



All photos in these pages are taken from Ren Hang personal website and social media.



Ren Hang

Bodies Without Redemption

Chen Shuxia

On 24 February 2017, photographer Ren Hang leapt to his death from a twenty-eight-floor building in Beijing. He had not yet turned thirty, but his work had already attracted considerable international attention. This essay retraces the path of Ren's life, contextualising it within the rapidly developing field of Chinese photography. Beginning with the emergence of 'private photography' in China in the early 2000s, the article describes how a cultural industry made up of independent-publishing and photo fairs has blossomed in contemporary China.

Mostly naked, friends and models of Ren Hang appear on a rooftop with skyscrapers as the backdrop, in a forest of tall trees, in a field invaded by wild grass, in a pond with budding lotuses, on a lonely rock hit by waves, or in a bathtub amongst swimming goldfish. Their naked bodies and limbs are neatly arranged as if they did not own them—an effect compounded by the deadpan expression on their young, pale faces. Labelled as 'eroticism', Ren's photography could be considered sexual, since the sexual organs of these young men and women are either subtly hidden by odd props or directly confront viewers, but Ren saw it differently. In a 2012 interview, he said: 'I don't need to try to make it classy by calling it erotica. I don't think there's anything wrong with low class' (Bernhardsson 2012).

Ren capitalised on a 'low class' approach in his early photography. Dressed in cheap bras, fish net stockings, dyed hair, and bloody red lips, his female prototypes could have just as easily been found in Yang Yong's

early works on Shenzhen prostitutes, such as his series ‘Fancy in Tunnel’ (2001–2003) (Yang 2014). However, compared to Yang’s seriousness in questioning the lost identity of these female migrants when facing rapid urbanisation in south China, Ren’s ‘low class’ seemed indifferent.

Abandoning all clothes and dyed hair, Ren’s natural bodies spoke for themselves. ‘We were born nude... I just photograph things in their most natural condition,’ Ren explained (Bernhardsson 2012). He said that he took up photography in 2007, out of boredom, when he was studying advertising at a university in Beijing. With a Minolta point-and-shoot 35mm film camera, Ren photographed everything around him. Dorm-mates walking around undressed in the heat of Beijing’s summer became one of his early subjects.

The Emergence of ‘Private Photography’ in China

The trend of casually photographing the everyday life of friends started with the emergence of the so-called ‘private photography’ (*sisheyi*) movement in China at the turn of the millennium. Influenced by pioneers of ‘private photography’ in the United States and Japan—such as Nan Goldin and Nobuyoshi Araki—young Chinese photographers, led by Lin Zhipeng (also known as No. 223) in Guangzhou, embraced the unique tone of film at the exact moment when the world was celebrating digital technology. They decided to capture the spontaneity of fleeting moments all around them, which they used to express their indifference to the rest of the world.

Ren picked up on the trend of ‘private photography’ a few years later. Like Lin, he declined the responsibility of social concern, but at the same time he also

rejected both Yang and Lin’s technique of casual composition of a photo. Ren’s snapshots were carefully choreographed and framed. Mostly positioned in the middle of the image, the bodies in his photographs were always shown in uncanny twists and bends. By displaying the meaningless non-functioning bodies as props for a shot, Ren seemed to give them an alternative life. These naked young men and women looked as if they were playing hide-and-seek by climbing on trees. Pinching the skin of a neck or penis seemed childishly funny. Yet the flash from the point-and-shoot camera flattened these young faces and cast a layer of stark pallor on them. Influenced by the Japanese poet, film director, and photographer Shūji Terayama, Ren created slightly strange and ghostly atmospheres (British Journal of Photography 2017). The fact that he suffered from depression, which led him to have suicidal thoughts (Ren 2017), might also explain the absurdity and the tint of death that seeped from his images.

However, the absurd tone of his images is just right. The slender nude bodies, the young and fair faces, the out-of-context yet beautiful props form a fantasy that induces voyeuristic desire. The red lips and nails betray the ‘naturalness’ that Ren claimed, and hint at a formula common in fashion photography, reflecting his advertising background. If taking photographs saved him from the boredom of studying advertising, advertising came back to him in his final years. Fashion brands such as Maison Kitsuné and Gucci, as well as fashion magazines such as Purple and Libertain Dune, commissioned Ren to photograph their new collections. His stark flashed images perfectly blended ‘private photography’ with more staged fashion photography, giving it a brand new arty look.



Photo Books and Independent Publishing

The nudity in Ren's photos did cause some controversy. His website and exhibitions were shut down; once he was arrested while shooting outdoors. It sounds like a precarious existence, but it wasn't. In China, this is a well-trodden path. He was no rebel willing to test the bottom line of the government or the extent of acceptance of a conservative society. Indeed, at the margins of contemporary China's controlled and moralised society, there remain many grey areas where legality is not enforced. While the police are intent to catch and suppress 'dissidents' aiming to mobilise disaffected populations, Ren was not one of them. He was just a self-made photographer. He publicised his photos on his website and social media accounts. He also self-

published photo books. From 2011 until his death, he produced sixteen books, some of them with a print run of up to five hundred copies. People could buy them in art bookstores and online.

There are risks involved in this kind of self-publishing in China. All books are supposed to have a formal publisher who gets an ISSN number and goes through the censorship process. Due to the fact that the censors would have probably characterised Ren's photos as obscene, most official publishers in China would have never accepted his books. They belong to an alternative world that is teeming with life and creativity, and is often enmeshed with the new economy in ways that do not make it entirely incompatible with legality.

