: Great. I'm glad you feel that way. So I guess I won't take up any more of your time, we

already went over the schedule a little bit, so thank you very much, I'm very grateful for this chat.

EM: Of course of course. Okay, thank you so much.

GT: No, thank you, I'll let you get back to your work.

EM: Have a good day in Paris!

GT: You too, thank you. Have a good day in Singapore.

EM: Thank you. Bye bye.

GT: Take care. Bye bye.