

深景镜头。前景中一名工作人

束。

NEGOTATING AI VISUALITY IN MAINLAND CHINA

将这艘船置于水面框架的中

二人将书籍扛上山坡的画面。

**Working through examples of images and
the social practices that generate them –**

...decisions over what counts as “evidence” have historically been a crucial
tool in defending the privilege of the already powerful;

- in relation to AI -

...coverage of this deepfake phenomenon often misses is that the “truth”
of audiovisual content has never been stable –
truth is socially, politically, and culturally determined.

Britt Paris Joan Donovan 2019

XMU Anthropology Museum Project

A moving image artefact to accompany an exhibit about the migration of Universities in China 1931 – 1945.

AI create a dramatic remake of the movement of the Xiamen University library from the coastal city to the interior town of Changting in 1937.

AI trained with Fujian landscapes and peopled by prompts. Essentially the drama arises from moving books across mountains. Prompts on screen alert audiences as to the provenance of the images . The action also asking questions of knowledge and form and location in 2025.

AI 提示 #1：一幅描绘中国工人拆除中国大学图书馆的绘画作品。



AI 提示 #2：将这张图片处理成照片效果。

First iteration tests

AI提示 #3：制作一幅中国劳工扛着书籍上山的图片。



AI 提示 #4：将这张图片处理成照片效果。

Provisional exhibition design





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束。

Third iteration using contemporary landscapes and deliberate anachronism



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二人将书籍扛上山坡的画面。

XMU Anthropology Museum Project - Process

In its current form – AI is given landscape images taken today to people or visualize action.

Landscape image AI training



AI result



In this project, the museum will assert -

...decisions over what counts as “evidence”...

- in relation to AI -

...the museum claims audiences will not “understand” the images...

Audio-visual meaning has never been stable in China – and what follows are
brief details of some vernacular visual practices in China

The sophistication of this audience should
not be underestimated!

A short look at some vernacular and popular images in China – Cultures of Visuality

Bearing in mind the indexical properties of photographic images foregrounded by major thinkers –

The mold of the real - Bazin

Punctum and that-has-been – Barthes

Grounded power of indexical images - Susan Sontag



Anonymous coloured studio photo, 1951. cited by Zhang, 2023

Source - Jin, Yongquan. Yi ming zhao [Anonymous photos]
Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2020



Anonymous colored studio photo, early 1950s. From Jin, Yi ming zhao, 298.
Cited by Zhang, S . 2023



北京天安门合影 1966.12

Colored photo at Tiananmen Square, 1966. Courtesy of Thomas Sauvin / Beijing Silvermine.
Cited by Zhang, S. 2023

Visual Cultures – iconophilia – Retouching Photographs

Wang Hu reminds us that many of the photographic negatives of the republican period bear traces of pencilled refinements – the technique of *xiuban*.

Zhang Shaowen studied chromatically retouched images from the socialist era. The practice is called – *zhuose* – and there is broad acceptance of this practice by society at large, in China. Zhang Shaowen has argued –

The application of an additional material substrate atop pure photographic inscriptions suggest that the untouched monochromes key to canonical theories of photo-indexicality are ultimately incomplete repositories for memory and meaning.

Shaowen Zhang 2023

Furthermore –

Such chromatic memory traces collapse the visual articulations of participation in collective history onto idiosyncratic acts of personal exposition.

Shaowen Zhang 2023



Anonymous coloured studio photo, 1951. cited by Zhang, 2023

Source -Jin, Yongquan. Yi ming zhao [Anonymous photos]
Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2020

Visual Cultures – Charcoal Painting

A practitioner of charcoal painting called HU Liren, retired recently and closed his business – the Xiangru Art Studio - in Quanzhou, Fujian.

His charcoal painting specialty was painting portraits of the deceased commissioned by their families for commemorative purposes.

His charcoal paintings are photo-realistic reproductions of photographs, typically with the background removed and the subjects' expression enhanced as generative of memory and affect for a specific audience. A healthy trade in creating these images existed in Quanzhou since the republican period.

He learned the craft from his father who perfected it Singapore in the 1920s. He fears the craft will disappear now as he has not trained younger people.