The cultural industry occupies a prominent position within this new economy. Listed for the first time as one of the main pillar industries by the State Council in 2009, the



Ministry of Finance earmarked 4.42 billion yuan of special funds for its development in 2016 (Ministry of Culture 2016). This has benefited first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. For example, Shenzhen has become an important base for China's cultural exports, with the value of its cultural and creative industry in 2016 estimated at 194.97 billion yuan and an annual growth rate of 11 percent (Lin 2017). The Shenzhen municipal government is also the main supporter of alternative art festivals, such as the Fringe Festival and Here is Zine, Here is Shenzhen.

Zines, short for 'magazine' or 'fanzine', are a small-run self-published medium, motivated by the need for self-expression rather than profit. Today's zines all around the world have put on a new professional and fashionable look, and have gradually attracted numerous young fans even in China. Just as Su Fei and Guan Wei, owners

of the first Chinese zine store BananaFish (<http://a-perfect-book-for-bananafish.com>), explained: '[What we do] expresses a normal state and expectation of young people in China today... The idea of independent publishing's "speaking out for oneself" touches us.'

The photographs, poems, and diaries about his depression that Ren Hang published on his website perfectly espouse the unique spirit of zines. The fact that they come out in limited editions also gives zines some aura of hipness. 'Their freewill, extraordinariness, the feeling of sensibly fashionable exude some charm,' said Eriko Obayashi (2017), owner of POP Tame, a zine bookstore and art gallery in Tokyo. In recent years, self-publishing photo-books has become part of this zine frenzy in China. In a time when every urban youth has a phone and is obsessed with sharing pictures of his or her life online, photography is possibly the

most accessible and appropriate medium for zines. Photo-books now can be found online, in book stores, and especially in exhibitions, photo festivals, and photo fairs.

From Shenzhen to the World

Ren Hang caught the wave of this rising hipness. While traditional publishing venues shut their doors, independent publishers at home and abroad welcomed his new brand of talent. Self-publishing enabled him to have a specific public, more control over the printing process, and complete freedom in the selection of content. Beginning in Shenzhen, this trend of independent publishing has gradually spread to the rest of China. It seems ironic that the not-so-legal self-publishing is a growing part of the new economy that is being promoted by the Chinese authorities. However, in today's

China there exists more flexibility and freedom to meet new consumer demands in the cultural industry. Most importantly, by promoting relatively niche industries, as the Shenzhen government is doing, the Chinese authorities are able to project an open and inclusive image on the international stage, thus promoting Chinese soft power across the world.

If Shenzhen leads the way with fringe festivals and zine fairs in China, Shanghai is on the frontline of photography. Besides the establishment of the Shanghai Centre of Photography in 2015, Shanghai held its third Photofairs Shanghai in September 2016, welcoming twenty-seven thousand visitors. More and more Chinese collectors are turning to photography due to the accessible price of works in limited-edition. 'The market in China has greatly matured,' said Alexander Montague-Sparey (2016), the Artistic Director of Photofairs Shanghai, 'and this has enabled us to present exciting,



emerging artists from China and across the Asia-Pacific region.' Ren Hang was exactly this type of exciting new artist. Although there is no report of his photos being sold at the fair in Shanghai, his works are highly prized among young photographers in China. Having been shown in more than twenty solo and seventy group exhibitions around the world, Ren's art moved from gallery walls to museum walls—his two latest solos 'Naked/Nude' and 'HUMAN LOVE' were launched earlier this year at the FOAM Museum in Amsterdam and Fotografiska Museum in Stockholm, two of the most important photo museums in Europe.

More and more young talents like Ren Hang have emerged in the last decade in China. A lot of these emerging photographers were educated in America or Europe, and are accustomed to a jetsetter lifestyle, flying between international cities for their life and work. Meanwhile, thanks to the



growing domestic interest in photography, international photography festivals are mushrooming across China—such as the Pingyao International Photography Festival, the Lianzhou International Photo Festival, the China Lishui International Festival, Photo Beijing, the Caochangdi PhotoSpring, the Jimei x Arles International Photo Festival, etc.—each one of them attracting thousands of photo enthusiasts from home and abroad.

Ren Hang's works have attracted more attention overseas than in his home country. In February this year, Taschen published Ren Hang's first and only international collection, which covers the work of his entire career (Hanson 2017). 'The images are fresh, but also empty and superficial. They contain a deep sadness within,' commented Ai Weiwei (Genova 2017). Producing these superficial yet beautiful images with objectified young bodies might have slightly alleviated Ren's deep internal sadness. In various interviews, he remarked about the pleasure he found while taking photographs, saying that it gave him a strong sense of existence (Mocamomo 2012). Ren actively fought his depression, but his condition made him full of despair. In one of his final posts on Weibo on 27 January 2017—on the eve of the Chinese New Year—he said: 'Every year my wish is always the same: to die earlier.' On 24 February 2017, Ren leapt off a twenty-eight-floor building in Beijing, leaving behind his photos, his depression, a roaring fame, and the limelight of China's buzzing creative industry. He had not yet turned thirty.

This text is taken from *Gilded Age: A Year of Chinese Labour, Civil Society, and Rights, Made in China Yearbook 2017*, edited by Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, published 2018 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/MIC.04.2018.37