Urban Demolition and the Aesthetics of Recent Ruins

in Experimental Photography from China

Xavier Ortells-Nicolau

Directors de tesi: Dr. Carles Prado-Fonts i Dr. Joaquín Beltrán Antolín

Doctorat en Traducció i Estudis Interculturals
Departament de Traducció, Interpretació i d'Estudis de l'Àsia Oriental
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工地不知道从哪天起，我们居住的城市
变成了一片名副其实的大工地
这变形记的场京仿佛一场
反复上演的噩梦，时时光顾失眠着
走到睡乡之前的一刻
就好像门面上悬着一快褪色的招牌
"欢迎光临"，太熟识了
以到于她也真的适应了这种的生活
比起那些在工地中忙碌的人群
她就像一只蜂后，在一间屋子里
孵化不知道是什么的后代
哦，写作，生育，繁衍，结果，死去
但是工地还在运转着，这浩大的工程
简直没有停止的一天，令人绝望
她不得不设想，这能是新一轮
通天塔建造工程：设计师躲在
安全的地下室里，就像卡夫卡的鼹鼠，
或锡安城的心脏，谁在乎呢？
多少人满怀信心，一致于信心成了目标
工程质量，完成日期倒成了次要的
我们这个时代，也许只有偶然性突发性
能够结束一切，不会是"哗"的一声。

周瓒

No sé desde cuándo, la ciudad donde vivimos
se convirtió en un enorme sitio de obras, digno de ese
nombre,
este paisaje metamorfoseado se asemeja a una
pesadilla presentada una y otra vez, visitando a menudo
el insomnio
de un momento antes de llegar hasta el país del sueño,
como el descolorido letrero que cuelga en la fachada de
una tienda,
"honrados por su preferencia", demasiado familiar,
de modo que para ella también resulta cómodo este modo
de vida,
en contraste con la multitud ajetreada que se afana en la
obra,
ella parece una abeja reina, en su cuarto propio,
incubando quién sabe qué descendencia.
Ah, escribir, procrear, multiplicarse, dar fruto, morir,
pero el sitio de obras sigue operando, este vasto proyecto
parece casi no tener fecha de entrega, desesperante,
ella debe imaginar, esto es un nuevo proyecto,
construir una torre de Babel: los ingenieros escondidos
en el sótano de seguridad, como el topo de Kafka
o el corazón de Sión, a quién le importa
cuánta gente se llenó de confianza, de modo que esa
confianza
se volvió el fin, la calidad y la fecha de entrega, cosas de
importancia secundaria.
En nuestro tiempo, tal vez sólo lo accidental y repentino
Pueden acabar con todo, no será un ruido de "bang".

Zhou Zan
(traducción de Fernándo Pérez y Sun Yi)

Acknowledgements

INDEX

Introduction

"No matter where one turns in the People's Republic, one beholds a sight—and site—of rapid change" (2011: 1). Visual anthropologist J.P. Sniadecki thus emphasizes the visibility of a phenomenon that affects China since the early 1990s. Demolition, a side-effect of urban development, has come to conform, to a great extent, the landscape of Chinese cities, epitomizing many of the characteristics of China's economic and political development, as well as many of the challenges posed by the reforms.

For its part, Chinese photography, a major actor in the avant-garde and experimental art practices of the last decades, consolidates as a modern and vibrant art field, firmly grounded in the languages, venues—and growingly, in the markets—of international contemporary art. As this dissertation is being finished, the first edition of an art fair devoted to photography has taken place in China (Photo Shanghai), and different editorial and academic initiatives, such as Marine Cabos' web *Photography of China,* the monographs of contemporary photographers published by Thircuir Books, and the journal *TransAsia Photographic Review*, among other initiatives, are contributing to situate contemporary photography from China as an international referent.

In dealing with the engagement of experimental photography from China with the demolition site, this work focuses on the aesthetic strategies of a group of photographers who have challenged conventional artistic methods and languages. The particular characteristics of demolition sites have turned them into testing sites for new conceptual approaches and experiments with mix media. In turn, the work of these artists has elevated the wasteful materiality of rubble into emblematic ruins, encapsulating far-reaching and complex social implications. For that reason, the emphasis of this dissertation is placed in the aesthetic and artistic strategies articulated in the work of experimental photographers, rather than in the depiction of demolition the photographs provide. Such focus in the artistic over documentary aspects of the images is intended, in part, to respond to some ingrained tendencies in the international evaluation of artworks coming from the People's Republic of China,

in which documentary value is often highlighted at the expense of aesthetic or artistic value. One example of such interpretation affecting photography is found in the catalogue of a collective exhibition that presented, for the first time in Spain, a sample of contemporary experimental photography from China. The curators write:

> *ZHU YI! Chinese Contemporary Photography aims to present life* in the People's Republic of China. It is an exhibition that goes on a tour of the Middle Empire, as it is today, illustrated by a collection of photographs that reveal the complex transition from the rigid Communism built by Mao Zedong to liberal socialism as seen from the viewpoint of artists...(My emphasis; Zhu and Iturrioz 2007: 22)

While photographs by Wang Qingsong 王庆松, Cang Xin 苍鑫, or Hong Lei 洪磊, to cite some of the over thirty photographers included in the exhibition, are indeed *of* contemporary China and "present life" in the People's Republic, the emphasis on the photographs' documentary role has the effect of reducing their artistic value. It seems difficult to image a similar valuation, focusing on their role as documents of their local reality, of works of Jeff Wall or Andreas Gursky, to cite two contemporary experimental photographers from Canada and Germany, respectively. One of the many and complex reasons for this different treatment, as critic Hou Hanru 侯瀚如 has noted, is that Western responses to Chinese artworks participate of "the myth that the artists as well as the people of China are still the exotic Other in both the cultural and the ideological senses" (Hou 2002: 57). In this sense, this dissertation tries to balance the implications of the adjective 'Chinese' as applied to photographic works from China, with an assessment of the aesthetic value of the photographers' artworks.

The focus on the artists' strategies is also of particular importance in relation with the aesthetics of ruins, with which the academic and critical response has repeatedly connected contemporary Chinese works on urban demolition. The photographic projects that conform the corpus are concurrent with an international rekindling of the *Ruinenlust,* or fascination with ruins, which has periodically attracted and influenced the visual arts and cultures of Euro-America, a recent manifestation of

which, for instance, has been an exhibition or ruin-related artworks at London's Tate Britain, entitled "Ruin Lust". Throughout history, ruins, encompassing a load of historical, aesthetical, and cultural implications, have articulated knowledge, traditions, and ultimately, realities (amounting, with Edward Said, to a "discourse" in the Foucauldian sense), naturalizing the response to ruins. Flaubert, being ironical but also perceptive, he noted in his *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* (1911) that ruins "induce reverie; make a landscape poetic" (Flaubert 1968: 77). Today, the recurrence of images of abandoned, derelict and decayed architecture, reaching what has aptly been termed as *ruin porn,* glamorizes devastation and wreckage, and offers a postmodern version of the aesthetics of sublime.

This dissertation addresses discourses about, and responses to ruins from the understanding that, rather than an immediate aesthetic response to fallen and decayed architecture, a "ruin" is the product of discursive, conceptual, and visual intervention and framing. For this reason, it is useful to unpack the ruin's multiple meanings and connotations before putting the notion to use. Even more, ruins are context-sensitive, and it is necessary to account for their framework of production and reception before to uncritically collapse images of demolition (in this case, from China) into the visual regime of ruins.

Research for this dissertation can be traced back to a graduate seminar on Contemporary Chinese Documentary Film convened by Weihong Bao at Columbia University in 2008, which discussed documentary films that focus on the ruinous effects of modernization and urban development, such as Wang Bing's 王兵 *West of the Tracks* (*Tie xi qu*, 2003), Shu Haolun's 舒浩仑 *Nostalgia* (*Xiangchou*, 2006) and Ou Ning's 欧宁 *Meishi Street* (*Meishi Jie*, 2006). In my course paper I started reviewing literature on the emergence of ruins in contemporary Chinese visual culture, and ruin theory in general. I expanded this initial research for my MA thesis, *Dropping the Ruins: Discourse, Ideology and the A(n)esthetization of Remnants in China* (Ortells 2010), which focused on contemporary art in China and the ideological and discursive

implications of the emergence of the ruin imaginary in the context of urban development.

At that early stage, some of the questions that would lead to this dissertation had already arisen. To what extent could these images of urban demolition be called 'ruins'? Were there not important differences between them and the aestheticization of remnants in Western art? Might it be that something was getting lost in translation, in using the term 'ruins' for these images from China? Given the fact that ruins had been virtually non-existent in the long history of Chinese art, and that they arrived to China with the Western presence, terming these images as 'ruins', would not amount to some sort of epistemological violence, a phenomenon abundantly noted in the context of cultural contact—even clash—between China and the "West"? In order to address these questions, cultural difference became a critical variable, and I began to examine different representational traditions and ideological biases. The English landscape garden movement of the 18th century, in which Chinese art—or an ad hoc, digested and frequently imaginary version of it—was put to work to articulate new ideas in aesthetics and design, served the ground for an examination of processes of transcultural appropriation in the context of emerging imperialism. Moreover, a tentative comparative perspective on photography of Chinese demolition by Chinese and foreign photographers seemed also to reveal important differences relative to differences in artistic traditions and personal distance. However, after a continued engagement with ruin theory, the key variable appeared to be not so much cultural difference as the ruin itself. Ruins are embedded in highly fluid and multifaceted discursive fields, and are a malleable, changing, and adaptable notion, also in European art: the meaning of ruins, contrary to their material base, is not carved in stone. Rather than one thing called a ruin, what we confront are multiple possibilities to negotiate and appropriate architectural remnants for different purposes and agendas. Visualizations of demolition arriving from China into a transnational arena of exhibitions, biennales, monographs, etc., are not an exogenous rarity, but an actor in the current reconfiguration of the meaning of ruins.

To pursue these and other research interests, I enrolled in the PhD program of the Department of Translation, Interpreting and East Asian Studies of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB). A FI-DGR 2012 predoctoral grant (AGAUR, Generalitat de Catalunya) has made it possible to devote undivided time and energies to research. The InterAsia Research Group and the East Asian Studies and Research Center (CERAO), both at the UAB, have supported my assistance to international conferences, where I have been able to present parts of this research in extremely rewarding thematic panels, such as "Ruins, Heritage and Monumentality in China" (ICAS 8, June 2013, Macao) and "Shooting, Building, Dwelling: Urban Space and Contemporary Visual Culture in China" (AAS Annual Conference, March 2014, Philadelphia). In addition, sections of this dissertation have been presented at the conferences "Cosmopolitan China", University of Manchester (16-18 May 2012); "Convergence in Divergence: Contemporary Challenges in East Asian Architectural Studies", School of Architecture, Chinese University of Hong Kong (10-12 December 2012) and the 4.º Foro Español de Investigación en Asia-Pacífico-FEIAP (Granada, 6-7 February, 2014). A research grant "Becas Iberoamérica" of Santander Universidades allowed me to spend the summer of 2013 at the Pontifícia Universidad Católica in Santiago de Chile, where I could share and discuss findings with colleagues working on related topics. Further bibliographic research has been conducted at SOAS University of London and the British Library during a research stay in Spring 2013 thanks to a BE-DGR 2013 (AGAUR, Generalitat de Catalunya) research grant, as well as the Asian Art Archive in Hong Kong (December 2013 and June 2014), and the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA) Study Center Library. I have also had an invaluable chance to discuss particular aspects of this this and receive feedback from two of the major specialists in the field of Chinese contemporary art, like Wu Hung and Francesca Dal Lago, as well as multiple colleagues, artists and curators.

Aims and scope

In the over three decades since the economic reforms started in China, urbanization has substantially changed the layout of most Chinese cities, replacing many old residential neighborhoods with new compounds of high-rises, erecting glimmering business districts, and developing new infrastructures of communication. One of the consequences of these changes has been the overbearing presence of demolition rubble in cities, which has reified "the menace to the city and its memory" (Braester 2010: 227-228) for artists and filmmakers, who have recurrently incorporated it in their works. With the continued development of urbanization in China, demolition continues to configure one of the major themes of contemporary visual culture, and most particularly, of artistic photography.

Urban renewal and real-estate development have been major engines of China's economic reforms. Since the early 1980s, when a new constitution granted ownership of the land to the State, and supplementary legislation made possible a market of land lease rights, a new legal framework made possible the development of the real estate sector. Public, semi-public and private actors rushed to a market of an enormous potential, transforming, in the process, China's economy as well as the architectural and social configuration of its cities. To pave the way for urban development, old quarters were demolished at an astonishing rate: it is estimated than only during the period of implementation of the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1996 – 2000), the country as a whole saw over 330 million m² of housing demolished (Li and Song 2009: 3).

Since the early 1990s, artists using photography have produced some of the most compelling artistic articulations of the resulting demolition. While some photographic series have been included in specialized literature on art and demolition in China, there has not been to date a monograph focusing on the specific relationship between photography, on the one hand, and demolition and ruin, on the other. Narrowing thus the scope of the study, this dissertation affords an in-depth analysis of photographic

projects that contributes to the emerging body of literature on Chinese photography, and contemporary experimental photography in particular.

More concretely, this work focuses on photographic projects framed by the category of experimental art (*shiyan yishu*), which explores different media and materials while being receptive to new influences and inspirations. Etymologically, the term *shiyan* brings together an aspiration of attaining something solid and true (*shi* 实) with an empiricist methodological imperative to undergo a test (*yan* 验).[1] In dealing with the demolition site, experimental photo-artists have challenged conventional approaches to urban reality (specially the methods and language of documentary and journalistic photography) and essayed a combined use of different media (photography, video, digital art, performance, and installation art), while producing a self-reflective commentary on the relationship of images with history, memory, and identity. In terms of aesthetics, self-definition, and institutional affiliation, experimental artists have differed from the practitioners of documentary, ethnographical, activist, or journalistic photography, who have also recurrently focused on urban development and demolition.

The corpus includes works by self-defined photographers along with those that have combined photography with other media, like video, performances or site-specific interventions. This blurring between disciplines and media, and the influence of photography in the development of contemporary art at large, echoes the avant-garde revolution in the 1960s, when, as Rene Clair pointed out, photography was perceived, for the first time, as "something much too serious to be left in the hands of

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[1] *Shiyan* establishes a dialogue with the motto of "search truth from facts" (*shishi qiu shi*), an old Maoist saying rekindled, after the Cultural Revolution, in order to break away from the over-ideologization of social practice, and to encourage a renewed emphasis on subjective experience and entrepreneurism. This new understanding of "Searching truth from facts", championed by Deng Xiaoping, was first articulated in the article "Practice is the only criterion for truth" (*Shi jian shi jian yan zhen li de weiyi biaozhun),* published in an internal magazine of the Central Party School in May 10, 1978, and in the following days, in major national newspapers like *Guangming Ribao* and *Renmin Ribao* (Li 1994: 236).

photographers". It thus was more appropriate to speak of "artists using photography" of which some "also happen to be photographers" (cited in Chevrier 1989: 113).

The selection of photographic series has tried to be as comprehensive as possible, but priority has been given to representativeness over exhaustiveness: while there might not be all, it certainly includes the most significant photographic works on demolition from China[2]. In addition, and because of the importance of the socio-economic and political context, and the direct interpellation, as urban citizens, of urban development projects in their artworks, the corpus is limited to artists from the People's Republic of China. Photographers based in Hong Kong, Taiwan, as well as ethnic Chinese photographers based in foreign countries have not been included. This choice has left out two important photographers of the demolition and decay of Chinese cities, Hong Kong photographer Stanley Wong (aka anothermountainmain), whose *Lanweilou* series reflected the phenomenon of unfinished and abandoned buildings, and Sze Tsung Leong, whose *History Images* are usually included in monographs of Chinese art and the artistic response to demolition, as well as in the pioneering exhibition of contemporary photography and video from China curated by Wu Hung and Christopher Phillips in 2004, *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China*. Self-defined as "American and British", based in New York and Los Angeles and born in Mexico, Leong obtained an MA at Harvard, and collaborated in the project *Great Leap Forward* (2002), directed by Rem Koolhaas at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. His well-reputed work participates in, and responds to, an international context with little connection with the domestic development of art in the P.R.C.