Colourising a monochrome image
Quanzhou, Fujian 03.12.23
Authors photograph



“It's not about major alterations—just making them appear more spirited and dignified. Typically, we remove any imperfections in standard photographs.. HU Liren, interview, Quanzhou, 18.10.2025



“Without careful scrutiny, one might struggle to distinguish photograph from charcoal portrait.” (Weixin) 05.19.2018



謙，字景欣，福建泉州府人，光緒二十
(1897年)——宣統元年(1909年)國
貢員，授從七品銜，宣統元年，己酉
考第一名中式(拔元)，派任廣東化
州判授七品銜功績顯赫，宣統二年
(1910年)升任廣東廣州府正五品頂

For some commissions there are no photographs. HU will construct a portrait from a conversation with the family, gathering details of the ancestor's appearance and their status and occupation. HU Liren, Quanzhou, 18.10.2025



One of HU's most recent commissions. HU blames AI for the demise of his business. Former customers can generate images of ancestors or manipulate their photographs simply with image generative tools. HU Liren, Quanzhou, 18.10.2025

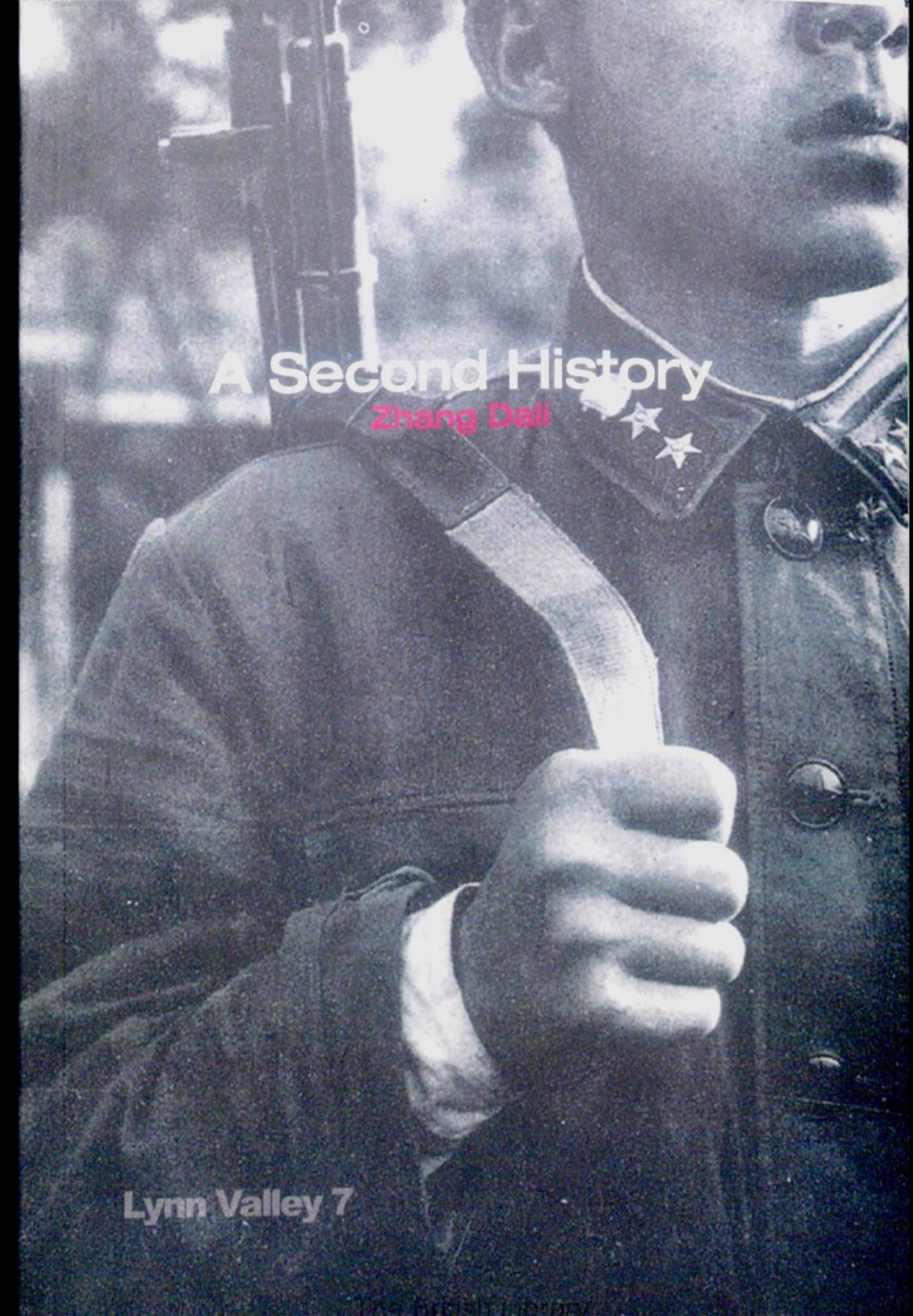
Visual Cultures – Zhang Dali's *Second History*

The artist Zhang Dali's project is an investigative work looking at the provenance of well-circulated photographs in China's history over the past century.

