Visuality in China in a time of AI.

Stephen Connolly, Deakin University, Melbourne, 25.11.24

This talk is an exploration of the environment of reception of photo-realistic images in modern China. It is a brief impressionistic survey of selected practices of vernacular and media photography with the aim of contesting framings of AI visuality as always 'fake' or 'inauthentic' as evident in the West. A distinction between the 'authentic' and the 'inauthentic,' as embedded in practices of photography, is thus provincial, rather than shared globally. To ground the discussion in practice, I will start with a project underway as a Digital Media academic at a partnership institution within XMU, Xiamen University, Fujian, that initiated this enquiry. My concluding remarks are tentative and open.

In the West, one of the foci of discussions of media and academic attention to the generative capacities of AI imagery is a concern with the distinction between the 'indexical,' a property of images acquired by cameras, as in opposition to the 'deepfake' images generated by experimental Generative Adversarial Networks (GANS), or AI. (Paris and Donovan 2019) Bratton argues in his Afterward to a recent essay collection this distinction is mapped onto real/illusory divide in western thought, yet the term for AI in China, *rengong zhineng* (人工智能), is most faithfully translated as *human-made intelligence*, a nuance collapsing this distinction. (Bratton 2025)

In the West, evidential or photo-realistic images are given the status of representing the world around us. Let us first attend to two key issues pertaining to the social institutions and valuations that substantiate this claim. As Paris and Donovan point out, 'decisions over what counts as "evidence" have historically been a crucial tool in defending the privilege of the already powerful,' and in relation to AI in relation to 'deepfake' images,

> ...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

Both issues arose as points of contestation in a project commission from the Museum of Anthropology in our institution, the University of Xiamen. The brief was to create a digital to re-represent the forced relocation of the university in 1937 to the town of Changting in the Fujianese interior, predating an invasion of the city by Japanese forces by some months. AI visualization is to be deployed to produce a short media artefact.

The production method was simple – contemporary views of the route taken to move the instituion were shot, ingested as training media into AI, and prompted to people the landscapes, to visually unfold a story of transporting the library across mountainous terrain. There are deliberate anachronisms in this approach – the landscapes of today stand in for the past, as well as instances of the mixing of metaphor and exaggeration for effect. The AI prompts appear as scrolling text, normatively stylized as video material is in the PRC online ecosystem.

That the representation uses 'fake' and 'inauthentic' visual material in its re-counting of an historical event in the University's story has been subject to protracted discussions with the museum. On the one hand, for the museum, a historical narrative could only be told in the most conventional of visual forms – a discursive documentary with archive images. On the other hand, in their view, their audience would not understand the visual treatment of the narrative that was proposed.

The first position pertains directly to Paris and Donovan's first observation. Visual artefacts must be validated by expertise as evidential and presented normatively in an 'objective' "factual' audio-visual form. The second position, I would contend, stems from a lack of consideration of the visual practices shaping the conditions of reception of the photo-realistic image in China. Instead, I maintain, as demonstrated by vernacular visual practice, audiences bring sophistication and intuitive knowledge to their understanding of photo-realistic images.

As documented by scholars of photography in China (WU 2016), since the dawn of medium the photographic image has been augmented by colour re-touching. As collected by ZHANG Shaowen in these examples of vernacular portraits of the 1950s to the 1970s, this practice continued in the socialist period. Zhang interprets the enhancements of these images as a strategy of negotiation with the normative, officially mandated postures of the vernacular portrait. The chromatic additions to the images are expressive of a desire for a record of individual memories within the strictures of formalized image making. ZHANG suggests this opens out an important issue regarding the reception of these images –

> … 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 …
>
> ZHANG Shaowen 2023