A further caveat should be made about the geographical scope of this dissertation, having in mind the frequent risk of falling into "the fallacy of homogenizing China from the standpoint of an urban locale" (Wang 2001:94), a local determination usually

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[2] Some photographers whose work on demolition has not been included in this dissertation are Maleonn 马良 (Shanghai, 1972), Zhou Jun 周军 (Nanjing, 1965), Jin Jiangbo 金江波 (Zhejiang, 1972) and Cai Hongshuo 蔡鸿硕 (Hunan, 1979).

embodied by cites like Beijing or Shanghai. As a historical and political center, demolition in Beijing probably conveyed further complexity than in other cities, in quantitative if not in qualitative in terms. The material vestiges of China's history, like buildings from different historical periods and styles, or the grid of *hutong* alleyways which offered an example of organic urban development, stood on the way—though not deterred—the development and urbanization plans. In addition, and even though important artistic hubs emerged in different cities (Guangzhou, Chengdu, Xi'an), the experience of many migrant artists testifies that the capital city, in the 1990s, "emerged as the unquestionable center for experimental art" (Wu 2002: 4), and, in the works of different artists and writers, was turned into "a space for performing identity" (Visser 2010: 6). Still, different projects in chapter 4 and, most particularly, in chapter 6 (which focuses on work of artists from the area of Chongqing and Sichuan), compensate the ascendency of Beijing, though a comprehensive valuation of photographic projects on urban demolition from China would surely benefit from further and more localized research.

The corpus is presented around different categories according to common aesthetic strategies and the temporal evolution of demolition-based photography since the early 1990s to the present. Synthetically, the chronological and thematic groups are as follow:

- *Photography and multimedia experimentation:* the inception of mass-scale urban development in the 1990s triggered the first experimental approaches to demolition. This early projects were characterized by a strong interrelation with other media, such as performance, site-specific and installation art.
- *Photography as concept and performance:* some of the most influential and enduring photographic approaches to demolition, using conceptual and staged photography, took off with the development of experimental photography in the mid-1990s, and along a decade marked by the explosion of construction works in the trail of the Beijing Olympics (2008).

- *Spectral photography*: coinciding with the construction and demolition works of the Three Gorges Dam, and the expansion of urban development to most Chinese cities during the 2000s, demolition-based performance and photography explored remnants by means of spectral presences, embodying the impregnations of the past and its traumas on derelict architecture.

- *Photography as (re)construction*: the decade of the 2000s also witnessed the international consolidation of some Chinese photo-artists (like Wang Qingsong) and the expansion of artistic experimentation with digital technologies. An exploding artistic recourse was to create virtual recreations of cities and demolition in photographic tableaux, scale models, and digital and 3-D platforms.

- *Photo-conceptualism and architecture:* also along the 2000s, a necessary category groups those photographic projects that championed in architectural photography and conceptualist strategies, such as serialization, the creation of typologies, and the experimentation with exhibiting layouts, such as grids, juxtapositions, and mosaics.

- *Newest trends in ruin photography:* the last group, presenting contributions to ruin photography from the decade of 2010s, summarizes some of the characteristics examined in the previous chapters, offers a testimony of present projects, and indicates possible future directions in ruin photography from China.

Literature review and sources

The recurrence of urban development and the accompanying demolition in contemporary Chinese visual culture has been acknowledged in specialized and academic literature. In *Cities Surround the Countryside. Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China* (2010), Robin Visser examines the urban culture of the post reform period, including its intellectual, literary, and artistic manifestations. Expanding her previous categorization of articulations of demolition as "spaces of disappearance"

(2004), Visser identifies demolition as a key element in the artistic and literary contemporary configuration of Beijing and Shanghai. By means of an analysis of novels by Liu Heng 刘恒 and Chen Ran 陈染, films by Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅 or Lou Ye 娄烨, and artworks by Zhan Wang 展望, Zhang Dali 张大力, and Wang Jinsong 王劲松, among others, Visser foregrounds the ways in which demolition has served to articulate present day fragmented and alienated subjectivities, as well as temporal and conceptual frames of reference that resist categorization. Similarly important is the work of Yomi Braester, who has focused on the engagement with demolition and ruins of contemporary film and drama. His most important monograph on the subject, *Painting the City Red. Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract* (2010), examines works that incorporate issues of urban change, development and demolition from the P.R.C. (and in one chapter, from Taiwan) since 1949 to the late 2000s. Responding to the erasure of the "spatial semiotics of memory" (Braester 2007: 162), Braester argues that a number of films create a "preservational chronotope [that] slows down the events to lived time and turns the spectator into an eyewitness who moves through the city and records the change" (2010: 226). One of most significant contributions of Braester's work is to underscore the close connection, even connivance, of filmmakers and urban planners in the visualization of the new urban reality. Some instances of drama and film, in a manner that echoes the recurrent city models proudly displayed in urban museums throughout China, contribute to visualize the "instant city": in "covering up the messy demolition, relocation of residents, and integration of sustainable preservation into redevelopment" (2010: 150), drama and films facilitate the transition from one urban reality to the next.

The most influential academic reference for this dissertation has been the research of art historian and curator Wu Hung. Since the publication of Wu's article "Ruins, Fragmentation, and the Chinese Modern/ Postmodern" (1998), the notion of ruins has become an inescapable reference to account for the artistic production of the last decades in China in relation to its contemporary milieu. Wu's use of ruins as a critical category for Chinese contemporary art has connected different aspects of

11

contemporary art practice (on occasions, with no relation with architectural remains), such as the recycling, reference, critique, or transformation of Cultural Revolution imaginary; new experimental trends exploring artistic fragmentation; and new social formations derived from consumerism and alienation. In the catalogue of the pioneering exhibition *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century,* curated by Wu at the Smart Museum of Art in Chicago in 1999*,* he used the notion of ruins as an umbrella term for a number of contemporary artworks in which fragmentation and waste was paramount, as in artists engaging with the scars of the Cultural Revolution (Cai Jin 蔡锦, Wu Shanzhuan 吳山專, Wang Jin 王瑾), with "'wasted' environments and people" (Yuan Dongping 袁冬平, Zhang Huan 張洹, Shi Chong 石冲), and with the transformation of the city (Zhan Wang 展望, Rong Rong 荣荣, or Yin Xiuzhen 尹秀珍) (Wu 1999). Wu Hung's critical and curatorial work on photographer Rong Rong has significantly contributed to situate "the master figure of ruins" as an inescapable reference in the critical and scholarly approach to contemporary art in China (2006, 2003a, 2002a).

Inspired by contemporary works on demolition and their recourse to ruins, Wu Hung has directed his attention towards the past in order to situate these contemporary images of ruination in the cultural and historical context of China. After an "exhausting but unproductive search for 'ruin pictures' and 'ruin architecture'", Wu has concluded that "in traditional China...visual images of ruins virtually did not exist," and that they arrived to China as a Western cultural export. Further, he posited "a taboo in premodern China against preserving and portraying ruins: although abandoned cities or fallen palaces were lamented in words, their images, if painted, would imply inauspiciousness and danger" (1998: 59-60).

Wu's continued research on these two axes, ruins in contemporary art and ruins in the history of Chinese art, has resulted in *A Story of Ruins. Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (2012), the most complete and informed examination to date of ruins in China. In the book, Wu travels along Chinese ancient painting to locate

vernacular visual articulations of the "ruin sentiment", and traces, along the encounter with the West, the travels of architectural ruins into the visual repertoire of China. After a process of "internalization", ruins have erupted in moments of particular political and cultural significance of the modern and contemporary periods of Chinese history.

A growing body of literature has contributed to the academic reception of contemporary experimental photography from China, though the number of monographs on the topic is still reduced. The analysis of the development of photography of curator and critic Karen Smith, focusing on the most experimental approaches, remains particularly insightful. Smith's article "Zero to Infinity: the Nascence of Photography in Contemporary Chinese Art of the 1990s" (2002), locates the inception of experimental photography in the mid-1990s, noting its main actors and their relationships, as well as the most significant exhibitions and events. As a sought-after critic and curator, Smith's writing is attuned with the most contemporary developments in photography, as in the case of Sun Yanchu 孙彦初, who Smith included in an annual report of the most influential artistic proposals of year 2011 (*As Seen 2011-Notable Artworks by Chinese Artists*, 2012).

Photography historian and critic Gu Zheng 顾铮, a member of one of the earliest groups of contemporary photographers in the 1980s, the Shanghai-based North River League (*Beihemeng*), has become China's most reputed and influential theoretician, historian and critic of photography. His contributions to journals and exhibition catalogues are numerous, and Gu has recently produced his first monograph in English, confirming his position as a referent also at an international level. *Contemporary Chinese Photography* (2011) testifies his first-hand knowledge of the development of contemporary photography, and offers brief but insightful analysis on a wide array of the major photographers of the last decades.

Accompanying the exhibition *Between Past and Future. New Photography and Video from China*, art historian Wu Hung and Christopher Phillips (curator of New York's reputed International Center of Photography), edited a solid exhibition catalogue, to which they contributed with an historical account of the development of contemporary photography since 1976, and an analysis of the main strands and characteristics of contemporary photographic and video art in China. Finally, a recent contribution to note is *Photography in China* (2013), by historian and curator Claire Roberts. While directed to a non-specialized readership, Roberts' book achieves to produce a well-informed and compelling historical narrative of photography in China, since its origins in the 1840s, to the most up to date developments, like Sun Yanchu and the Shanghai duo Birdhead 鸟头.

In addition to these academic sources, different journals and magazines published during the development of experimental photography in China by some of its main actors have been particularly informative. In particular, the four issues of *New Photo* (*Xin Sheying*), published by Rong Rong and Liu Zheng 刘铮, and the *Black* (1994), *White* (1995), and *Grey* (1997) *Cover Books* (*Hei, Bai, Hui pi shu*) edited by a group of artists and critics that included Ai Weiwei 艾未未 and Xu Bing 徐冰, provided a reveling testimony of the interests and influences of photo-practitioners, and of the dual development of theoretical reflections and visual experimentation.

Regarding photography, the wealth of available online materials has also been an invaluable source of information and knowledge. Websites of individual artists and galleries have often been important sources of statements by the artists, media coverage, and critical reception. On occasions, direct email contact with galleries and artists have proved highly rewarding in terms of feedback, academic and visual materials, as in the case of artists Zhan Wang, Li Wei 李日韦, Jiang Pengyi 蒋鹏奕, and Zhang Kechun 张克纯, and the galleries 10 Chancery Lane and Vault17.

Academic literature on ruins and ruin theory is extremely vast and diverse, for which it might be useful to group the most influential sources for the present work under a few groups. The first is composed by art historians who have traced the aesthetic engagement with ruins along European painting and up to the most contemporary development, with forays into the intellectual and philosophical contexts (Zucker 1968, 1968; Makarius, 2005; Dillon, 2006; Roth et al. 1997). Focusing on particular moments and aspects from these linear narratives, a second group of works is characterized by their detailed analyses of the aesthetics and phenomenology of ruins. Alois Riegl's essay *The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin* (*Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen*, *seine Entstehung,* 1903) was particularly significant for its pioneering exploration of the Western response to architectural remnants in relation to art history and preservationist policies, and the proposal of a differentiation between historical value, age-value, and use-value, of lasting influence. More contemporary contributions, such as Ginsberg (2004), Hetzler (1988; 1982), Trigg (2006), and Thomas (2003), have provided nuanced analysis of the particular aesthetics of the ruin.

In between these two groups of authors, a particular typology of texts navigate the history of the fascination with ruins along its artistic, and literary sources, and include descriptions of important archaeological sites and ruins. The classic in this regard is Rose Macaulay's *Pleasure of Ruins* (1953), which has had a number of more contemporary continuators, especially Christopher Woodward's *In Ruins: A Journey through History, Art, and Literature* (2010). With a lyrical, first person narrative, both Macaulay and Woodward mapped their personal fascination with ruins and remnants, while putting it in relation with literary authorities and historical sources.

A third group is made up by the contributions of prominent intellectuals, thinkers, and artists from different disciplines that have made passing reference, or reflected on ruins in their works. An important case in point is Sigmund Freud, who saw in the archaeological excavation of ruins an analogy for the analytical process. For Freud, "the technique of excavating a buried city" offered a perfect comparison with the

"clearing away the pathogenic psychical material layer by layer" ("The Aetiology of Hysteria" [*Über die Ätiologie der Hysterie*], 1896, cited in Trigg 2006). As evinced by the texts in a volume edited by Brian Dillon (2011), including short excerpts from over forty authors (from classics like Diderot, Georg Simmel and Rose Macaulay; postmodern readings by Jean Baudrillard and J.G.Ballard; the view of contemporary artists like Robert Smithson and Tacita Dean; or the contributions of contemporary visual and cultural studies researchers such a Giuliana Bruno, Svetlana Boym, Jonathan Crary, and Celeste Olalquiaga), the intellectuals and artists of the modern period have approached ruins from multiple entry points, bestowing them with many metaphorical readings in relation with philosophy and politics, aesthetics and culture, and architecture and urbanism.

The genre of the philosophy of history had read ruins as remnants of the juggernaut trail of progress. In Hegel's dialectics of the progress of the Spirit, for example, ruins witness the greatness and eventual demise of previous stages and "worlds". Mixing nostalgic evocations with a self-sufficient affirmation of nineteenth-century European hegemony, Hegel noted: "when we see the evil, the vice, the ruin that has befallen the most flourishing kingdoms which the mind of man ever created; we can scarce avoid being filled with sorrow at this universal taint of corruption" (Hegel 1914: 21-22). Introducing a political and activist element to the reading of the ruin, Walter Benjamin's influential contribution allegorized ruins as a "wreck upon wreck" piling high at the feet of History in a dialectic process between progress, propelling mankind towards emancipation, and periodical emergences of moments of resistance (*Theses on the Philosophy of History*, IX 1969: 257-258): For Benjamin, "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin, VI Thesis 1969: 255). Ruins thus become testimonies of discontinuities, "filled" moments of the here and now that contrast with the homogenous, linear, and continuous time of official historiography (*Theses* XIV 1969: 261). Rather than musing amidst the ruins with the philosopher of history, and retreating "into the selfishness that stands on the quiet shore, and thence enjoys in safety the distant spectacle of 'wrecks confusedly

hurled'" (Hegel, op.cit), the historical materialist proposes that ruins have to be appropriated. As the editor of a recent edited volume on processes of ruination in relation to imperialism acknowledges, Benjamin's visions of ruins have contributed

"to treat them as symptom and substance of history's destructive force, to take the measure of the 'fragility' of capitalistic culture from the decaying structures left scattered across our urban and rural geographies, to attend the force of these fragments and the traces of violence left in its wake." (Stoler 2013: ix)

Benjamin has also been highly influential in the conceptualization of the ruins of modernity. In his unfinished *Arcades project* (*Passagen-werk*), composed of fragmentary notes written between 1927 and 1940, Benjamin develops a mythical understanding of early capitalism, as expressed in the Parisian arcades. Benjamin reads the commodity fetish as a fossil, a "residues of a dream world": "The development of the forces of production shattered the wish symbols of the previous century, even before the monuments representing them had collapsed" (1999: 13). In the exposé of 1935, Benjamin famously credits these new forces of production for the turning of architecture into engineering, reducing nature to its representation in photography, and compressing literature in the montage-like form of the feuilleton. The arcades, the characteristic *passages couverts* of 19th century Paris, were the liminal space where these new commodity objects linger before entering the market. With economic uncertainties, and the rapid obsolescence of the arcades, Benjamin felt that "we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled" (ibid.), a statement that echoes what artist Robert Smithson would term, in the 1960s, as "ruins in reverse": "the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built" (emphasis in the original, Smithson 1967: 49).