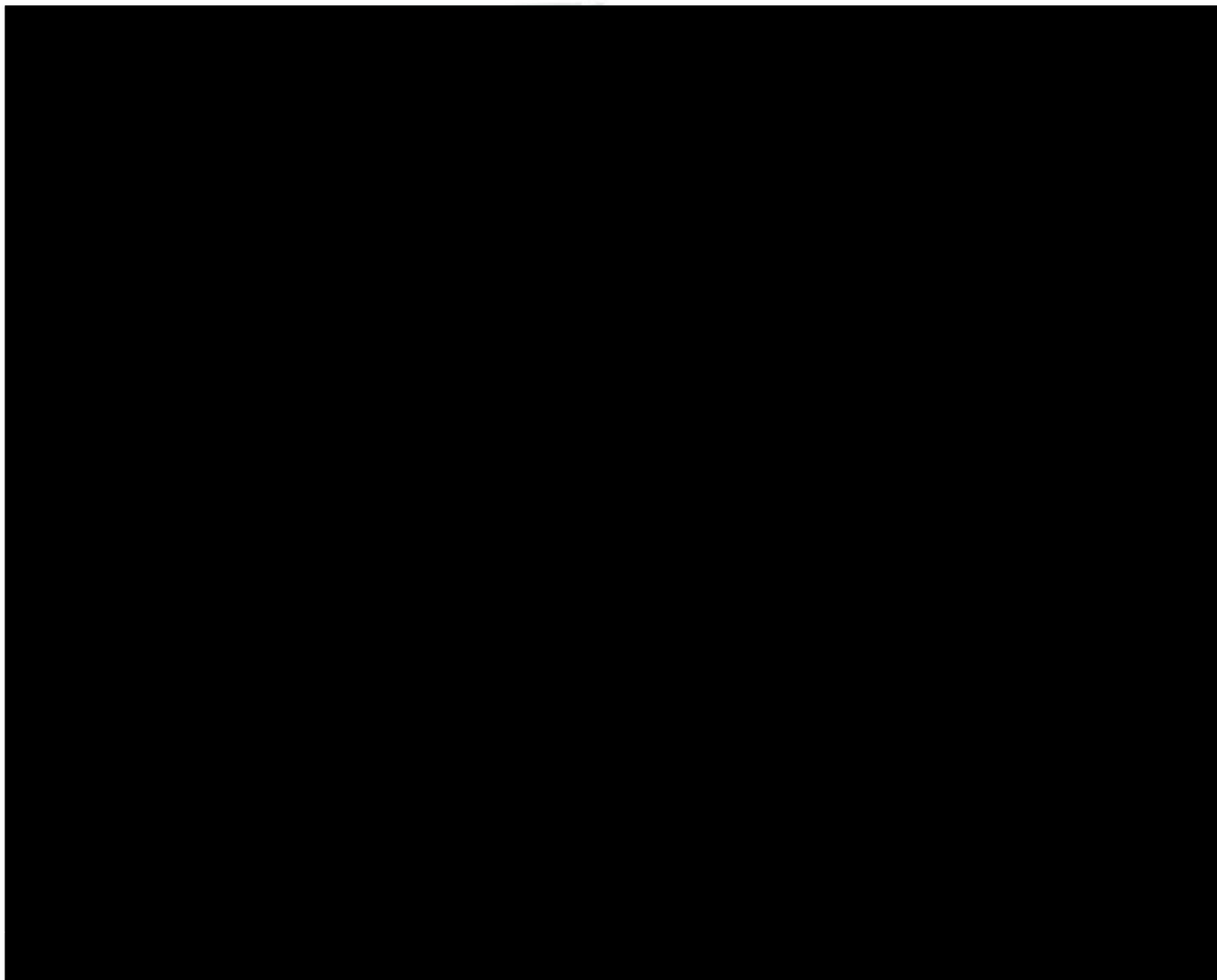
Focusing on photographs of the leaders of the country in the socialist era and the writer Lu Xun, Zhang Dali compares original negatives with published photographs.