Let us now look at a second vernacular practice of the enhancement of the visual image – the painter in charcoal of the ancestor portrait. Commissioned to adorn family shrines, the ancestor portrait has a long history in China. In the 20th century, this genre of devotional work was influenced by photography, pushing work into the realms of photo-realism, comparable to contemporary painters such as Chuck Close. (Stuart and Rawski, 2001). A contemporary practitioner of ancestor painting in charcoal, a vernacular and affordable medium, is HU Liren, who only recently closed his shop – the Xiangru Art Studio - in Quanzhou in Fujian. His meticulous, photo-realistic portraits of the deceased are still commissioned by relatives. In the words of a report on Weixin/WeChat, 'Without careful scrutiny, one might struggle to distinguish photograph from charcoal portrait.'[1] HU Liren work is to subtly transform photographs, through changes that enhance the portrait for its commemorative purpose. In his own description of his practice –

> 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

HU is not required to evidence his artistic signature in the portraits, instead they are simulacra of photographs which are enhanced. Little value is given to a notion of indexicality in the photo-realistic portrait. On the other hand, the *social contract* of the artefact – the notion that the image is consequential to a set of tacit agreements between subject, photographer and audience – is prized.

Rather than a record of a certain moment, the image is enhanced to illicit veneration – an *affect* required by the familial status of the subject. Stuart and Rawski deny affectual responses are implicated in the reception of ancestor images, yet they quote the desire of ancestral painters is to elicit a response of instant recognition –

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[1] 摄影大视界 / Photography's Grand Vision (2018) *一笔一划绘人生 高超画技无传人 - l Stroke by stroke, a life is painted Unrivalled skill, yet no successor*. At:
https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/OlY0CbgjFxoAeU10yPmIrg

> ... a painter of portraits {xiezhen chuanshen} who ... wishes one thing only: to paint a portrait which is totally like, so that when the son sees it, he says, "This is really my father."

<div align="right">Jonathan Chaves, quoted in Stuart and Rawski, 2001 pp82</div>

For some commissions, HU has no photographs to work from. HU will construct a portrait from a conversation with the family, gathering details of the ancestor's appearance and their status and occupation. In an age of AI, we can reframe Hu's generation of a visual artefact as informed by language prompts for facial appearance and online visual research for clothing and evidence of status. HU lamented in our interview with him that customers now use AI to prompt the images he used to paint, and cites generative AI for the demise of his business and craft. His was the last charcoal painting studio in the city.

Let us finally look at images in media discourse of the second half of the last century in China – indirectly by way the work of artist ZHANG Dali. His *Second History* (2003 – 2006) is a collection of 130 well known photographs of significant cultural and political figures. Researching the archive of publications, he has located the visual sources and components of manipulated photographic images that appeared in the news media in modern China. We need to remember that these journalistic images date to a time prior to digital media, ZHANG's collection ends in the mid-seventies. In his words –

> This is a work in the form of a pure archive. Its existence relies on the physical materials. I have found these materials in heaps of old papers. They were already there, and they are not going to change because of my subjective feelings.

<div align="right">ZHANG Dali, quoted in WU 2016</div>

What I would like to highlight here is the normativity of these kinds of images in mainland China. In the words of photo re-toucher CHEN Shilin quoted by WU – "20 million copies were made and distributed to 40 countries," – an enormous feat of analogue image production methods. As described by WU –

> Doctored subjects in his archive include old photos and leaders' portraits, as well as news photos and snapshots of ordinary people. 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 is contending images have an indisputable place an understanding of the world and we must attend to the cultural contexts of reception. To posit a provisional conclusion, within the visual practices of photo-realism in mainland China, the indexical properties of the photograph are not paramount. The distinction between the indexical 'real' and the 'inauthentic' - in vernacular images, the documentation of family ancestry, and indeed in journalism – does not figure in the reception of these images. These visual cultures have significant histories and inform the present.

In China, visual cultures of sublimation – the refinement and enhancement of the photographic image - to an ideal form as tokens of memory and affect – are normal, industrially produced, and desired of images. The visual culture of *socialist realism*, as orientated to reception - the inculcation of an ideal audiences - is a wider topic for further and deeper research work. For the meantime, a hope expressed here is for a more nuanced discourse that recognises local, specific, and contextual framings of the reception of AI generative images.

Thank you.

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