Finally, a fifth group of sources is that composed of the most contemporary approaches to ruin theory. Coming from a wide range of disciplines, including visual and literary studies, human and cultural geography, archaeology, anthropology, and

sociology, different scholars are sharing energies to break away with the ingrained Romanticized and highly aesthetic approach to ruins (i.e. Macaulay's) and the emphasis in the poetics of ruins. The aesthetics of the sublime are still much alive in contemporary photography, even at its most sociological, and the thrill that inspires urban explorers' trespassing into derelict, abandoned, and out-off-limits spaces, becomes in occasions a modern avatar of the sought-after transgressiveness of the Romantic intellectual, lost among the ruins of a classical temple. The focus is now turned instead on ruins as traces and symptoms of socio-economic processes and dynamics, and the most compelling and influential contemporary academic work on ruins participate in a conscious effort to move beyond visuality, engage with the epistemological operations at work in the configuration of the "ruin" object, and even recognize ruins "as places of play, promise, activism, unregulated participation, unexpected memory, and encounters with the uncanny and the sensual" (Garret 2011: 379).

As identified by two of the most significant proponents of new ruin studies, cultural geographers Tim Edensor and Caitlin DeSilvey, the current academic take on ruins develops along three conceptual axes: first, a tendency to use ruins as sites from which to examine and undermine the capitalist system and the state; second, the articulation of discourses that challenge dominant ways of relating to the past; and third, the reconsideration that ruins provoke on conventional strategies for practically and ontologically ordering space (Edensor & DeSilvey 2012: 3). In all three approaches, the relationship of ruins with the discourses that frame them is a key element of ruin epistemology, acknowledging and operating on the assumption that "[s]omehow we cannot leave ruins alone and let them simply exist in their mute materiality. We need to make them speak and militate for our theories" (Schönle 2006: 652). Under these paradigms, the materiality of ruins becomes an instance of "matter that matters for human meaning" (Hayles 2005: 3)[3], and, in so much as it

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[3] The context of Hayles' comment, in *My Mother was a Computer: digital subjects and literary texts* (2005), is her critique of the disembodiment of the digital. Hayles exposes a vision of materiality as an "emergent property created through dynamic interactions between physical characteristics and

remains highly discursive, it is open for appropriation for different political and ideological agendas.

Recently published edited volumes testify a widespread academic interest in ruins, debris, and waste (Franck & Stevens 2006; Hell & Schönle 2011; Stoler 2013; Graves-Brown et al. 2013; and Olsen & Pétursdóttir 2014). These texts provide a wide range of analyses on different typologies of space under processes of ruination, throwing light on the destabilizing potential of ruins, and the opportunities for appropriation. This dissertation aims to contribute to this emerging body of literature with a new and productive perspective, amplifying the scope, and thus de-provincializing contemporary art and visual culture from China, so that it can contribute to international academic approaches to the ruin.

Objectives and hypothesis

The main objective of this dissertation is to analyze experimental photographic projects on demolition from China to expand our understanding of representations of rubble and dereliction in contemporary Chinese visual culture, and of experimental photography in particular. To do so, the present work starts from a premise, obtained from contemporary academic approaches to ruins, that understand that a ruin is not a given, transparent, or immediate aesthetic and cultural object. Rather, a ruin is the result of discursive (textual, visual) constructs that frame rubble, debris, and architectural waste, and transforms it into a significant emblem of personal and collective memory and identity. "When we frame an object as a ruin", notes Michael Roth, "we reclaim that object *from* its fall into decay and oblivion and often *for* some kind of cultural attention and care that, in a sense, elevates its value" (emphasis in the original, 1997: 1).

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signifying strategies. Materiality thus marks a junction between physical reality and human interaction. Following Bruno Latour's call for a turn from 'matters of fact' to 'matters of concern', I like to think of materiality as the construction of matter that matters for human meaning" (Hayles 2005 : 3).

A distinction then emerges between rubble and ruins: "Rubble is material without significance; it is matter destined to be removed. By contrast, the term 'ruins' evokes traditions, visual codes, and a wealth of significations" (Puff 2010: 254). The division is highly relevant to the subject under study, as it opens the possibility to analyze the dynamics between demolition (wasteful materials) and its photographic representation. In addition, given "the ruin's necessarily *constructed* relationship to questions of history, and its importance in the creation of the present" (emphasis in the original, Thomas 2003: 181), it becomes compulsory to attend to the socio-cultural context of production and reception of the ruin.

From this premise, then, this dissertation poses the hypothesis that if the works of experimental photographers have turned rubble into ruins, they must have done so by supplementing the conventional, immediate visual record of demolition with meanings, frames of reference, and concepts. The artistic, aesthetic and conceptual elements in the different photographic works are located and examined in order to disclose whether, and how, they have articulated the ruin and its meanings.

Methodological framework

In order to offer an inclusive perspective on the kaleidoscopic nature of the phenomenon of ruins, this dissertation approaches the study of the photographic articulations of demolition by experimental artists from China from three different and complementary methodological vectors. This interdisciplinary approach is well equipped to contextualize the fluid contours and variegated agencies at play in the social, aesthetic and intellectual articulations of the phenomenon of ruins. In this sense, this dissertation participates of the academic approaches to ruins (those conforming the fifth group of ruin theory sources previously noted) that strive to overcome the visual emphasis of former approaches by embracing contributions from multiple disciplines and ground ruins in their specific social and economic conditions of emergence and reception.

The first vector is the study of the structural causes for the emergence of the phenomenon of demolition in present day China. Taking analytical tools from the social sciences, particularly from public policy and urbanism, demolition is contextualized as a key social practice in the political and economical reforms in China starting in the late 1970s. The second vector is the examination of the particular aesthetics of ruins. A perspective of cultural comparativism, focusing on the material, intellectual, and ideological context, is proposed to account for the disparate presence of ruins in the representational traditions of Europe and China, and underscore the particular articulations of transience and decay in the visual culture of China, and examine different appropriations of the imaginary of ruination, both as a discursive as well as visual trope, in the intellectual and artistic fields of China and in the context of growing worldwide circulation of ruin images.

The third methodological vector, engaging with art and visual studies, focuses on the history and characteristics of photography. The reflection on technological conditions, historical implications, and aesthetic innovations of photography aims to identify the particular connection between this medium and the imaginary of ruination. The work of photo-conceptualist artists who revolutionized the meaning and aesthetic understanding of ruins in the post-modern context offers illuminating examples of the history and evolution of the photographic treatment of ruins, as well as a crucial antecedent and influence for the experimentalism of Chinese photographers since the mid 1990s, whose works are, in turn, contextualized within the particular evolution of photographic art in China.

In addition to research on the specialized literature, conducted in some of the most complete bibliographical repositories on Chinese art, this work is the result of a personal engagement with the object under study, multiple visits to museums, temporal exhibitions, and ruin sites, conversation with specialists, artists, and curators, as well as the presentation of different sections at international conferences, all of which have been instrumental to inspire and refine the analytical approach to contemporary photographic projects on demolition and ruin from China.

Structure and organization

The dissertation is structured in two parts. Part I provides different contexts to delineate the scope of photographic projects on demolition from China: the politico-economical and social framework that caused the emergence of demolition in reform China (chapter 1); the articulations of the imaginary of ruins in a cultural and historical perspective (chapter 2); and the development of photography, both in its relation with ruins, as well as in its evolution in China (chapter 3). For its part, Part II presents and analyzes experimental photographic projects on demolition and dereliction in six chapters that organize a broad corpus of artists along a temporal line and common artistic strategies. In what follows, the main contents and objectives of each chapter are briefly characterized.

Chapter 1 explores the conditions of China's urbanization to locate the causes for the widespread and enduring presence of demolition rubble in Chinese cities. The institutional, legal and economical structure regulating urban development in reform China is presented as a key factor affecting the ubiquity, extended presence, and overt visibility of demolition in most Chinese cities. Beijing's Old and Dilapidated Housing Redevelopment program is examined to foreground mismatches between plan and implementation, diversity of competing interests, and preeminence of economical considerations in development plans. Urban landscapes of rubble and demolition are characterized in five different typologies (razed, leveled and vacant lots; ongoing demolition; derelict and abandoned architecture; the *chai* character; the *lanweilou* phenomenon) and connected with the works of the photographers examined in Part II. A final section of this chapter addresses the intellectual and activist debates about the preservation of architectural heritage in China.

Chapter 2 engages with the notion of ruins and its aesthetics in a long itinerary since the visual articulations in ancient art to contemporary intellectual and academic appropriations of its meaning and aesthetics in China. Starting from a discussion on the differences between Europe and China's ruin representation and preservation, a

second part of the chapter elaborates on the different intellectual, political, artistic, and academic articulations of the ruin imaginary in modern China, from the 19th century to contemporary times. The chapter ends with an analysis of a highly popular text on ruins by scholar and best-seller writer Yu Qiuyu 余秋雨 ("Ruins", 1992), of which an original translation is annexed at the end.

Chapter 3 begins with a historical survey of the intense relationship of photography with ruins. After examining the early photographic interest on the ruins of exotic countries, of war destruction, and of early demolition projects (like those generated by Baron Haussmann's reforms in mid-nineteenth century Paris), the chapter also examines the work of pioneering photo-conceptualist artists whose work has strongly influenced the modern imagining of ruination and dereliction in relation to entropy, waste and urbanization. The connection of post-war photo-conceptualist artists with contemporary artists from China is established by virtue of three elements: the importance of the topic of architectural ruin; the centrality of performance as an aesthetic strategy; and the way in which photo-artists self-reflexively question the photographic medium and its status as art, contributing to mobilize experimental energies in a wide range of artistic disciplines. The second section of the chapter presents the photographic context for the different projects analyzed in Part II, summarizing the main developments of photography in China since its origins in the mid-19th century and up to the experimentalist proposals since the mid-1990s, when new artistic approaches, gradually departing from documentary and ethnographic photography, introduced subjective points of view, an enhanced aesthetic awareness, and new directions for photography in relation to performance art and photo-conceptualism.

The different chapters in the Part II present the results of an in-depth analysis of photographic projects on demolition based in the artists' individual trajectory and artistic evolution, their main explicit and implicit influences, and the formal characteristics of their works. The resulting categories under which the artists' work has been grouped is not intended as a clear-cut taxonomy of what are in truth

extremely individual careers. Rather, commonalities in the artists' approach to demolition and a shared temporal scope renders a narrative of the evolution of ruin photography from China over the last decades, and highlights some of the most compelling forms of engagement with demolition in the process of transformation into ruins. In that sense, as the introduction to Part II makes explicit, the comparison with non-experimental photographers on demolition accentuate the different conceptual and aesthetic strategies by which experimental artists have appropriated and transmuted rubble and decay.

Chapter 4 analyzes the artistic experimentation around the topic of demolition of mix-media works of the decade of 1990. Early projects by Huang Yan 黃岩, Geng Jianyi 耿建翌, Zhan Wang, and Zhang Dali betray a prominence of the demolition site simultaneous to the inception of the first massive plans of urban development and renewal. In these works, rather than a topic, demolition becomes a malleable and suggestive artistic medium to put to test new artistic strategies, for which photography establishes a productive coalition with site-specific art, installation, performance, and even rubbings.

The influential work of Rong Rong is the focal point of chapter 5. Rong Rong's work foregrounds some of the major and most enduring strategies for experimental photographic articulations of demolition in relation with conceptualism and the recourse to performativity. Related projects by Jiao Jian 矫 健, Liu Jin 刘瑾 and the Gao Brothers 高氏兄弟 are also discussed in relation with the transformation of the demolition site and derelict buildings into a stage of performances and photomontages.

Expanding the reflection on the performative impulse opened in the mid-1990s by some of Rong Rong's series, chapter 6 presents works created in the 2000s in which different apparitions, blurring the borders between temporalities and identities, embody the artists' memories and traumas. Ghost-like personifications, evocative of

specters from the Chinese folk and literary traditions, as in the photographs of Chen Jiagang 陈家刚, prompt the acknowledgement of spectrality as a critical category. Moreover, the chapter introduces artworks created in different locations and about other kinds of rubble, such as the demolition works triggered by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam (Chen Qiulin 陈秋林 and Yang Yi 杨怡), urban development in the city of Chongqing (Qin Wen 秦文), or artworks engaging with the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake.

In chapter 7, the recreations of ruins and urban demolition in the work of Wang Qingsong and Jiang Pengyi exemplify the potential of staged photography, and of ruins, to condensate critical stances. The analysis of their photographic projects leads the chapter to other works created with the most up-to-date technologies of visualization, such as digital software and 3-D platforms, by multimedia artists Cao Fei 曹斐 and Zhang Xiaotao 张小涛. The virtual worlds presented in their works emphasize the fragility of processes of construction but also of ruination, which can be undone in just one click.

Chapter 8 present photographic series by Ai Weiwei, Luo Yongjin 罗永进, Wang Jinsong, and the couple Shao Yinong 邵逸农 and Mu Chen 慕辰, that focus on architecture, construction sites, vacant lots, demolition works, or indoor derelict spaces. A common feature of these works is the reliance on conceptualist strategies that affect the research design and objectives of the series, the strategies of edition and exhibition (using juxtaposition, grids, and mosaic), the relationship between the individual photograph and the totality of the project, and the discursive framing of the series within the recent history of China.

Finally, chapter 9 presents the work created in the last years by some of the most promising photographers from China: Yang Yongliang, Yao Lu 姚璐, Sun Yanchu, and Zhang Kechun. Their work testifies a continued engagement with the theme of urban

development and the aesthetics of ruinous landscapes, while offering a glimpse into new aesthetic approaches.

The conclusions summarize the different findings, with particular attention to the implications and future lines of research opened by this dissertation.

Formal aspects

All Chinese names of individuals are cited using characters in their first mention, and in pinyin romanization in the following. A complete list in both systems is annexed at the end. This final list also includes all Chinese titles of artworks, as well as concepts and phrases, which are cited in pinyin throughout the dissertation, with the exception of those instances in which the character has been considered important in itself (i.e., *chai* 拆, *xu* 墟, etc.). Citations are referred to the section Works Cited, including those from websites, blogs, and online newspapers. The bibliography cites titles of Chinese works in characters, pinyin, and the translation in English. Websites of galleries, museums, repositories, and artists, credited as sources for the images are included in the section Online sources.

Part I: Social and Aesthetic Contexts

Figure 1. Huang Rui, *Chai-Na/ China*, 2005.

Source: Le Monde (2007)

Chapter 1. Urban development in China and the emergence of ruined landscapes

Since the 1980s, urban renewal and development has become an inescapable reality in Chinese cities. Business districts, hotels, shopping malls, as well as sport venues (especially in the trail to the 2008 Beijing Olympics) and communication infrastructures, have radically transformed the layout of many urban centers. Construction works and parcels of demolition, the precondition for these new buildings, have also populated, and in occasions for long periods of time, Chinese cities. But while demolition is a common feature of any developing city around the world, its ubiquitous and enduring presence singles out the Chinese case. Before analyzing the photographic projects of Part II, then, it is useful to try and answer questions about why and how has demolition become such a momentous presence. In the same manner that urban development, in China, "has not been a passive outcome of economic growth [but] an active driving force instrumental to regional transformation" (Lin 2011: 1), this chapter explores whether there have been particular dynamics affecting demolition in China.