The doctored images not only help reconstruct historical events and images of state heroes, but also lay a foundation for comprehending the world surrounding us."

Wu 2016



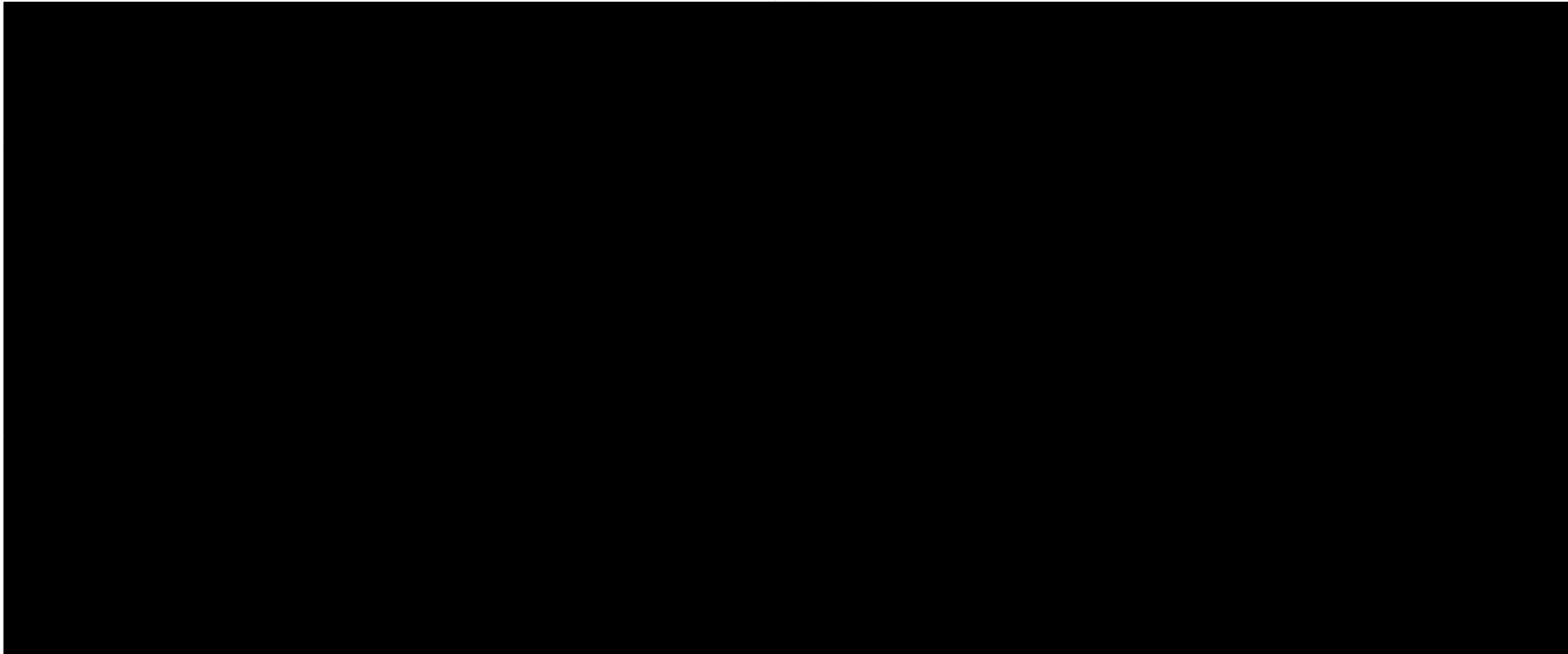
Lynn Valley 7



Zhang, D. (2012) *A Second History*. Vancouver, Canada: Bywater Editions.



