A Visual Misalignment of Modernity.
Documentary Photography of Contemporary Urban Transformation in Shanghai

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Abstract

The built environment of contemporary Shanghai has accumulated relatively continuous historical fragments, providing a unique, complete and diachronic sample of urban transformation for documentary photography. As an objective and material fact, how the transformation has become a subjective and cultural fact that was visualized by photography remains a significant issue.

A series of art movements in China since 1976 thrived the individual’s expression, artistic or documentary, by photography. Before long, the unprecedented and nationwide urbanization realizing the comprehensive modernization after the Reform and Opening up Policy in 1978 has far surpassed the construction of the past. During the urbanization in Shanghai, architectural spectacles and highly mixed urban development has emerged, meanwhile, the historical trace of everyday life has inevitably either vanished or transformed. It is a significant interaction between the material transformation pursuing the Chinese subjective modernity by codifying “Plans” to realize the comprehensive modernization and the visualization of the specific spatial impact that reconstructed everyday life underlying the overall transformation.

Concentrating on three representative and sequential photographers whose long-term documentation illustrated the urban transformation in contemporary Shanghai: Guo Bo acted as a professional architect and a photographer as well who depicted the everyday life in vanishing residential lanes “Lilong” after the Reform; Lu Yuanmin delved into the street and gleaned the surreal micro-reactions during the transformation; And Xi Zi applied his lens to produce an urban specimen of the remaining existence of the crumbling residential housing amongst new developing areas, this paper discusses how the visual misalignment as a distinct feature and approach of the recognition of the urban transformation was revealed by documentary photography.
Although focusing on different motifs, their representations with self-consciousness as an intertextuality of urban transformation demonstrated a common sense that brought the overall transformation as a material fact of the comprehensive modernization in Shanghai back to everyday experience as a cultural fact. The coherence and distance, the intimacy and indifference, the familiarity and strangeness in the documentation endeavor sensitively to represent the visual experience of modernity in everyday life which reveals a phenomenon of misalignment in visual culture of the urban transformation in Shanghai.

**Keywords:** Documentary photography; Urban transformation; Experience of Modernity; Contemporary Shanghai; Architectural visualization

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Introduction

Shanghai, as a unique and well-defined case representing the intensively accumulated fragments of urban features formed in multiple historical periods since the port opening, has demonstrated a continuous condition of transformation that has been absorbing and mediating the Western and local principles.¹ This city has absorbed the enlightenment of Western modernity, in turn, contributed to the construction of the subjective modernity of China.² Particularly, the space and the visualization, realized by two concrete and dominating agent——architecture and photography, act as significant parts of the comprehensive modernization that is pursuing the uncomplete modernity in China.³ Shanghai, where the material urban transformation and the humanistic photographic representation interact constantly, provides a traceable case of the cognition and imagination of the modernity rooted in the collective and the individual. However, the interaction illustrates not only a parallel path, but also dramatic vibrations.

Urban transformation is a vivid emergence of the role that Shanghai has played as a frontier of the international exchanges throughout the modern history and the contemporary modernization in China. Thus, it is significant to consider that the ever-changing built environment as a basic feature has catalyzed its corresponding body of culture, moreover, and formed a coordinate system of space and time. Hence, everyday life in diachronic periods reflecting the actual experience of space and time could be perceived and navigated within the coordinate system. As Marshall Berman indicated, “Here is a mode of vital experience—experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils……I will call this body of experience ‘modernity’.”⁴

Experience: Plans And Everyday Life

The contemporary Shanghai has merged the historical heritage of the original old city and the previous concessions, and more importantly, the new established areas catalyzed by decisive and codified “Plans” embodying the comprehensive modernization for realizing the subjective modernity.

For instance, before the founding of People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Republic of China (ROC) government launched “the Greater Shanghai Plan” in 1929 which was greatly influenced by the Western urban planning principles and traditional Chinese architectural style eclectically.

This plan was to expand the main administrative areas by launching a new city other than depending on the original concession area. After the World War 2, government of ROC carried out a new version of “Greater Shanghai Plan” from 1945 to 1949 to reconstruct Shanghai, especially reorganized the industrial and residential land use. In the early period since the founding of PRC, more nationwide and regional “Plans” had been established including the comprehensive Five Y ears’ Plans, Shanghai Overall Planning for 1953, 1959 and etc., which were greatly influenced by Soviet Union and undertook to create an industrial oriented cities serving the comprehensive modernization by industrialization. During that period of time, Shanghai expanded dramatically and absorbed a large amount of migrants for industrial production. As a result, the highly mixed living condition occurred in Shanghai's traditional residential area—“Lilong” and numerous new worker’s residential units were established.