This chapter analyzes the process of creation of demolition within the context of urban development. A major emphasis is put in the legal and political framework of land ownership to argue that the structural dynamics of urbanization (including legal, political, and economical factors and actors) hold responsibility for the ubiquity and long-lastingness of the very particular visual regime of the demolished landscapes. The chapter first sketches the recent history of urban development in China, with special attention to the policies and legal changes brought about with the reforms. Next, an examination of Beijing's Old and Dilapidated Housing Redevelopment program exemplifies the functioning, outcomes, and social implications of urban renewal plans. The third section exposes different kinds of ruinous landscapes in relation to the dynamics that create them, and briefly notes their presence in the work of photo-artists of Part II. The chapter ends by noting some of the origins, strands, and consequences of debates on architectural heritage in China resulting from massive and widespread demolition.

1.1. Outline of the recent history and major policies affecting urbanization in China

While urbanization has occurred late in China compared with other nations,[4] China has become in the last 30 years a country with a majority of urban population, a process that will most probably continue in the next decades. The PRC surpassed the 50% barrier of urban population in 2011, and is expected to continue growing, reaching 65.4 in 2025 (United Nations 2011). The central government continues to cipher its plans for growth and value creation in urbanization, with the idea of enlarging the income of its citizens and develop domestic consumption. The focus now is moving from the development of megacities (*dushihua*), which have pushed the development of the first decades of the reforms, to the development of rural towns and small cities (*chengzhenhua*) in the context of the program Building a New Socialist Countryside (*Jianshe shehui zhuyi xin nongcun*) (Hillman & Unger 2013).

Table 1. Increase of the national percentatge of urban population over the last decade.

1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2011	2012
17.34	19.39	23.71	26.41	29.04	36.22	42.99	49.95	51.27	52.57

Source: *China Statistical Yearbook* 2005, 2013

The breakneck speed of this increment is easily revealed by any statistical source: in 22 years (1980 – 2002), the increment of urban population in China has been of around 250 million people (Hsing 2010a: 5). To better visualize the scope of urbanization, let us note that roughly the population of Indonesia (the planet's fourth most populated country) moved or was reassigned[5] from towns to cities in the last

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[4] Urban majority was achieved in the US by the beginning of the 20th century.
[5] Changes in what constitutes a city have also had a lot to do in the increase of urban population in

decades of the 20th century. To these figures it needs to be added an unregistered "floating population" of migrant workers that in official data of 2012 amounted to over 2.36 hundred millions (China Statistical Yearbook 2013), over a quarter of China's urban population (Campanella 2008: 180).[6]

Graphic 1. Stages of China's urbanization. Data from China's Statistical Yearbook 2012 and *Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the National Economic and Social Development* in 2012.
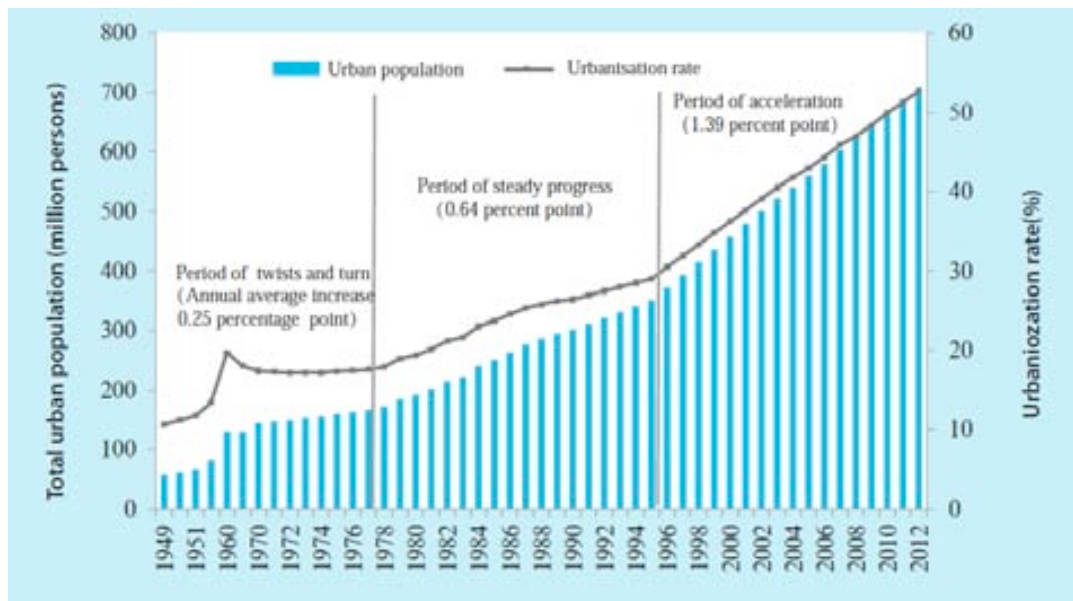
Source: UNDR (2013:16)

During the Maoist period, the official revolutionary ideology stressed the importance of rural values and implemented different campaigns[7] of massive migrations to the countryside, which, according to some estimates (Ren 2013: 24), added up to around

China. Ren Xuefei notes that while in 1978 China counted with only 193 cities, by 1988 this number had gone up to 434, and to 663 in 2000 (2013: 14)

[6] For some, the false temporariness of these migratory sojourns, which excludes migrants from any benefits and rights in the cities, deserve to call China's as a "incomplete urbanization" in that it has not sought to uproot permanently its rural population (Chan 2010:66).

[7] The 'Big Linkup' (*dachuanlian)* of the early Cultural Revolution initiated the migration of youth, which was turned into state policy in the next years under the movement "Up to the mountains, Down to the villages" (*shangshan xiaxiang yundong*).

17 million of mostly young students and white collar professionals. Behind the official rhetoric of reeducation by the peasants, these programs vacated the cities of unemployed and potentially disruptive young population, especially during the Cultural Revolution, when universities closed their doors.

For all the rural bias of the Maoist regime, and the decrease in the rate of urbanization at an annual average of 0.16 percentage points between 1966 to 1977 (UDND 2013: 18), urban population still grew and enjoyed better living conditions. The household registration system, or *hukou*, was established in 1957 to regulate flows of rural citizens to the cities which had been large in the first decade of the new Republic. During this period, urbanization was controlled and housing received little funding. As a result of all these elements, in the 1960s and 1970s urban population only grew a 2.3 per cent annually (Ren 2013: 23).

In Beijing, population grew more steadily than in other cities due to the demand of administrative personnel as the new capital, and periodical events, like the Tangshan earthquake in 1976, which generated a wave of displaced population to the city. From 1949 to 1990, the population of the city grew from 1.65 to 5.2 million (Abramson 2002:47). The shortage of housing resulting from this phenomena was solved by the division of existing courtyard unfamiliar housing into smaller housing units, what Hsing terms the "socialization of private homes" (2010b: 19), a solution that contributed to the densification of the traditional courtyard houses.

At the wake of Mao's death, the new vice-chairman Deng Xiaoping (effectively acting as the new leader) pushed a number of important reforms in the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP. In December 1978, Deng made public his reforms to achieve the "Four Modernizations" (*sige xiandaihua*) in agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. In this context, the Open Door Policy, which made possible foreign investment, and the tendency to decentralize decision-making processes and gradually create a land market, would strongly affect urban development. In this context, the shortage of housing (caused, from the

perspective of the new market-oriented policies, by its consideration as welfare in the socialist decades), was gradually addressed by an increase of rents on new public housing, and the subsidized sales of existing or newly built housing (Zhou & Logan 1996: 407).

The policies of opening up and reform (*gaige kaifang*) were implemented, starting at the end of the 1970s, in an incremental and geographically confined way. The "household-responsibility system" (*jiating lianchan chengbao zeren zhi*), was tested in the province of Anhui as a first step in the gradual transition from a planned to a market economy, and from State-Owned to Township-and-Village Enterprises (*xiangzhen qiye*). Similarly, and starting in 1982, reforms in land management and attraction of foreign investment were tested in the newly created Special Economic Zones in the coastal cities of Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou and Xiamen, before extending them to other regions and cities (fourteen in 1984, and eighty in the following years). This new strategy, by which cities would lead the path to development and growth,[8] shelved for good the Maoist rural bias.

For all the magnitude of the reforms, the socialist structure of government remained in place. In relation to the emergence of real estate sector, the most influencing factor was the fact that State retained ownership of the land. In fact, it was only in the wake of market-oriented reforms when the State, by means of the new 1982 Constitution, stipulated its ownership of all land in China. Other legal provisions, in 1988, created the conditions for a market-based expansion of urban development. Some of the legacies of the pre-reform period and dynamics of the socialist state influencing urban development have been the allocation of land to government agencies (like the Party, the Army, universities and research institutions, hospitals, or State-Owned Enterprises) and the different vertical (*tiao*) and horizontal (*kuai*) authorities, which

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[8] "Cities lead the counties" (*shi guan xian*, sometimes also rendered as *shi dai xian* or *shi lingdao xian*), has been the administrative and spatial strategy that has de facto turned China into an economy led by cities by means of converting counties to cities (*xian gai shi*) or annexating suburban counties into cities (*che xian jian qu*) (Ma 2005:486-490).

have created a situation of inter-state competition (Hsing 2010a).[9] In addition to this path-dependent characteristics, and whereas Harvey (2005) situates China's reforms in the context of global neoliberalism, Keith et al. (2014) propose that China's market-oriented changes have diverged markedly from Western neoliberal policies, displaying a particular Chinese "economic life", including a fluidity between public and private sectors, and vernacular notions of exchange and relationality derived from gift (*li wu*) rituals and connections (*guanxi*).

New regulations supplementing the new Constitution opened the door to the development of a real estate sector. In 1988, article 10, section 4 of the Constitution, which states that "No organization or individual may seize, buy, sell land or make any other unlawful transfer of land", was amended with a clause that stipulated that "the right to use land may be transferred in accordance with the provisions of the law" (Yeh 2005: 52), a provision that was regulated by the Land Administrative Law of the same year. From that moment, municipal governments could lease use rights of urban land for terms up to 70 years for residential use, and 50 for commercial use. As a result, the real estate sector in China has taken the form of a market of land uses, rather than a property market.

In the spirit of the reforms, more autonomy and independence was granted to local government. Rather than a retreat or a disarticulation of state power, decentralization

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[9] The vertical, or functional, line (*tiao)* involves different actors along the hierarchy, which in the case of land, it involves the Ministry of Land and Resources down along provincial, county and city branches. For its part, the *kuai* axis concerns different agencies at the same level, the competences of which can, on occasions, collide, such as top-level different ministries, like the Ministry of Land and Resources (*Guotu Ziyuanbu)*, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (*Zhufang he Chengxiang Jianshebu)*, and the Ministry of Culture (*Wenhuabu*) (to which the State Administration of Cultural Heritage-*Guojia wenwu ju*, belongs), or city-level Land Bureaus (*Guotu ziyuan guan*) and Cultural Relics Bureaus (*Wenwu ju*). A key factor in Chinese politics, the implementation of policy depends on a great extent to the dominance of either *tiao* or *kuai* lines of authority in a particular issue, that is, on which of the two relations is paramount (*lingdao guanxi*) (Lieberthal 2004 186-188). To further complicate the picture, residential or industrial *danweis* (units) belong to the central state bureaucracy, which allocated the land in pre-reform era. The result is that when a danwei carries out a sale of land lease rights in the hidden market, colliding on occasions with the interests of county or city authorities, they are backed by their supervising bureaucracies (Hsing 2006: 172). Finally, the Chinese Communist Party is also an active actor that affects alliances and the equilibrium of authority.

has resulted in a rescaling and rearticulation of such power, "with a different form of state intervention at lower spatial scales" (Ma 2005: 478), and urban planning and development has replaced economic planning of the socialist era as the main vehicle of state intervention in the cities (Hsing 2010a: 9).

The introduction of a decentralized fiscal responsibility systems (*caizheng baogan zhi*) resulted in a substantial decline of budget allocation from the center, from over 80 percent in 1976 to less than 10 percent in 1992 (McGee et al. 2007: 17). At the same time, local governments were given authority to claim and assert property rights over the land, and were encouraged to explore their own ways of mobilizing capital for investment. Economic performance was established as the condition for promotion of cadres, while competition was unleashed (between regions, cities, and between districts within large cities) for the attraction of foreign investment, GDP growth, and industrialization. Urbanization became paramount in that regard, as local governments could grant tax exemptions to foreign companies in the first years, or low-cost (or on occasions, no-cost) land. Urbanization also developed as a way to create the optimal conditions (transportation, infrastructures) to attract foreign investment.[10]

In the first years of the reforms, local governments obtained huge revenues from urbanization, as the central government had established an annual fixed lump-sum remittance (Lin 2011:3), but in 1994, a new taxing system was implemented by which local governments had to pay taxes proportional to income. To compensate budget shortfalls, local governments became even more active in urban-related activities, the revenues of which were off-budget. Reallocation of public land for its leasing to the commercial sector for housing development, and the expropriation of rural land in the city's vicinity, became one of the most important sources of revenue generation. Only in 2010, municipal governments of Shanghai and Beijing received over 100 billion

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[10] These strategies are encapsulated in different idioms, such as "building an attractive nest to lure a phoenix" (*zhuchao yinfeng)* and "building road networks to channel fortune" (*lutong caitong*) (Lin 2011:10).

RMB from the lease of land rights, an amount that did not figure in the budget and thus was not taxed by the central government (Ren 2013: 73).

In addition to inter-city competition, local governments have had to negotiate their authority vis-à-vis central-level agencies, like the Army and State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). In previous decades of the revolutionary period, these actors were allocated large plots of land, usually in the city center, given the industrial bias of urbanization during Maoism. In the new market of land lease rights, these parcels became premium land, turning their owners into major participants in urban development, the new "socialist land masters" (Hsing 2010a: 35-38).[11] With large parcels of land in the city centers, they have supposed an important source of competition for local governments. One way for local governments to assert their authority on land was to implement plans of urban renewal. Through the different administrative processes to demarcate areas, issue titles and cadastral registrations, etc., "municipal government attains proprietary rights over specific and clearly marked urban land parcels" (Hsing 2010a: 47-55), thus avoiding disputes with illegitimate but politically powerful land masters.

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[11] Such has been the case particularly with SOEs, which even though they have undergone a process of downsizing, closure, or conversion between 1995 and 2005, still retain a major role in the enterprises' assets (around a third of the total) (Ren 2013: 46-47). Wang Hui has analyzed the conversion of a large SOE, the Jiangsu Tongyu Textile Group, from SOE to collective enterprise (in the spirit of the initial economic reforms of the 1980s) and later back to a State-run company. The change of status and recovery of authority by the government coincided with the downsizing of the company, diminishing production and dismissing core technical staff. For Wang, a key aspect to understand this process is the 253,000 square meters of centrally located land. Though allocated land is supposed to be used for its original purpose, Wang examines regulations and antecedents that would facilitate the conversion of land use. In addition, he cites the plans of the city of Yangzhou for development and attraction of investment, which include the creation of an economic development zone in the western outskirts of the city (Wang 2008).

1.2. Urban renewal: the case of Beijing's Old and Dilapidated Housing Redevelopment program

Programs of urban renewal of old neighborhoods and housing (*jiuqu gaizao*) have been one of the most important policies for urban renewal and development. While officially addressing the need for improvement and renovation of old and unsafe housing, they have often constituted platforms for urban expansion and real estate speculation, as well as a large source of municipal revenues.

Beijing's Old and Dilapidated Housing Redevelopment program (*Weijiufang Gaizao*, from now on, ODHR) is particularly significant to the present work, as its effects were personally felt by many of the first generation artists living at the time in the capital. Moreover, and given the multiple layers of urban history in Beijing, the effects of renewal programs had an affectation that went beyond the relocated neighbors, and triggered concerns and debates over the convenience and implementation of the programs, as well as larger consideration on the importance of architectural heritage for China's culture and identity.