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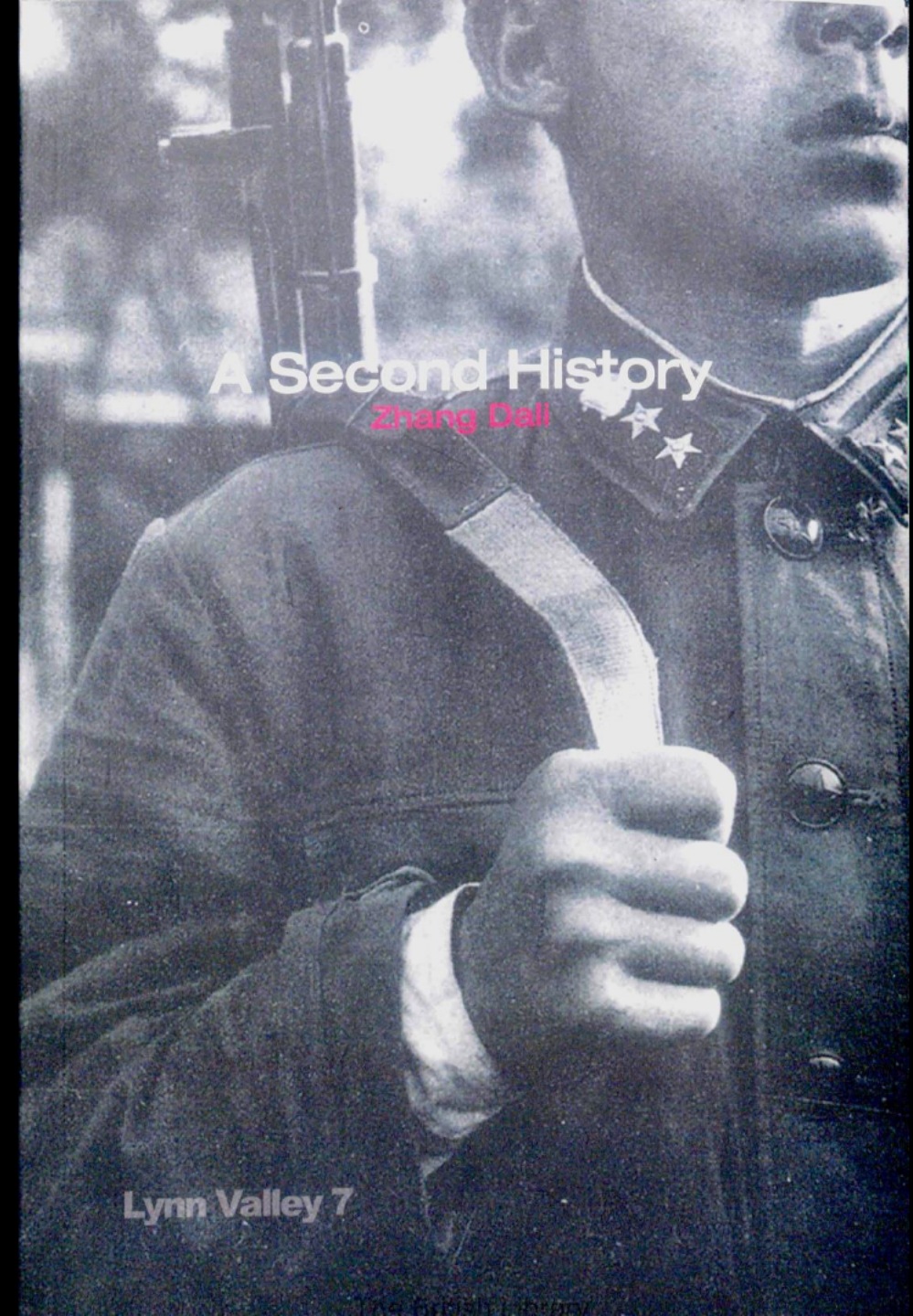
Zhang, D. (2012) *A Second History*. Vancouver, Canada: Bywater Editions.

Visual Cultures – Zhang Dali's *Second History*

The artist Zhang Dali's project is an investigative work looking at the provenance of well-circulated photographs in China's history over the past century.

... “ we begin to realize that the distortion of photographs does not always serve political propaganda. In fact, it is accepted and employed by society at large, since everyone is attracted by ideal sublimated' images of themselves. ... As for recent digital images, they are even more prone to elaborate editing techniques, from beautifying people's faces to elaborating background scenery. The distortion of Photographs in political culture thus has an enormous cultural and psychological basis.”

Wu, Hung. (2016) *Zooming in ...*



Lynn Valley 7

Negotiating AI in China

As these examples show, long before the advent of AI, the reception of images in their vernacular form – visual practices and cultures in China - did not adhere to this distinction.

I would suggest, in China, past visual cultures of sublimation – the refinement and enhancement of the photographic image - to an idealised form - as tokens of memory and affect – is normative, industrial, and desired by consumers of images.

My hope is for a nuanced discourse around the reception of AI generative imagery – the use and reception of this technology is NOT uniform across the globe.

谢谢

THANKS

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Thanks also to MA Xueke for HU Liren interview



Xiamen University
The University for the Creative Arts (UK)