The rapid and nationwide urbanization following the Reform and Opening–up since 1978 far surpassed the construction in any historical period. Catalyzed by the new Market Economy with Chinese characteristics, in Shanghai, super–scale architectural spectacles reshaping the skyline established from the blank fields and highly mixed and ambitious urban renovation from the existing areas had emerged dramatically. In turn, especially from 1990s to 2010s, traces of everyday life underlying the transformation have inevitably been transformed, and it had been a more complex social issue in terms of the vanishing of locality and evolving of economy so fast.

Towards a more humanistic urban planning methodology and value since the conversion from the pursuit for rapid development to the human–oriented and elaborated urban management by a series of central policies since 2013, it has become more important to mediate the experiences of modernity between “Plans” and everyday life in contemporary China. It is explicit that the “Plans” provide a metaphor that embraces the technological rationality and the meaning of ideology in collective narrative. Hence, the imagination of modernity embedded in the material construction—the solid achievement realizing the expectation for the accelerating modernization has become a cultural identification between the realism and idealism. Meanwhile, individuals’ everyday life and adaptation to that material construction will inevitably require a certain process and demand more specific focus by social studies. Consequently, documentary and art criticism by photography since 1976 have demonstrated an intuitive and cognitive result of the transformation of everyday life produced by this process. Moreover, as an urban cultural phenomenon, the visualized result reveals more sensitive experiences of modernity and provides opportunity to examine the interaction between “Plans” and everyday life.

Documentary Photography As An Intervention: The Interaction Of Space And Visualization

From the architectural spectacles representing the achievement, to everyday life reflecting a humanistic concern and critique of built environment, Shanghai has been illustrated by photography as a symbol of modernity, as well as its imagination, since the utilization and popularization of photography in China.

Especially, from the end of 1920s to the end of 30s, relatively stable political situation, thriving world trade and economy, market of real estate and the population expansion catalyzed the material construction in Shanghai mainly following the Western urban planning and architectural design principles.8 Besides, the outburst of modern built environment in turn stimulated the visual creation, criticism and consumption brought about by photography in China.9

Distinguished from the exotic traditional Chinese architecture and picturesque towns that occupied the intention of professional photographers, the emerging urban transformation indicating the modern life initiated to be one of the significant motifs for art motivated photographers, especially local intellectuals in early 1930s. For instance, the Black and White Photography Association and photographer JIN Shisheng at that time, paid great attention to representing the modern spectacles in Shanghai: Art-deco and Modernist apartments erected from the new developed blocks, high-rise towers along the Bund, and brightly lit theaters at night, etc. Moreover, those photographers utilized abstracted figures that distinguished from the view of everyday life, such as the representation of complex figures composed by the structure of a steel bridge to pursue the sign of the modernity. (Fig. 1)

After a series of art movements in China since 1976, the tortuous development of photography during the Cultural Revolution ended up with a much more liberated field.10 Since then, the documentary photography in China has undergone multiple stages from the constructing proletariat ideology to constructing a subjective visualization, from the collective narrative to individual expression, from technical record to conceptual representation. Among them, the documentary of built environment could return to the primitive impulse of photography, to present an intuitive response to the immediate scenery, such as the authentic and personal experience of urban transformation rather than a relatively macroscopic indication of ambitious plan of the city. As Berman stated: “To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know,

During the more than 40 years’ development of Chinese contemporary photography, a basic approach have been built to distinguish with the singular expression of the collectiveness and ideology by a more imperturbable judgement, self-consciousness, and individual perspective.

In the case of Shanghai, the practices with personal, conceptual, and long-term observation constituted a significant part of the overall process. The experience from the urban transformation in Shanghai mediating the “Plans” and everyday life could be traced as a diachronic retrospective of photography practice with a clear geographical area as a clue. A large number of those who have been documenting Shanghai for decades provide not seductive images for consumption, but a visual and historiographical intervention presenting the transformation of material-built environment and social organization attached to it. The three photographers mentioned in this article are representatives among them and depicted iterative imprints of Shanghai in different periods.