Starting in April 1990, the project was intended to ameliorate the housing and living conditions of residents in old housing, which integrated Beijing's grid of alleyways or *hutong*. Beijing's hutongs trace their layout and name to the Yuan dynasty, when small street lanes converging around a well were called with the when the Mongolian word *hottog* (water well). The original layout consisted of narrow streets spreading from main roads in which gates opening along continuous walls granted access to *siheyuan* houses, structured in different wings around a large inner courtyard. As a result of this distribution, hutongs resisted well the frequent dust storms coming from the north, enjoyed a good insulation, and combined the organization around the extended family group with a strong interrelation with the neighborhood.
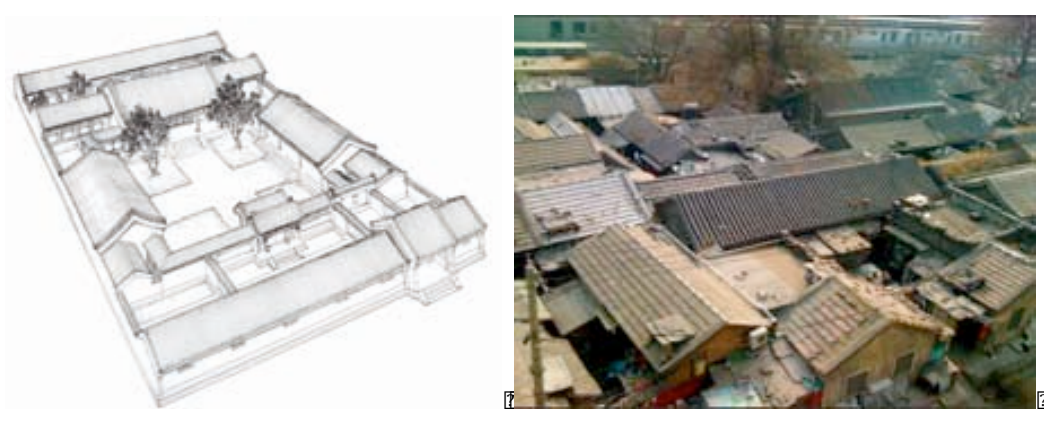
In the course of the last decades, these courtyard houses had became progressively overcrowded and dilapidated. Shortage of housing as a result of insufficient

levels 3, 4 and 5. Upon initiation of the project, 6 million m^2 of housing were declared as dilapidated inside the old city (Abramson 2002: 49). The affectation of the project increased due to the fact that the minimum size for a development was set at 40,000 m^2. The ODHR was implemented at an enormous speed. In 1993, municipal and district governments planned 221 projects, involving 20.9 km^2 of land and a population of about one million. By 1998, 4.2 million m^2 of old housing had been demolished (Fang & Zhang 2003: 2). As a result of the speed and scope of the demolition, a new category of urban citizens emerged, the *chaiqianhu* or "evicted households by forced demolition" (Hsing 2010a: 62). Neighbors had little, if any, opportunity to present their allegations or intervene in the negotiation of compensation, and intimidation or directly bullying was recurrent to resistant tenants, with cases of partial demolition, smashing of furniture, and even breaking in and demolishing the house in the middle of the night (Hsing 2010a: 77-78). In occasions, tenants would resist demolition, barricading in their houses and giving rise to the figure of the holdout or *nail* house.

The development of the ODHR was also affected by rising property values. Fang and Zhang do not hesitate to term the ODHR "a large-scale speculative form of development involving massive demolition and ruthless displacement, resulting in enormous social and cultural costs" (2003: 149). While the original plan intended the relocation of the tenants in the same location, the inhabitants of demolished houses were largely relocated in new residential suburbs built in the outskirts of the city, favoring the commercialization of areas in the city center at premium prices. Residential areas, originally planned to host new residential districts (*xiaoqu*),[12] were gradually replaced by more profitable developments, such as shopping malls (as in the case of the New Oriental Plaza in centrally located Chang'an Avenue), Central Business Districts, and luxury residences (Campanella 2008: 150). As a result, the city experienced a process of residential centrifugation of the city center to newly constructed developments in the outskirts (see Map 1).

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[12] Despite of its name, a *xiaoqu* can consist of up to ten mid to high-rise blocks, hosting hundreds of families as well as services like schools, supermarkets, restaurants and health centers.

Map 1. Major destinations for centrifugal relocation as a result of the ODHR.

Source: Fang & Zhang 2003

Relocation into the new settlements supposed a large list of problems, from the inadequate conditions of hastily build apartments, to problems of transportation (particularly affecting elderly and laid-off people), and lack of services like schools, shops, or health services in the new residential suburbs. The buildings and neighborhoods where many people was relocated were not able to reproduce the characteristic communitarian aspect of old quarters, a kind of close-knit collective interrelation that artists, who had frequently experienced it themselves, would often comment upon. For this reason, adding to the destruction of the house, tenants perceived the destruction of their "life-world", and in addition to the defense of property rights, protests have often targeted the "social rights to a livelihood" (Hsing 2010a: 62). Commenting on the work of photographer Zeng Li (see), whose photographic archive offers a comprehensive catalogue of residential typologies, Christopher Phillips offers a characterization of the strong interrelation of urbanism, physical layout and community life in the hutong that is worth quoting at length:

Thanks to their narrow lanes, originally designed to offer protection from Beijing's notorious dust storms, hutongs were hospitable to pedestrian traffic but not easily accessible to automobiles. The very crowdedness of the courtyard dwellings encouraged a vital, constantly flowing street life. While living conditions were difficult, these neighborhoods were hardly slums; the hutong social structure was remarkably stable, most residents were employed, and public services were readily available. Most crucially, families that had lived for generations in the same hutong inevitably developed a network of close, nuanced relationships with neighboring families. The real appeal of hutong life was this extraordinarily intimate human texture, a quality impossible to re-create in the standardized apartment buildings that were Beijing's only residential alternative. (Phillips 2006: 11)

1.3. Typologies of ruinous landscapes

In many Chinese cities radical demolition has continued for more than a decade, keeping metropolises like Beijing in a state of perpetual destruction and disruption. The irony of Beijing's mass demolition is that though it promises renewal, numerous sites are left in ruins for years. (Visser 2004: 280)

The strong visibility of demolition responds, for some, to a deliberate will of the party-state to socialize the efforts and hopes for modernization. Discussing the widespread presence of the *chai* (拆, meaning 'to demolish') character in walls of residences bound for demolition, Adam Chau argues that the government forces Chinese citizens to "bear witness to its efforts to modernise – hence the public viewing of the signs of demolition" (2008: 201). For his part, Neves understand the city of Beijing as a medium: "a media capital *and* a mediated capital that functions as material technology for public communication about the *future* of Chinese sociality" (emphasis in the original, 2011: 42). In this sense, a recent edited volume (de Kloet & Scheen 2013) posits an understanding of the "city-as-spectacle", including the connection of spectacle with speed (Abbas 2013), and the discussion of spectacle as a form to subsuming criticism to urban development (Visser 2013). What is undoubtful is that the pervasiveness and visibility of construction and demolition works answers to the

functioning dynamics of urban development and its institutional and governmental context.

The division between the state ownership of the land and the land-lease market has translated in the creation of two types of land: primary and secondary land. Primary land is allocated (*huabao*) by the central government to municipalities and state-owned agencies, which in turn can transfer their use rights by conveyance (*churang*) to private or semi-private actors in the secondary market. These rights can then be circulated by means of transference, rent, or by using them as collateral for loans (Lin & Ho 2005).

However, before land rights can be transferred, municipal and district agencies, by means of primary development companies, need to prepare the land under their jurisdiction, a process referred to as *cooking* the *raw* (that is, primary) land. *Cooking the land* implies dealing with the compensation and relocation of tenants, clearing and leveling the parcel, and providing it with the basic infrastructures and connections (transportation, electricity, water, etc.).[13] The different dynamics and converging interests affecting this process may have the effect of delaying, stalling, or interrupting construction works, leaving in their wake different typologies of demolished and ruinous landscapes.

1.3.1. Razed, leveled and vacant lots

Central-level agencies (especially industrial SOEs) hold large parcels in the city center. The sheer extension of these parcels, once hosting factories, warehouses or residential compounds, amount to extremely large plots. On occasions, once the land has been cooked some of these large parcels have remained vacant for a long time. The reason

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[13] This processes of leveling the ground and connections via roads, electricity, and pipes is called the 'one-flattening and three-connections' (*san tong yi ping*). The number of connections extended to seven to include sewerage, telecommunications, gas, and heating, and finally to nine, with the addition of Internet connection and the separation of sewer and rainwater (Chang, 2004).

has to do with competition among different governmental agencies. As the interested party might try to accelerate the official decision and the issue of licenses by the force of the fait accompli (referred in Chinese with the old idiom *xianzhan houzou,* literally "behead first, report it to the emperor later"), valuable land plots in central locations have been demolished and leveled *before* the project was approved. These parcels would, by the same token, enter into speculative markets, with their value rising during the period of time in which the availability of the land is assured—the land is leveled and ready—but has yet to be auctioned. Expecting a higher return from the land rights, primary developers capable to absorb the uncertainty could benefit from an anticipated razing and leveling of the land, and the temporary (yet on occasions extended) standstill in construction works.

In some of his photographic projects, Ai Weiwei has addressed the resulting spaces, of a vast and imposing scale, and a provisionality that can extend over months. For Ai, razed land amount to "a question mark there, a big, big void…It's a unique situation, a void with many questions, yet people don't want to look, or raise these questions" (Blackwell 2006). Among construction sites, factories, highways, and razed houses, these expanses of land stand as a mute interrogation to the modernization of the city (Figure 4). Razed wastelands of rubble are also an important element in the digital collages of Yang Yongliang, where they open spaces and create volumes in contrast with new high-rises and demolished houses, and in the urban *terrain vagues* of Sun Yanchu (Figure 5).

Figures 4 and 5. (Left), Ai Weiwei, *Olympic Stadium,* 2005-2008; (right), Sun Yanchu, *Obsessed*, 2004-2011.

Source: Jeu de Paume; artist website

1.3.2. Ongoing demolition

With razed and leveled parcels, the most recurrent urban ruins in Chinese cities are those of unfinished or ongoing demolition works. Up to 2011, official regulations allowed demolition works to begin before negotiations for compensation with the relocated tenants have terminated. As a result, developers would rush to demolish as many houses of a targeted area as possible, so as to gain the upper hand in the negotiations and minimize protests and resistance.

An economy of demolition, based on the recycling of construction waste, has also contributed to the visibility of urban demolition and, particularly, to its ruinous appearance. Either the same owners, who would use materials in constructing a new home, or recycling companies that sort out and resell bricks and rebar, are frequently seen armed with hammers and other simple and rudimentary tools in demolition sites. Old houses, in particular, demand a slow dismantling without heavy machinery in order to salvage and resell the bricks that constitute the major construction material. Neighbors from villages on the outskirts of the city also participate in the recycling of construction materials, in what is called *tuji jianfang*, or 'construction

assault'. Their interest lays in reusing the salvaged materials to increase—albeit temporarily, and often haphazardly—the building stock of their own houses, in anticipation to the moment when development, in its unstoppable advance towards the city fringes, would engulf their village. These neighbors will then obtain a higher compensation, as it is calculated based on the constructed area of the house (Kao 2013: 41-42). The slow dismantling and recycling of construction materials, a sort of slow-motion demolition, generates a particular aesthetic effect in which pillars outlive ceilings, and rubble cascade through doors and windows onto the street. Not surprisingly, the pervasiveness of ongoing demolition and its terrains of rubble have awakened many connections with the ruination and destruction of wartime shell-shocked cities.

Figures 6 and 7. (Left) Rong Rong, *Beijing No.1,* 1997; (right), Chen Qiulin, *Rhapsody of Farewell,* 2002.

Source: Chambers Art Gallery; video still

The photographic series of Rong Rong were among the first to focus on the apocalyptic landscapes surrounding Beijing demolished houses (Figure 6). Moreover, processes of ongoing demolition are pervasive in the works of artists working on the consequences of the Three Gorges Dam (chapter 6). The urban scenes of Yang Yi and Chen Qiulin (Figure 7) offer a hallucinatory portrait of everyday life in his hometown Kaixian in the midst of the demolition works.

1.3.3. Nail houses (*dingzi hu*)

Forced relocations (*chaiqian*) have given rise to a growing number of cases of resisting neighbors. The reasons for their opposition have often to do with dissatisfaction with the amount of the compensation, or the type and location of the new assigned lot, especially in the case of the owners of parcels that included commercial outlets such as restaurants or retail shops, which lose a lot of potential costumers far from the city center. Fearing that development companies would use their absence to demolish their property, some neighbors have barricaded inside their houses, progressively isolated as demolition advanced in the surrounding area. These holdouts are referred with the neologism of 'nail' houses or *dingzi hu,* using the metaphor of a stubborn nail that resists being hammered down. They have attained a high visibility, particularly since the case of Wu Ping 吴蘋 and Yang Wu 阳物, a couple of Chongqing residents who resisted relocation, amidst an already excavated plot of land, in their house on top of a 17-meter pillar. A media-wise, courageous woman, Wu Ping managed to attract official media outlets with impromptu press conferences, while her husband Yang Wu, raising a national flag on top of the house, framed their cause as a patriotic defense against ruthless entrepreneurs (Hess 2010). A photograph by Jiang Zhi 蒋志 (Hunan, 1971) (Figure 8) emphasis this visual allure by digitally adding a spotlight directed to the holdout.

Figure 8. Jiang Zhi, *Things would turn nails once they happened*, 2008.

Source: artist website

While Wu and Yang's case was particularly iconic, other less noticeable nail houses are often difficult to distinguish from the houses awaiting demolition in the residential areas where construction crews are already at work. The transitoriness of life in households surrounded by demolition informs Wang Qingsong's *Home* (Figure 162), in which a young man seems to inhabit an utterly derelict house. The extreme imaginary condensed in Wang's tableaux is not far from reality, though, as testified by documentaries like Ou Ning's *Meishi Street* (*Meishi Jie*), in which different neighbors life precariously in half demolished houses awaiting for the resolution of their claims and court cases.

1.3.4. Decayed, derelict and abandoned architecture

Architectural decay, especially as a result of precocious obsolescence and disposability, encompass many of the circumstances of China's breakneck pace of development. In this regard, a particularly striking is the ruinous emergence of unfinished construction projects, which have remained, on occasions for years,

precariously standing as testimonies of improvisation, corruption or simple mismanagement. In 1999, for example, in the wake of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, Guangzhou's China Plaza achieved the dubious privilege of being "China's largest *lanweilou*."[14] This term, originated in the popular jargon, is composed of *lan* 烂 meaning 'decaying' or 'rotting', and *wei* 尾, for 'tail' and 'ending'. "Buildings (*lou* 楼) of rotten finishing", then, are those buildings unfinished or discontinued.[15] The phenomenon of the *lanweilou* reached its peak in the late 1990s, when only in the island of Hainan, construction projects covering over 16.3 million m² were aborted or unfinished (anothermountainman 2012). Deng Xiaoping's 1992 "Southern Tour" (*nanxun*) unleashed a fever of development, with investment and prices skyrocketing shortly after. In 1993, Zhu Rongji 朱镕基, then Governor, aimed at controlling raising inflation, controlling credit policy and rising interest rates, which prompted a bubble burst in 1993. As a result, an esteemed 30 to 50 million m*2* of built floor were underdeveloped (Hsing 2010a: 42). In addition to the haste and improvisation by which many projects were undertaken, the frequent use of land as collateral for bank loans by municipal governments and SOEs exploded in all its magnitude (Walker and Buck 2007: 57). Beyond these extreme cases, though, unfinished projects have been a frequent phenomenon in the last decades, during which over investment, lack of sustainable financial backing, and inconclusive debt disputes have often resulted in the halting of construction projects. The Gao Brothers have recurrently chosen unfinished buildings as the backdrop for their scenes. The anonymous, grey concrete expanses of unfinished high-rises are digitally multiplied, playing up the sense of powerlessness and alienation of the characters of their scenes (Figure 9).[16]

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[14] The principal reason was the bankruptcy of Guangdong International Trust and Investment Corp (GITIC). At the time the tallest building in Asia, the twin towers of Tianhe district *China Plaza* (*Zhongcheng Guangchang*) supposed an image problem for the city of Guangzhou, which at the time of the celebration of the 2001 National Games decided to pay the glass facades of the unfinished towers (Gaubatz 2005:102).

