

ART &  
CULTURE

'New Framework' showcases photographs by 12 mainland artists from the 1980s and 1990s – including, clockwise from near right, Mo Yi's *My Illusory City No 4*, Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, Zhang Haier's *Bad Girl* and RongRong's *East Village 1994 No 19*.

# SNAPSHOTS OF HISTORY

Avant-garde photographers throw new light on a dark part of China's past pivotal to its future, writes *Mercy Lo*

**CHINESE CONTEMPORARY** art has made a great leap forward on the global stage.

Witness, for example, the genre's having stolen, ever since the late 1990s, the limelight from other types of art at international biennials and festivals. A part of it has to do with its popularity among critics and experts, resulting in record prices at auctions.

On the other hand, Chinese photography seemed to be like the wallflower sitting in the corner at a school dance, waiting to be noticed.

"Compared to the development of other forms of Chinese contemporary art, Chinese photography is a few decades behind," says RongRong, a pioneer in Chinese experimental photography.

As the art world celebrates the maturity and sophistication of Chinese contemporary works, the revolution in Chinese photography has only just begun.

When the Mao Zedong era started in 1949, photography became a means of political propaganda. Ordinary people were not allowed to own a camera. Journalists could only exercise that privilege if they were looking for snaps on a specific news topic. What was once a rich person's toy had become a political vehicle.

That changed in the 1980s when China opened up, allowing its people to enjoy the brief freedom of openly discussing different ideologies, capitalism and many other topics previously taboo.

Zhang Haier, Mo Yi and Han Lei were some of the photographers of that era who brought forth an alternative voice.

"All that creative and dynamic cultural energy came to a sudden halt in 1989. The Tiananmen Square incident brought everything back to square one," RongRong says. "Like it was before the 80s." But this painful period in history also gave rise

to a new wave of photographers, who yearned for freedom as well as new muses and perceptions that diverged from their experiential exposure.

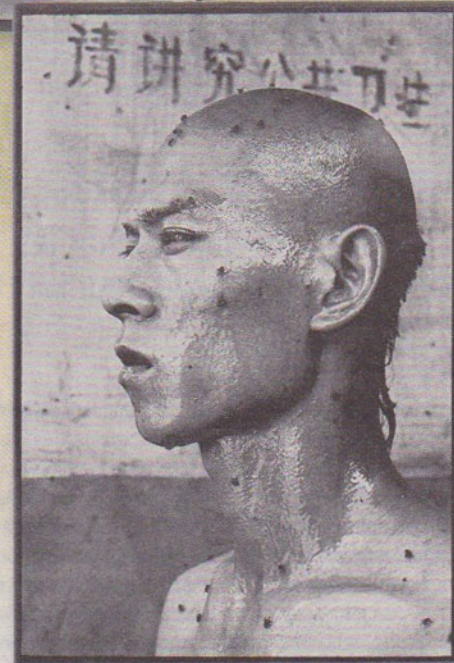
They coalesced into the pioneering group that started the Yuanmingyuan art village and 798 art zone in Beijing, hoping to give new direction and energy to a subdued society.

In 1996, RongRong and a journalist friend, Liu Zheng, started *New Photo* magazine. "It was a private collection of works that, we agreed, was different from mainstream productions – something real, innovative and liberating," RongRong recalls. "Deep down, we had this relentless thirst to emancipate ourselves from restrictions imposed by the system, to express our true feelings and thoughts in our works."

Although only four issues saw the light of day between 1996 and 1998, the magazine marked the beginning of a new era when Chinese photography was rejuvenated by artistic expression.

Photographers are witnesses to history. Each click of the shutter immortalizes a moment. History becomes tangible. And *New Photo*'s reproductions reflected the transformation of Chinese society over the past two decades.

Collaborating with Blindspot Gallery, RongRong has selected a diverse collection of works by 12 artists for the exhibition "New Framework: Chinese Avant-garde Photography 1980s-90s."



Until June 22, more than 80 works will be displayed at the Blindspot Annex in Wong Chuk Hang, and Blindspot Gallery in Central.

"These works really pushed the envelope. Different from the mainstream, this new generation of photographers was able to influence those still living under the traditional system," RongRong says.

"Our new ways of expression might have been hard for them to accept at first, but it was this difference between us that caused them to doubt themselves and begin to search for new possibilities."

As a young artist in Beijing, RongRong used to subscribe to every single photography magazine he could find. He found most of the works quite dull, lacking in unique takes on life and independence. That feeling remains the same even now – decades later – when he revisits them.

From breakthroughs in topics to experimentation with different staging and presentation forms, the exhibition gives a glimpse into this remarkable period of Chinese photographic history when the camera captures a still life of history in all its dynamism.

Zhang, from Guangdong, was among the first to develop an independent approach, with provocative subjects including semi-naked prostitutes. Mo's conceptual approach captures the insecurity all the social and political changes wrought in the people.

Han, from Henan, encapsulates the memory of the period through his documentation of urban life in China since the 1980s, while Qiu Zhijie, from Fujian, questions the false objectivity of documentary photography with his staged photography.

The main venue, Blindspot Annex, is on the 15th floor of the Po Chai Industrial Building, 28 Wong Chuk Hang Road. Blindspot Gallery is at 24-26A Aberdeen Street, Central. Admission is free.

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The exhibition's curator, RongRong, is one of pioneers of Chinese avant-garde photography. MERCY LO