11 Berman, All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity, 15.

[Fig. 1]
Guo Bo: existence of the past and confrontation of the vanishing

Guo Bo, who was born and educated in architecture in Japan, returned to China to work in Shanghai Civil Architectural Design Institute as an architect in 1955. He found photography as his way to illustrate urban spaces as the social phenomenon for both professional work and personal interest.

His profession endowed him with unique perspectives and opportunities of documenting multiple subjects associated with the overall urban development in Shanghai. Among them, Guo paid great effort to capturing “Lilong”, where a large number of citizens lived and the everyday life performed (Fig. 2). As a basic form of residential organization and spatial connotation to shape the locality, the rise and fall of “Lilong” have become important components of the urban transformation in Shanghai. At the same time, it is also a vulnerable prototype that hardly adapt itself to the overall modernization, especially the basic condition of infrastructure.

Especially, as a participant and professional designer of the construction derived by “Plans”, he could be more sensitive of the gradual transformation of “Lilong” and took the shots ahead of it. In his self-statement, “At the very least, I could photograph the old buildings before they were gone forever.” Guo applied the modest visual syntax such as the classic division of composition and delicate arrangement of light to organize this meticulous and social investigation of everyday life, and to illustrate the spatial characteristics of “Lilong” with a humanistic perspective focusing on experience, the narrowness and intimacy, the temporary but effective occupancy, and the sense of boundary and territory.

For instance, the image of “Yuanfang Lane” emphasizes the extreme but intimate narrowness which was formed by the compromise of the restricted space and demand of living condition. Though it explicitly doesn’t suit the vision of modernization, Guo endowed this authentic experience with dignity by creating a linear space with an extreme proportion bathing in the delicate light aura (Fig.3). “Wang Jia Port Street” demonstrates the very common scene that people are occupying the limited but accessible public spots under a cantilevered dwelling to do business (Fig.4). And the public lanes could be utilized as a recreation and communication center for people and the boundary could be redefined between public and private (Fig.5). Facing the inevitable trend, Guo provided one of the earliest depictions of the vivid everyday life in “Lilong” after the Reform, at the same time, a sense of ceremony for everyday life.

14 Yun Guo, ed. Time & Space traces of Shanghai—selected artworks by photographer Guo Bo 1980–1999 (Shanghai: Tongji University Press, 2009). Mr Guo Bo made this statement in the preface in June 2009 when this book was about to be published.
[Fig. 2] 
“Anping Street, close to Lishui Road” photographed by Guo, Bo. 1980s, Accessed at Guo, Yun, ed. 2009. Time & Space traces of Shanghai-selected artworks by photographer Guo Bo 1980-1999. Permitted to use by the author.
“Yuanfang Lane” photographed by Guo, Bo. 1980s.
[Fig. 4]
“Wang Jia Port Street” photographed by Guo, Bo. 1980s.
[Fig. 5]
“Lane at Yang Jia Shan Road in Nan Shi Ward” photographed by Guo, Bo. 1980s.
“The everyday was always there, and we, like everyone else, were always immersed in it. To some extent it is this immersion which prevents us from seeing the everyday, or acknowledging it. (...) products, among them buildings, are inevitably involved in the vicissitudes of the everyday world. (...)”\(^{15}\) By demonstrating a highly systematic observation of everyday life and a typological investigation of urban space, Guo represented the intimacy interaction, the pattern and rhythm of everyday life and space. The dual identity as architect and photographer endowed him the sensitiveness for the part of everyday life which is neglect in architectural design and planning, especially when it is engulfed by the “artistic pursuit” brought about by the grandiose “Plans”\(^{16}\).

**Lu Yuanmin: unrelated city**

As one of the most noted contemporary photographers and a Shanghai native, Lu Yuanmin started his professional career in Shanghai Municipal Engineering Research Institute as a technical photographer. Then he moved to work in Cultural Center of Putuo District in Shanghai and gradually initiated his documentary along his everyday route from home to work unintentionally.

Different from Guo’s vision, Lu intentionally put himself distant from what he was observing. As critic Wu Liang commented on Lu’s photography, “Lu Yuanmin is not only a lost person, but also a native outsider. Because there are only lost people and outsiders will be indifferent to the great plan of this city.”\(^ {17}\) The features, such as “lost” and “outsider”, endow Lu with a capacity of being independent from the transformation of surroundings and thus being sensitive to the miscellaneous fragments and scattered scenarios during this process. In turn, an unrelated city constituted by the delicate interaction of everyday life and the grandiose “Plans” demonstrates the unexpected vitality.