[15] Other famous *lanweilou* include Beijing's Morgan Plaza, a mixed-use compound close to the Olympic Stadium, and Wenzhou's Bank of China Mansion (*Zhongying Daxia*), which was finally imploded.

[16] A photographer whose work has focused on Chinese aborted buildings is Stanley Wong, a.k.a. anothermountainman. Because of the focus of this work on PRC-based photographers, his work is not covered in this dissertation. See anothermountainman (2012)

Another source for derelict and decayed buildings have been the foreclosure and abandonment of SOEs and their annexed residential compounds. The photographic series of Chen Jiagang feature the precocious ruination of factories belonging to the Third Front, the massive relocation of industries in the 1960s to the western provinces of Chongqing and Sichuan (Figure 10).

Figures 9 and 10. (Top), Gao Brothers, *The Forever Unfinished Building, no.2,* 2005; (bottom), Chen Jiagang, *Great Third Front* series, *Afternoon*, 2008.

Source: Hua Gallery; artist website

1.3.5. *Chai*

The character *chai* 拆 (meaning 'to demolish') is a recurrent presence in the walls of houses slated for demolition. Rudely painted with black or white paint inside a circle, *chai* has become a major symbol of reform era China. For Chau (2008), beyond a mere announcement, *chai* characters are a source of "powerful writing to effect desired perceptions, to interpellate certain kinds of subjects and to exact accommodating behaviors from these subjects" (2008: 195). The most significant photographic engagement with the *chai* character is that of Wang Jinsong, whose *A Hundred Characters for Demolition* creates a wall of images composed of one hundred photographs of the character obtained in the streets of Beijing. A mixed-media series by Huang Rui 黄锐 has appropriated a street slang that, capitalizing on the pervasiveness of *chai*, and its interrelation with contemporary China, has restyled the name of the country as *Chai-na* 拆那, thus emphasizing both the process of (An)globalization of China as well as the import of demolition in its modern definition.

Figure 11. Huang Rui, *CHINA/ Chai-na series*, 2010.

Source: 10 Chancery Lane Gallery

1.4. Debates and activism around urban heritage

Chapter 2 presents the view of different scholars who have posited that there exists in Chinese culture a disregard for architectural remnants. Under this view, the Chinese, who preserved textual (i.e. historiography) and material records (i.e. bronzes, calligraphy), would not have similarly cherished architectural remains due the characteristics of their architectural techniques and materials (more ephemeral) and their philosophical tradition. In contemporary times, it has been often noted that the demolition of old quarters and ancient buildings have met little resistance, with localized protests focusing on issues of compensation and government corruption, rather than on the material and historical value of the buildings. For example, *New York Times* correspondent Nicolai Ouroussoff commented that "[f]ew see the hutong areas as treasured historical landmarks" (2008). But the different waves of architectural destruction have triggered some concern for the preservation of architecture. Seen as a reaction to massive demolition, this phenomenon echoes the birth of the notion of preservation and the discourse of "national heritage" in France in the early 19th century, prompted by the destruction of architectural heritage in the aftermath of the French Revolution (The *Commission des monuments historiques,* the first institution devoted to architectural preservation, was only founded in 1837. See Choay 2007).

Before examining the responses to the demolition of urban heritage, it is interesting to examine similar debates around the case of the Yuanming Yuan, the pleasance of the Qing emperors in the northwest corner of the city, famously looted and burned in 1860 by British and French troops in reprisal for the murder of some of its officials in the context of the Second Opium War. While the history of the destruction of the gardens includes other sources of destruction and further ruination,[17] the Gardens

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[17] Including the fact that remaining materials were transferred for the furnishing of the Yihe Yuan, the Summer Palace of the Empress Cixi; that the upheavals during the Boxer rebellion, the Republican period, and the Japanese occupation also supposed the pillage of trees, stones and rockeries; that in Communist times, hills were leveled and lakes filled to create farmland, horse paddocks, pigsties and small factories and villages, and, during the Cultural Revolution, lecturers from Peking University, as

have been turned, in the reform era, into a museum of the diligence and wisdom of the Chinese people, a memorial of Western imperialist violence, and, to a lesser extent, of the ineptitude and corruption of the Qing rulers. This discursive framing has to face the paradox that the only architectural remnants of the Yuanming Yuan are those of the Xiyang lou, the European style palaces located in the northern section of the Changchun Yuan, one of the gardens that composed the original compound. Commissioned by emperor Qianlong to the Jesuit missionaries in court, the European palaces were made of marble and stone and covered with glazed colored tiles, producing a Chinese appropriation of European baroque and Versaillesque taste which, as the symmetrical reverse of the Chinoiseries that flooded Europe in the 18th century, has been appropriately termed as an "Européennerie" (Thomas 2009). As an example of what will be discussed later in chapter 2, the construction materials of European style architecture was what made possible, in the first place, the future ruin, which fragmentarily and eroded—or precisely because their capacity to record erosion and fragmentation—managed to survive fire, time and neglect, while the delicate pavilions, bridges, kiosks, and garden designs of the Chinese sections left no traces. What further enhances the paradox, as one of the most important Chinese historian on the Yuanming Yuan, Wang Daocheng 王道成 notes, is the fact that the Western-style palaces amounted only to over two percent of the total gardens (cited in Kutcher 2003: 33). History, then, has only "solidified", as the official website of the Yuanming Yuan declares,[18] as a result of European imperialist violence, but also, because of European designs and construction materials, and discourses on preservation and museification of ruins that originated in Europe.

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part of their reeducation, filled lakes with rocks and earth. In a last example, the stone of the buildings made its way into the trophic chain, as peasant grinded marble and add it to the grain to increase its weight. These different epochs of spoilage have entered common parlance as the three "calamities" of wood (*mujie*), stone (*shijie*), and soil (*tujie*) (Barmé 1996).

[18] "In order to act as a site for the patriotic education for the whole country around the topic of the relics, the solidification of history [*ningu de lishi*] and the revitalizing of the spirit of the gardens combine in the the Yuanming Yuan into a unique tourist venue that every years attracts many young students. " (my translation, Yuanming Yuan Yizhi Gongyuan 2014).

These circumstances gave rise in the mid 2000s to intense debates about the preservation or reconstruction of the European palaces of the Yuanming Yuan. In an academic symposium in 2004, Ye Yanfang 夜宴防, a researcher of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, defended the conservationist view. Aligning with the official narrative of national humiliation, Ye underscored how the gardens were "an ideal place for 'patriotic education.'" While some renovation could be undertaken, he opposed "making a 'fake antique' on the ruins, which may destroy the natural beauty of the park." Conversely, the supporters of reconstruction highlighted the gardens as the "crystallization" of Chinese genius, and contended that the actual ruins were, primarily, the ruins of Western style architecture and its materials. Luo Zhewen 罗哲文, head of Ancient Architecture Expert Group under the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, defended reconstruction to show the "sharp contrast between the previously splendid garden and its present condition." Reconstruction, it was argued, would align with the handover of Hong Kong to bring in a triumphal closure of the "century of shame" precipitated by Qing corruption and Western imperialism (*People's Daily* 2005).[19]

Debates around the preservation—or at least, a better, more effective preservation—of China's urban heritage have shared some of the concerns of art scholars and historians in relation to the Yuanming Yuan. The inherent architectural value has been less important than the role of some houses for national history. The demolition of houses that belonged or hosted important historical figures, like Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 and Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹,[20] has given a boost to complaints about the erasure of China's cultural landmarks. Xinhua news agency senior reporter Wang Jun 王军, in his

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[19] 3-D technologies seem to have offered a solution to some of the issues raised in the debates, affording preservation of existing ruins while offering a chance to visualize the former buildings. An augmented reality project by the Department of Optoelectronic Engineering at the Beijing Institute of Technology of Peking University projected a virtual rendition of the former Yuanming yuan on the site of the ruins of the Haiyang tang (Liu et al 2006; Ortells Nicolau 2011).

[20] Cai Yuanpei was dean of Peking University in the late 1920s and a major figure of the New Culture movement; Cao Xueqin is the author of the Chinese classical novel, *The Dream of the Red Pavilion* in the mid-18th century.

influential and widely read *Beijing Record* (2011), contributed to revalorize Beijing's urbanism and architecture as an important artistic and cultural asset.

The variegated implications of urban demolition into a variety of areas, such as public safety, social justice, or economic and human sustainability, have prompted another kind of activist responses. In this regard, preservation scholar and activist Hua Xinmin 花新民 stands among the first local voices to denounce the impact of massive-scale demolition on the societal and family ties. But the most important contribution in the visualization of heritage activism has been the advocacy of preservation by a number of well-known personalities and intellectuals, such as Tianjin-based writer Feng Jicai 冯骥才, and most significantly, the so called "four iron pillars" (*si da tiegan*) of Beijing preservation, who have used their social visibility and political connections to raise awareness about the issue of preservation. [21] Even in the context of growing awareness, the impact on actual preservation policies has been limited, particularly to cases in which negotiation with the authorities has been possible (Braester 2010: 268).

A significant change affecting the valorization of architectural heritage has been the professionalization of urbanism since the 1990s. While urban planning has been used to justify many urban renewal projects, professional urbanists have tried to mediate between political and professional considerations (Braester 2010: 112). A significant voice in this regard has been Wu Liangyong 吴良镛, a student of pioneering architectural historian Liang Sicheng and the first professor of urban planning in China. Wu has been behind some of the first renewal projects that have negotiated urban development with awareness about architectural context and history, like the development of Ju'er Hutong in Beijing. In turn, Wu's student Fang Ke 方可 developed

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[21] The "pillars" are Shu Yi 舒乙, the son of the writer Lao She and member of the People's Political Consultative Conference; Liang Congjie 梁从诫, founder of "Friends of Nature", the first environmental NGO in China and son of architecture historian Liang Sicheng (and thus, grandson of Liang Qichao); Yang Dongping 楊東平, another founder of "Friends of Nature" and professor at Beijing Science and Technology University), and Li Yan 李燕, specialist in classical literature, son of painter Li Kuchan 李苦禪, and member of the People's Political Consultative Conference.

a landmark doctoral dissertation on Beijing's urban development that provided an in-depth analysis of the way projects like the ODHR were actually implemented (Fang 2000; Fang & Zhang 2003). Thousands of grudged *chaiqian* households sued the Beijing government in 2000 for illegal demolition basing their claims on Fang's work, in the so-called Grand Litigation of Ten Thousand Plaintiffs (*wanren dasusong*) (Hsing 2010b: 35).[22]

Only a few decades ago, the preservationist concerns of Liang Sicheng were largely ignored. In nowadays China, the demolition of a house where Liang lived for a brief period in Beijing provides an example of changing attitudes, as well as the importance of historical figures in this process. In the 1930s, the architectural historian and his wife and colleague, Liu Huiyin 林徽因，lived in a house at Beijing's Dongzongbu Hutong. The house, of no outstanding architectural interest, was slated for demolition, a fact that raised the attention of the media and the NGO Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center (BCHP). After BCHP's campaign, demolition was interrupted in 2009, and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage declared the house a cultural site to be protected. In spite of this, in 2012, during the holidays of the Spring Festival, the house was totally demolished. In an unprecedented move, official news agency Xinhua lamented the demolition of the house in strong terms, noting that house had been declared an "immovable cultural relic" (*bu ke yidong wenwu*) and that the construction of a reproduction, a frequent option in such cases, did not uphold the "three guiding principles", that original objects should be in their original site and in their original conditions (*yuan wu, yuan zhi, yuan zhuang*) (Tu 2012).

The demolition of Liang and Lin's house also reveals the frequent network of competing interests and jurisdictions between different administrations with competence on urban development and management: On the one hand, the National Bureau of Cultural Relics, and city-level and district-level cultural committees and heritage officials, and on the other hand, the Land Resources Bureau, municipal

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[22] Fang Ke's research and activism is featured in former *New York Times* correspondent Ian Johnson's *Wild Grass (*(2004: 89-182).

officials and SOEs, the interests of which often coincide with the developer's (in the case of Liang's former house, a public-private enterprise) (Branigan 2012). Indeed, rather than the policies affecting preservation, it is the entrepreneurism of local governments and foreign investors those most often signaled as main culprits for ruthless development. In a context where economic interests have preeminence, gentrification (as Shanghai's Xintiandi 新天地, a old *shikumen* neighborhood turned entertainment and shopping district) appears frequently as the only way to accommodate preservation with the different economic forces, as activist Shu Yi acknowledged (Braester 113-117).

To this brief note on actors and voices about preservation it should be added a comparatively reduced but influential group of foreign trained architects who are foregrounding the need for an architectural and urbanism practice more sensitive to architectural and social heritage. Projects by Chang Yung Ho 张永和 (former head of the Department of Architecture at MIT and founder of the studio Atelier Feichang Jianzhu), Liu Jiakun 刘家琨 and Wang Shu 王澍 essay different proposals that integrate urbanization and architectural innovation with an attentiveness to context, culture, and sustainability. Wang Shu, recipient of the 2012 Pritzker Prize has been responsible, along his wife and partner Lu Wenyu 陆文宇 (both founders of Amateur Architecture Studio) of important architectural projects that recuperate traditional constructive techniques (like the *wa pan qiang* that involves reutilization of materials from demolished buildings for the erection of new walls, and the construction of timber structures without nails) and old gardening principles, and incorporates influences from landscape painting, making a productive use of tradition for architectural innovation (Sommariva 2010) while being attentive to the unavoidable demands for social and environmental sustainability.

The activist impulse for the protection of ancient architecture has also translated in photographic projects. Xu Yong's 徐勇 (Shanghai, 1954) project on Beijing's hutongs, created in the 1989, was among the earliest. Anticipating much of the destruction to

come, Xu created a detailed catalogue of architectural details that portrayed an "ethereal and atemporal Beijing" (Cabos, n.d.). The personal and collective memories that these images activate participate of a kind of nostalgia that has growingly permeated contemporary Chinese popular culture, a sentiment that, as Dai Jinhua has noted, "uses the construction and embellishment of remembrance to assuage the present" (1997: 145).

Figure 12. Xu Yong, *Willow Alley Hutong,* 1989.

Source: Hua Gallery

Chapter 2. Ruins in China: from ancient to contemporary art

In dealing with contemporary images of ruination, the history of the aesthetic engagement with ruins is frequently invoked. The case of China has not been an exception, and critical, academic and curatorial work on experimental artists working on urban demolition and decay has called upon ruins as a critical category. But ruins are a quite peculiar aesthetic and material object, characterized by a "fundamental semiotic instability" (DeSilvey & Edensor 2012: 4), discursive fluidity, and the gaze of the observer. It is necessary to unpack the different associations, meanings, and implications of ruins to better explore their critical and analytical potential. In other words, to know what we mean by 'ruins' before using them in our analyses of contemporary works.

The lack for antecedents for contemporary Chinese ruins has made evident the European origin of the aesthetic of ruins. This realization has contradicted some established connections in the West between Chinese art and ruins, mainly caused by the popularity of picturesque ruins of China diffused in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries in Chinoiseries and architectural follies. But perhaps more importantly, it has revealed the extent to which the (European) response to architectural destruction has been naturalized and universalized. In immediately calling broken and collapsed stones as ruins, we are not only *describing* them but also projecting a series of expectations and culturally-determined assumptions about their meaning, their agencies (i.e. "they speak, or witness, of a past that is no more"), and aesthetic potential.[23] As Robert Harrist notes in regards Wu Hung's search for Chinese ruins, "Why, after all, should one *expect* to find images of ruins in China or be surprised by their absence without taking the European model as the norm?" (Emphasis in the original, 2013: 315-316). Wu's turns into an aesthetical version of Needham's question, the positing of which presupposes the necessity, or at least plausibility, of the phenomenon.

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[23] The beauty of ruins is indeed quite strange. It contradicts the frequent attributes of beauty, such as wholessness, symetry, or cleaness, and shares elements with waste, putrefaction, dereliction, etc.

Rose Macaulay's *The Pleasure of Ruins* (1953), which traces the fascination for ruins in literature and art throughout history, includes in its first pages a note on ancient Chinese poetry about visiting the ruin of an abandoned or destroyed city. Macaulay (whose knowledge of Chinese poetry was based on Arthur Waley's 1918 anthology *170 Chinese Poems*) cites an anonymous poem of the first century BC, "The Golden Palace", and Cao Zhi's 曹植 "Sending off Master Ying" (*Song Ying shi*) that describes the city of Luoyang after Dong Zhuo's 董卓 sack in 190 AD at the end of the Eastern Han dynasty:

> In Lo-Yang how still it is!
> Palaces and houses all burnt to ashes.
> Walls and fences all broken and gaping,
> Thorns and brambles shooting up to the sky. . . .
> I turn aside, for the straight road is lost:
> The fields are overgrown, and will never be ploughed again.
> I have been away such a long time
> That I do not know which street is which.
> How sad and ugly the empty moors are!
> A thousand miles without the smoke of a chimney,
> I think of the house I lived in all those years:
> I am heart-tied and cannot speak.
> (Macaulay 1953:4)

For Macaulay, the Chinese, with the provision that they "have always taken a view of ruins both more tranquil and more sad" than the Europeans, have been equally responsive to the fascination for ruins, making her conclude that such fascination "has always, it would seem, been a human tendency" (1953: 1-2). However, while poetry, particularly that of the elegiac *huaigu* 怀古 genre, did often focus on ruins and devastated cities, ancient visual culture in China did not show the same attraction to ruins. Wu Hung's survey on art from the fifth century BC to the mid-nineteenth century AD identified merely half a dozen depictions of ruined buildings. In addition, "There was not a single case in pre-twentieth-century China", Wu notes, "in which the

ruined appearance of an old building was purposefully preserved to evoke what Alois Riegl has theorized in the West as the 'age value' of a manufactured form" (2012: 13).

This chapter explores ruins from a comparativist perspective. Different material, artistic, eschatological, and ideological aspects affecting the preeminence of ruins in the European tradition are contrasted with the different circumstances that conditioned the Chinese response to architectural ruins. It begins with an exploration of geographical, ideological, and socio-economical determinants active in producing and sustaining architectural ruins. The fact that architectural decay was not present in the representational traditions of China, and that the arrival or ruins, along with the European presence in China, was marked by cultural contact and epistemological violence, demands to acknowledge the cultural and geographic determinants, as well as the politics behind the alleged universalism of the fascination with ruins.

The naturalization of ruins also depends in the fact that, in Western academia, historical sense and ruins are closely intermingled. One might even wonder whether the trace brings to relevance the sense of historical discontinuity, or whether historical rupture bestows meaning and value upon the trace, creating a ruin (Hell & Schönle 2010: 5). The vast historiographical tradition of China provides a major example of a historical sense articulated without architectural ruins, which justifies a comparative perspective on ruins that extends beyond visual and art studies, and into cultural critique. Next, the history of pictorial representation of ruins in Europe is contrasted with particular visual tropes of sentiments of transience and decay in China. Taking the clue from Wu Hung's analysis of vernacular visual tropes for the ruin sentiment, it tentatively posits a thread running along Chinese art that in which ruins become incarnated presences palpitating with life, aiming to generate an emotional response from the viewer.

A second section of the chapter traces a representative itinerary across the major articulations of ruins in the intellectual and artistic fields of China's modernity, with a particular emphasis on the artistic and intellectual engagement with ruins in the

decades since the economic reforms, the direct context for the artistic projects examined in the part II of this dissertation. The chapter ends with an examination of a text by writer and scholar Yu Qiuyu titled "Ruins", in order to provide a contemporary example of intellectual appropriation of ruins in contemporary China, and delineate some of its meanings and implications.

2.1. Ruins in China: materiality, architecture, history

The "unspoken taboo against preserving and portraying architectural ruins" postulated by Wu Hung (2014: 94) finds an echo in contemporary times. Yu Qiuyu notes that "the two characters that compose the word 'ruins' [*feixu*] make people shake with fear" (1992, annex). This alleged discomfort with ruins and continued sense of inauspiciousness, danger, and fear, articulates a story included in the lecture delivered by writer Mo Yan 莫言 as his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize of literature:

> Bear with me, please, for one last story, one my grandfather told me many years ago: A group of eight out-of-town bricklayers took refuge from a storm in a rundown temple. Thunder rumbled outside, sending fireballs their way. They even heard what sounded like dragon shrieks. The men were terrified, their faces ashen. "Among the eight of us," one of them said, "is someone who must have offended the heavens with a terrible deed. The guilty person ought to volunteer to step outside to accept his punishment and spare the innocent from suffering. Naturally, there were no volunteers. So one of the others came up with a proposal: Since no one is willing to go outside, let's all fling our straw hats toward the door. Whoever's hat flies out through the temple door is the guilty party, and we'll ask him to go out and accept his punishment." So they flung their hats toward the door. Seven hats were blown back inside; one went out the door. They pressured the eighth man to go out and accept his punishment, and when he balked, they picked him up and flung him out the door. I'll bet you all know how the story ends: They had no sooner flung him out the door than the temple collapsed around them. (Mo 2012)

A foil to Mo Yan's tale can be found in the legendary figure of Simonides of Ceos, with whom a long Western tradition connecting architecture and memory is inaugurated. While the two stories are widely different in terms of historical, social, and textual context, they offer a glimpse in some differences in the cultural response to ruins. According to Cicero (*De Oratore*), while attending a banquet on the house of Scopas, Simonides was required outside the house. During his absence, the host and his guests, who had slighted the gods Castor and Pollux during dinner, died when the ceiling collapsed on them, a catastrophe caused by the twin gods who had timely summoned the fair Simonides outside the house. In the story, Simonides is next capable to identify the corpses by recreating the disposition of the guests in his mind, establishing the mythical origins of *memoria technica* or mnemotechnics, the strategies of memorization by means of the visualization of architectural structures.

> ...when their friends wanted to bury them but were altogether unable to know them apart as they had been completely crushed, the story goes that Simonides was enabled by his recollection of the place in which each of them had been reclining at table to identify them for separate interment; and that this circumstance suggested to him the discovery of the truth that the best aid to clearness of memory consists in orderly arrangement. (Cicero 1979, 2: 86.351-54)

In the story of Simonides, architecture, even when its destruction brings about dead, is turned into the vehicle of the memoristic abilities of Simonides. The building is seen in a close connection with—almost as an embodiment of—the former occupants. In Mo Yan's folk tale, death is similarly avoided stepping outside the house, but the morale of the story stops at the level of fate, with architecture sharing the inauspiciousness of the thunderous tempest and the shrieking dragons. Rather than as evidence of a mutually unintelligible cultural understanding of architectural ruination—Mo Yan's connection of the tempest and the "rundown temple" (*po miao*) seems to be taken from a Gothic tale—the two tales serve to frame different visual traditions of ruin representation in larger cultural and intellectual contexts, with particular connections to memory, death, and eschatology.

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In order to trace the origin of these differences it is useful to start from the material base. The privilege of timber over stone and brick as construction material in Chinese architecture made it difficult for architectural fragments to arrive to a hypothetical future observer. Wood beams and columns would totally succumb to fire, while physical and chemical erosion, given enough time and humid weather, would destroy any timber structure. Even rammed earth, which composed defensive walls, guardian towers, or pedestals, would easily lose its shape over time and become a formless tumult or dune. In addition, Chinese architectonic techniques favored modularity, which facilitated renovation and even full dissemble and relocation of buildings, and thus prevented the consolidation of architectural wreckage or decay. If the Italian Renaissance humanists, the first in celebrating ruins, did found them, was, first of all, because religious and sumptuary architecture in Europe and the Middle East had used marble, limestone, sandstone, or granite, all of which could suffer abandonment, destruction, or a long burial under deserts or other geological layers and still survive, albeit in fragments. More important than their mere survival was perhaps the fact that these materials geochemically registered decay, which in time generated the particular synthetical aesthetics of ruins based in an inescapable return to nature of all human efforts.

Surely, this distinction is not absolute. Stone defensive structures like ramparts (*lei*) and walls (*bi*), would stand precariously after the sack and destruction of a city, and as such they find their way in elegiac poetry: Tang poets saw the moon rising behind a destroyed rampart (*can lei*), or a lonely wall section of a monastery (*gu bi*).[24] But these architectural fragments were not deemed to possess aesthetic value, and only triggered sorrowful, nostalgic laments for long lost cities and houses, or departing friends. Similarly, some ancient timber buildings have arrived to our days, but only after numerous renovations and even complete rebuilding: "Each renovation and restoration aims to bring the building back to its original brilliance, while freely incorporating current architectural and decorative elements" (Wu 2012: 13).

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[24] Sikong Shu 司空曙 (720－790), "To a Friend Bound North after the Rebellion" (*Zeiping housongren beigui*); Ma Dai 马戴 (618 – 907), "An Autumn Cottage at Bashang" (*Bashang qiuju*).

In this sense, it is important to note that the aesthetic and intellectual sensibilities of the Italian Renaissance were articulated, to a great extent, around the valorization of Roman architecture, rediscovered under weeds and ivy in Rome's ruin fields, and in Vitruvius' *De Architectura.* Ruins were felt as a Gestalt, as a *totum divisum* that pointed to the existence of "an organic structure with an inner unity which conveys the original architectural concept, in mass and voids and in relation to the surrounding space" (Zucker 1961: 130). Raphael, Alberti, Vasari, or Brunelleschi, all the great humanist architects were also researchers of the architectural past. In contrast, well up to the 20th century, when the pioneering efforts of Liang Sicheng included architecture among the fine arts, Chinese architecture was considered a mere craft, frequently connected to families of artisans-constructors rather than to an individual master.

Another cultural element that marked the different reception of ruins was the fact that the remnants of Roman ruins revealed differences between the Classical past and the medieval present in terms of architectural style, scale, and construction materials, as well as in political and religious social environment. Conversely, the most characteristic elements of Chinese architecture—i.e., gabled roofs and interlocking wooden brackets, or *dougong*—were a characteristic shared by the architecture of periods separated by thousands of years. The systematical razing and destruction of temples and palaces during inter-dynastical transitions was therefore rather ritual, and the new dynasty did not feel the need to differentiate itself architectonically. When Liang Sicheng was trying to identify and formulate the different architectural 'orders'—as in the European Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, etc.—he had to focus on constructive solutions and measurements, instead than in the visible appearance of the building. Differences were more clearly expressed in bronzes, calligraphies, or stele rubbings (to cite some of the arts more attuned to history), which attracted the antiquarian energies of the literati class.

Indeed, considering the development of such a historical archive, there might seem to exist a paradox between such a history-bended culture as the Chinese that yet has

paid so little attention to its ancient architecture. A first element to be noted is cultural continuity: "Steeped in all the trappings of the world's longest-surviving unbroken cultural tradition", the educated classes perceived a cultural continuity with previous generations, even after periods of foreign invasion and rule (Silbergeld 1999: 64), and "never considered that its history had collapsed and burned" (Cheng & Ren 2002: 262). As long as they could be replaced or restored, and their functions regained, the destruction of monuments and architectural landmarks (temples, pagodas, altars, etc.) was not perceived as a challenge to cultural identity (Mote 1973: 51). The "necessity for ruins", to use J. B. Jackson's term (1980), seems then much less intense in the Chinese case. In a more poetic tone, Pierre Rickmans esteemed the sort of "periodic tabula rasa" by which Chinese cleared up their architectonic landscape as a salutary effect that "prevented this culture from becoming clogged up" (2008). Rickmans was writing under the inspiration of the poem "In a Thousand Years" ("Aux dix mille années"), from Victor Segalen's (1878-1919) *Stèles* (1912), where the Westerners "barbarians" and their "veneration of tombs" is contrasted with the *fils de Han*, who understand that, "*L'immuable n'habite pas vos murs,/ mais en vous, hommes lents,/ homes continuels*"[25] (Segalen 1914).

In contrast, as different academics have noted, the Chinese historical sense rested on the historiographical and textual tradition. Rather than in the material, architectural reality, it was in writing where history obtained its legitimacy. Discussing the role of the capital city, Mark Lewis notes that "as an artificial creation of the dynasty, [the capital] would collapse with the ruling house that created it. Created out of nothing by dictate or decree, it would return to nothing when those decrees lost their hold" (Lewis 2006: 188). Stretching the point, Derk Bodde proposes that the different root of "civilization" (relating to the Latin *civitas* for "citizen" and "city") and *wenhua* (a binome conveying "the transforming [i.e. civilizing] influence of writing") amount to the fact that, in the West, "the essence of civilization is urbanization; for the Chinese it is the art of writing" (Bodde 1981: 39).

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[25] "The immutable does not live your walls,/ but in you, slow men,/constant men".

Writing about architectural preservation in the context of contemporary development plans, Thomas Campanella notes how the value put on architecture that sustains historical preservation in the West is frequently transferred, in China, to the actual site: "The site is earthbound and enduring; architecture is relatively fragile and ephemeral". Whereas an original structure, moved to another site, retains its cultural value in the West, in China the importance is assigned to the "factor of significance" of a site, that is, its function or its primary characteristic. As an example, Campanella cites the well-known case of the renovation of Niu Jie (Ox Street) in Beijing's Xianwu district, leveled in 1998 to erect new residential developments: "The cultural significance of the neighborhood [the fact that it hosted an important minority of Hui population] existed independently of its built environment, or so it was argued" (2008:152-153). This particular cultural understanding of 'site' has been also explored diachronically in reference to art and culture. Wu Hung has unpacked the notion of site (*ji* 迹*)* in relation to its etymological sense as 'footprint', and has identified different types of sites according to the kind of traces they stand for: ancient sites of historical interest (*guji* 古迹); divine traces (*shenji* 神迹) such as mountains; remnant traces connected with political expressions of identity (*yiji* 遗迹); and *shengji* 胜迹**,** famous sites nowadays related to tourism and popular culture (2012: 62-91). For his part, Eugene Wang's study of the representation of the ruins of the Leifeng pagoda in Hangzhou proposes that an architectural landmark, to become a site, needs to add to its spatial characteristics a 'textual' life, a process of cultural citation which echoes the study of Stephen Owen on *huaigu* poetry (1986):

> A landmark alone, however, does not make a site. No site in China is without an overly of writing. To make a site is to cite texts…It is therefore as much a literary topic as it is a physical locus; it comes laden with a host of eulogies and contemplations. A site is therefore textualized. (2003: 487)

Wang foregrounds that the actual Leifeng pagoda was uneventful even for famous visitors, like Su Shi 苏轼 (1037 – 1101), who recorded his visit without a reference to

the pagoda. It was the combination of gazetteers, mystery folk tales, events (such as the pagoda burning in the 16ᵗʰ century and becoming a ruin), which fueled the imagination and turned the pagoda into a site that viewers connected with the "the strange and the otherworldly" (Wang 2003: 504).