In his image, there is a visual construction of the surreal scene that a formulaic and dominating vision for the modernity and another figure indicating the random and realistic moment in everyday life coexist. For instance, he took a photo for an old man watching the “Suzhou River” movie exhibition (Fig.6). The bird-view vividly represents the current achievement and visionary ambition of this city, meanwhile, the anonymous figure of man is watching this non-existent view in his everyday life. Here, a complex link is formed between the reality and virtual space visualizing the constantly changing urban environment.

\(^{15}\) Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till, ed. The Everyday and Architecture (Academy Press, 1998).

\(^{16}\) Guo, The Fast Vanishing Shanghai Lanes.

\(^{17}\) Yuanmin Lu. Memories blurred images of Shanghai (Beijing: China Photographic Publishing House, 2007), 2.
Another one captured the moment that several people were riding through a giant poster illustrating a rendering of a new established and magnificent commercial office building with a man in suit coming up (Fig 7). The delicate encounter of the reality depicted by the silhouette of the most common citizens and the vision of an ideal modern lifestyle embodied by the glamorous rendering of the future construction and the decent figure of a business man provided even a stronger sense of distance which became his metaphor of reexamining the experience of modernity in everyday life.

[Fig. 6]
“A senior in Suzhou Creek Movie Exhibition”. Lu, Yuanmin. 2003. Provided by the photographer.
"Street Corner" photographed by Lu, Yuanmin. 1996.
Provided by the photographer.
XI Zi: urban specimen

If Guo presents an immersive scene of everyday life in the eve of transformation, and Lu pursues the dramatic performance of the interaction between everyday life and the vision of transformation, then Xi Zi is providing the very objectiveness of the sensitive moment in urban transformation.

Since the beginning of 2000s, the urban transformation in Shanghai following a sequences of development “Plans” including the thriving real estate market and international events like EXPO, has become more dramatic. Traditional residential area such as “Lilong” and worker’s housing units, gradually lost the spatial efficiency and basic capacity of infrastructural demand during the renovation to build a livable and high-density metropolis. However, the real estate value of those residential areas that were in poor condition and not listed as architectural heritages but located in central or developing areas increased greatly. Thus, another wave of the transformation that existing residential areas were took place by much more modern and effective urban forms, such as communities consisted of residential high-rise towers, commercial complex and public transportation services has emerged. The co–existence of established and transforming urban units has become a common spatial and social phenomenon until now.

Xi Zi initiated the ambitious documentation of the vanishing traditional residential areas, which were under transformation or barely preserved since 2000s and endured working on this motif until nowadays. Buttressed by the digital technology and social media, his work demonstrates to the public a comprehensive documentation of the urban transformation in Shanghai. Compared with Guo’s attempt to preserve the imagination of the “Lilong” through photography and the real imprints of the individual’s everyday life, then Xi’s approach is more of a tingling but irreversible reality, leaving a portrait of the remaining vitality, a straight representation recognizing the sophistication of modernity(Fig. 9).

The traditional texture of Shanghai is vulnerable in terms of the overall and ambitious renovation process and it seems that the photographer adopted a fragile coordinate system to navigate the visualization. Here, gazing the miscellaneous of transforming environment even when it was vanishing, especially the obsolescent residential blocks juxtaposing with the high-rise towers, Xi presented an uncompromising indication of the contrast between new and old, faster and slower, grandiose and ordinary.

In fact, with the improvement of preservation of historical architecture and private asset, as well as the increasing of removal cost, it is quite obvious in Shanghai that the previous mode of massive renovation has decelerated dramatically. Furthermore, what the photography illustrates is that urban transformation inevitably brings about an emerging and temporary condition of “negotiation”. The removal brings great fortunate to people who were willing to
Lu also witnessed the first wave of real estate development in Shanghai after the 90s. When he met a demolishing site, the vanished and remaining structure of factory facilities and the well-established towers seems to be two different realms (Fig 8). One was erected to declare the vision of modernity, the other one was reshaped thoroughly to catch up with the pace. This image repenting a classic motif in documentary photography for urban transformation seems to be an allegory for the inevitable process of demolition serving the reconstruction pursuing the development in contemporary Shanghai, and many other cities in China. The components in his images seem to be visually and spatially unrelated, even Lu himself as a wanderer, a loafing individual is unrelated to Shanghai. However, by reexamining the rare sense of distance with the great city, Lu illustrated, the interaction between those unrelated components, which constitutes a unique experience that provides a suspending time and space in the curtain-like modernization process. The trace of everyday life and the vision of urban transformation during the 1990–2000s were augmented by his long-term observation.


[Fig. 8]
move and creates numerous millionaires, however, there were still some people were not
due to sophisticated personal or economic issues. As the photograph depicted, the remaining
traditional dwelling stands solely in the construction site with a background of new established
typical residential towers and the section indicating the spatial organization and the merely
existing trace of the previous everyday life (Fig. 10). By presenting the fragile moment, Xi allows
the visibility of another dimension of existence when the miscellaneous trace of everyday life
is exposed without a volume, a shelter, or a definition of space, like what Lefebvre had stated,
“Now, a critical analysis would doubtless destroy the appearance of solidity of this house,
stripping it, as it were, of its concrete slabs and its thin non-load-bearing walls, which are really
glorified screens, and uncovering a very different picture.”19

Other than those macroscopic views, Xi has taken quite delicate and microscopic observations
on the miscellaneous trace of everyday life in those traditional dwellings embodying the fragile
lifestyle. Especially, the articles of daily use in those blurred space——between the private and
public, such as stairway and atrium, constituted the most featured condition in the traditional
and crowded dwellings with multiple tenants, meanwhile, demonstrated the intuitive post-
occupancy of the space by everyday life.

In most cases, Xi avoids the appearance of concrete figures of people, and abstracts the
objectiveness as producing a delicate specimen sample of urban space by orchestrating the
nightly lighting effect and exposure conditions, the crumbling skeleton of construction site
and isolated dwellings, and the existing high-intensity development of the surroundings. He is
keen to present the last remaining vitality of the transforming structure to endow the material
objects with a suspended moment and to represent a much more sophisticated slice of the
experience of modernity.

[Fig. 9]
“A renovation site in Xi Kang Road” photographed by Xi. Zi. 2009.
[Fig. 10]
"A renovation site in Zha Pu Road" photographed by Xi, Zi. 2019. Provided by the photographer.
Conclusion: visual misalignment

By reexamining these cases mentioned above, moderate or incisive, as visual interventions to the urban transformation in a social discourse as a subjective and cultural fact rather than codified and technic archive, this research endeavors to reveal an essential interaction of space and visualization that was originated from the realistic urban transformation and formed a more sophisticated experience and connotation of modernity in contemporary Shanghai: the coherence and distance, the intimacy and indifference, the familiarity and strangeness.

In turn, this interaction reveals a phenomenon of visual misalignment, as a significant experience of modernity that is conceived by the coexistence of the “slower” modernity conveyed by the trace and existence of everyday life — as a visual critique, humanistic observation, nostalgia narrative or an intuitive reflection from an individual perspective, and the “faster” modernity conveyed by the ever-changing built environment, which is incapable of resisting the urban transformation catalyzed by the up to bottom “Plans” and acceleration of the modernization pursuing the completed modernity in the collective narrative. As Heynen has stated, “For individuals, the characteristics of modernity experience not only come from the combination of programmatic and transient elements, but also the swing between personal development efforts and nostalgia for irreparable things.”

To conclude, this visual misalignment conveyed by documentary photography provides a unique and cultural approach to comprehend and mediate the experience of modernity brought about by the urban transformation of Shanghai. Moreover, it forms a compass of humanistic value that has become a critical scale for measuring the social complex of the urban transformation, especially in terms of the current need towards a humanistic urban planning methodology in the age of stock in China.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to acknowledge the support of the following photographers: Mr. Guo Yun, son of Mr. Guo Bo, is not only a photographer and curator in Shanghai after decades of acting as a professional journalist in Japan, but also endeavors to support the studies on the documentation archive of Mr. Guo Bo. Mr. Lu Yuanmin, one of the most famous contemporary photographer in China and Mr. Xi Zi whose tremendous work provided vivid and profound visualization of the urban transformation in Shanghai, have shared with the author their experience and enlightening opinions after decades of documenting this city.

Bibliography