2.2. Pictorial traditions of ruin representation

Drawing a clear and definitive line between China and the West in the way architecture is understood and preserved verges, as any clear-cut division between reified cultures, in a culturalism that has been deservedly problematized (Chow 1998; Sakai 1997; Dirlik 1987). Case study-based analyses reveal, now and again, that architectural remains could also become culturally or politically significant in China. Jonathan Hay's study of the palatial complex of Nanjing at the wake of the Qing invasion and conquer, for example, shows that the ruins of the Ming palace did indeed acquire a significant importance both for Ming loyalists as well as for the new rulers, who accordingly proceeded to contain the ruins, literally (by means of blocking its access) and textually, by means of a "semiotic" siege intended to control their political potential (Hay 1999). Still, if limited to the development of ruin aesthetics in the visual arts, the difference between Europe and China remains a "broad and essentializing but nonetheless supportable generalization" (Silbergeld 1999:66).

The European tradition of ruin painting, an "undulant fever, [that] rose and fell, reaching its peak in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but never wholly absent" (Macaulay 1953: 9), is one of the most fertile icons in Western art history, comparable only perhaps to the genres of landscape or portrait. Starting in the early Quattrocento, ruins epitomized the recovery of the classical past, while providing a perfect motive for the study of perspective and atmospheric backgrounds.. In addition, as different early paintings show, ruins also conveyed religious allegories. The simple ruins that host the Nativity in Sandro Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi*

(Figure 13), for example, characterize the poverty of Jesus' family, while the Classical ruins in the background signal the victory of Christianity over paganism.

Figure 13. Sandro Botticelli, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1472.

Source: Wikipedia Commons

Italian and Flemish painters, the later, like Maerten van Heemskerck (1498 – 1574), sojourning in Rome in growing numbers to learn to paint "in Italian style", contributed to spread the ruin imaginary across Europe in the 16th century (Zucker 1968; Dacos 2014), but ruins only became "a legitimate subject for painting" (Zucker 1968: 59) in the serene vistas of Claude Lorrain (1600 – 1682) (Figure 14) and Nicolas Poussin (1594 – 1665), and in the visual melodramas of Salvatore Rosa (1615 – 1673) or Monsú Desiderio (1593 – after 1620), with whom ruins became a European fad during the 17th century.

In the 18th century, the interest in ruins developed in accord with major academic developments, and two different yet complementary attitudes, characterized by Robert Ginsberg (2004) as the classical and the romantic. On the one hand, the first excavations in Herculaneum and Pompeii, and Winckelmann and Le Roy's influential

studies on ancient Greek and Roman art,[26] among other novelties, activated the Classical vision, for which ruins are an opportunity to reconstruct and gain knowledge on ancient periods of history. On the other hand, Romantic vision sees,

> the ruin as a remnant of an irrevocable past and thereby weighted with the burden of loss. The ruin teaches us that the past has slipped through our hands. We possess its shadow, a broken image, fragments…a lesson resides therein. We too are subject to ruin." (2004: 315)

Such was the understanding of ruins championed by the proponents of the new genre of philosophy of history, such as Edward Gibbon (*History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1764) and Comte de Volney (*Les Ruines: ou, méditation sur les révolutions des empires*, 1822). With them, the Grand Tourers travelling to South Europe and the Middle East, well versed in ancient history, classical readings, and orientalism, nostalgically meditated on imperial cycles of rule and decadence among these material proofs of the slow but inevitable decline and decay of the greatest of human works. The past served, reflexively, to muse on the present and the future. In his comments to the 1767 Salon, Denis Diderot characterized the aesthetics power of ruins:

> Our glance lingers over the debris of a triumphal arch, a portico, a pyramid, a temple, a palace, and we retreat into ourselves. We contemplate the ravages of time, and in our imagination we scatter the rubble of the very buildings in which we live over the ground; in that moment solitude and silence prevail around us, we are the sole survivors of an entire nation that is no more. Such is the first tenet of the poetics of ruins". (Diderot 1995: 206)

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[26] Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (*The History of Art in Antiquity*), 1764; J.D. Le Roy, *Les Ruines des plus beaux monuments de la Grèce*, 1758.

Figure caption (above and below image, illegible)

provoked by the French Revolution, the Napoleonic campaigns and the different aftershocks and responses to it, articulated multiple visual manifestations of ruin imaginary in the development of the different Romanticisms, from the Gothic sublime of Caspar David Friedrich (1774 – 1840) (Figure 16), to the serene nostalgia of ruined abbeys—ruins both of Catholicism and French Absolutism—in the English countryside. In the Romantic visions of ruins there is a combination of the pleasant picturesque and the intense sublime, which opened ways to appreciate "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger" (Burke 1909, Part 1, section 7), both fields in which ruins prospered.

Figures 15 and 16. (Left), Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Carceri d'Invenzione*, 1745-1760; (right) Caspar David Friedrich, *Ruins of Eldena near Greifswald*, 1825.

Source: Wikipedia Commons

Compared with this European tradition, premodern China throws few and scattered examples of ruin painting. The examples presented by Wu Hung (2012; 2011) come almost all from Shitao 石涛（1642–1707) (Figure 17), whose characteristic personal style further proves the disregard of traditional artistic circles for architectural ruination.

To find important paintings of ruins it is necessary to wait for the work of reformist artists at the turn of the 20th century, such as Gao Jianfu 高劍父 (1879 – 1951)

(Figures 19, 20) or Wu Zuoren 吳作人(1908 – 1997), in which ruins appeared usually connected with the destruction of warfare. Gao's *Roaring Flames of the Eastern Battlefield* (*Dong zhanchang lieyan tu*, 1932) or *The Burning of the E Fang Palace* (*Huoshao Afang gong*, undated)*,* and Wu Zuoren's *Bombing of Chonging* (*Chongqing da hongzha*, 1940) foreground fire, smoke, dust and violence, coming close to the Expressionist use of ruins for political purposes, as in Otto Dix's (1891 – 1969) series on the First World War.[28] According to Stephanie Su (2010), even the Roman ruins of Yan Wenliang 顏文樑 (1893 – 1988) (Figure 18), painted during a three-week trip to Italy in 1930, must be understood in connection with discourses of modernization and approximation to Western culture, rather than with an study of the aesthetics of ruins. As in some of Gao Jianfu's activist paintings of ruins, they significantly appear with telegraphic poles (see Figures 18 and 19), contrasting but at the same time bringing together tradition with the present times (Su 2010: 6).

Figure 17. Shitao, from *Reminiscences of the Qinhuai River*, 1695-6.

Source: Cleveland Museum of Art

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[28] For the connection, via Lu Xun, of reformist artists with expressionism, particularly political European engravers like George Grosz, Kathe Kollowitz, and Frans Masereel, see Xiaobing Tang's *Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement*, 2008.

Figures 18 and 19. (Left), Yan Wenliang, *The Colosseum*, 1930; (right), Gao Jianfu, *Ancient Pagoda in the Setting Sun,* 1930.

Sources: Su (2010); Wu (2012)

Figures. 20 and 21. (Left), Gao Jianfu, *Roaring Flames of the Eastern Battlefield*, 1930; (right), Otto Dix, *Die Trummer von Langemark* (*The Ruins of Langemark),* 1924.

Sources: Wu (2012); National Gallery of Australia

In *A Story of Ruins*, in addition to searching for Chinese images of architectural ruins, Wu Hung tries to locate the "indigenous Chinese concepts and representational modes of ruins" (2012: 13), the visual counterparts of the experience of looking at, and thinking about, a ruined city or an abandoned palace, so recurrent in elegiac *huaigu* poems. Rather than in images of broken or decayed architecture (which, as we have seen, might most probably not have survived in the first place), Wu detected metaphors and visual tropes that elicited the experience of decay, death, and rebirth (2012: 94). According to Wu, in the visual repertoire of painters it is possible to discern a recurrent use of the trope of the mound covering a tomb (*qiu* 丘), and most particularly, of the *xu* 墟, which marks the void and silence of the site of a former city, the abandoned open expanse only filled with overgrown vegetation.[29] *Xu*, which entered Chinese language, up to our days, as the word for ruins,[30] stems from this etymological connection with 'void'. In this sense, it opens a highly productive difference with the term 'ruins', which stems from the Latin *ruere* ('to fall down, to collapse'), pointing to 'collapsed stones' and from here, to traces and remnants.

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[29] This last element provides a fascinating insight on the dialectics between universal and culturally determined responses. Flora is a crucial element in all ruin sites: weeds and fungi flourish in abandoned and deserted sites, and contribute to the processes of ruination by cracking and destroying the stones. However, the cultural representation of ruin flora is determined in a large degree by botanical geography. The rainy climate of England populated ruined abbeys and castles, as well as Romantic poems, of ivy and brambles, whereas in North China, ears of millet grew wild on expanses of abandoned land. Li Bai 李白 (701 – 762), on the mound of Xie An's 謝安 (4th century AD) tomb, writes: "The land is ancient, its cloud-creatures survive, /but its terraces have collapsed, where millet grows dense" ("A Song of Chin-ling: parting from Fan Hsuian", Owen 1990:425). A poem from the *Book of Songs* ("There the millet is lush" *Shuli* 黍離, I. 6.65) and Han dynasty commentator Mao Heng, canonized millet as a ruin trope and iconic ruinous vegetable (Wu 2012: 27-30; Owen 1986: 16-32).

[30] The last winner of the Xingyun Award for Global Chinese Science Fiction has been *Ruins of Time* (*Shijian zhi xu*) by Mainland author Baoshu 宝树, with a story in which only the memories of some people remain permanent in a world where, due to an experiment that distorted time, everything retrieves to the same point in time every 20 hours. Memory as human permanence, as remnant of an instable world, then, consigned by the term *xu*.

Figure 22. Attributed to Li Cheng, *Stele for Shedding Tears*, 13th-14th century.

Source: Wikipedia Commons

Wu also discusses one of the paintings that have traditionally been understood as a Chinese ruin painting, *Reading the Stele* (*Du bei an shi tu*) (Figure 22) attributed to Northern Song dynasty painter Li Cheng 李成 (919–967). As in many European paintings of ruins, a visitor focalizes the attention in an architectural element, in this case a stele, which comes from the past. In the scroll, the stele is credited as the *Stele for Shedding Tears* (*Beitu Le*). The stele became a major catalyzer for a melancholic reflection on the past and a trigger for the embodiment, by officials and literati, of Confucius dictum: "I transmit; I do not make" (*Analects* VII.1) (Owen 1986: 17-18). A visit to the stele was the occasion for actualizing and transmitting into the future the veneration for the ancestors that originated the monument in the first place. However, Wu notes that the stele, which looks solid and whole, with neither moss nor weeds hanging from its intact contours, cannot be described as a ruin since it shows no signs of decay and nor indicates the passage of time (2012: 36). Instead, it is the wrinkling

and contorted trees surrounding the stele that something akin to a ruin is hinted. The trope of the *kushu* 枯树 (Figures 23 and 24), a withered yet not dead tree, becomes a "living ruin" (Wu 2012:41) that expresses but transcends the passage of time and the ephemerality of nature.

Figures 23 and 24. (Left), Su Shi, *Withered Tree and Strange Rock* (*Kumu guaishi*)，ca. 1037-1101; (right), Shitao, *Reminiscences of Nanjing: Old Gingko at Mt. Chinglong*, 1707.

Sources: Wu (2012); Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Moreover, the barren and enduring tree encapsulates references to an eschatology of decay and rebirth, and the virtues of humility and resilience shared by neo-Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions.[31] In different paintings by Shitao, Wu also detects similarly ruinous trees, expressing notions and feelings about death and rebirth. The ultimate point, then, is that different cultural and philosophical background would produce different ruins. In Christian Europe, ruins bridged between transience and

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[31] The number of associations of the withered tree in poetry is large: A sign of impermanence in the poetry of the second and third centuries; and a pun based on the words "timber" *cai* 材 and "talent" *cai* 才, which motivated different metaphors: "the man of talent/timber may serve as a "beam" in the edifice of the state; raw talent/timber may be "carved" and given the adornment of culture or may prove too "rotten" to decorate". Taoists were drawn to it as a metaphor of the unaltered state that the gnarled tree preserves thanks to seclusion or deformity, whereas the rebirth of a lifeless tree could denote the restoration of a clan or dynasty (Owen 1979: 171)

eternity, material death and spiritual eternal transcendence. Even in secular aesthetics, ruins posited a synthesis between culture and nature, between the efforts of mankind and the forces of nature.[32] Conversely, a culture for which "Nature is cast as the comprehensible form of spiritual essence rather than as a transient signifier of the transcendent hereafter" (Silbergeld 1999: 65) would necessarily produce 'ruins' of a different kind.

It is tempting to see some of these visual tropes persisting in modern and contemporary art practice. While Wu Hung does not explicitly makes this connection, he nonetheless notes, discussing paintings of 20th century reformers of painting, such as Gao Jianfu, Huang Xinbo 黄新波 (1915 – 1980) or Chen Qiucao 陈秋草 (1906 – 1988), a recurrent future-oriented impetus, a push for renovation and hope that contrasts with the nostalgic indulgence of picturesque ruins, as well as with the sober documentary value of wartime visual documents. It might seem that some of the immanent vitality of the *kushu* runs through the branches of a sprouting tree and flowers that Situ Qiao 司徒乔 paints in front of Shanghai's Stone Drum Academy [Shigu Shuyuan], destroyed during a Japanese bombing (Wu 2012: 169).

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[32] Such is the view of Georg Simmel: "This unique balance—between mechanical, inert matter which passively resists pressure, and informing spirituality which pushes upward—breaks, however, the instant a building crumbles. For this means nothing else than that merely natural forces begin to become master over the work of man: the balance between nature and spirit, which the building manifested, shifts in favor of nature. This shift becomes a cosmic tragedy which, so we feel, makes every ruin an object infused with our nostalgia; for now the decay appears as nature's revenge for the spirit's having violated it by making a form in its own image. The whole history of mankind is a gradual rise of the spirit to mastery over the nature which it finds outside, but in a certain sense also within, itself" (Simmel 1959).

Figure 25. Huang Xinbo, *Seeds,* 1947.

Source: Wu (2012)

In Huang Xinbo's *Seeds* (*Benzi*, 1947) (Figure 25), ruined architecture and broken land seem energized by a similarly tenacious force, embodied by two huge hands that, echoing the trees in the background, burst forth from the ground. Decades later, in another momentous period such as the end of the Cultural Revolution, painter Huang Rui ciphered the aspirations of the nation in an anthropomorphized version of the ruins of the Yuanming Yuan, turning the columns into human bodies that embrace and console each other (Figure 26), and in a posterior painting, *The Rebirth of Yuanming Yuan (Yuanming Yuan: Xin sheng*; Figure 27), ruins have fully become anthropomorphized, and coming out from the earth, open and rise towards the sun. Even a contemporary photographic series by Li Wei (Hubei 1970) on the widespread demolition of old quarters in Beijing, a pair of stretched arms struggle to come out from the engulfing rubble, and in two of the photographs, the hands hold a baby "leaving the earth", as if it was possible to salvage, from the barren landscape, a sprout of hope and renovation (Figures 28, 29).

Figures 26, 27. Huang Rui, (left) *The Testament of Yuanming Yuan;* (right) *The Rebirth of Yuanming Yuan*, 1979.

Source: Wu (2012)

Figures 28, 29. Li Wei, (left) *Hands stretched out to the light;* (right) *Baby leaves the Earth,* 2003.

Source: artist website

2.3. Artistic and intellectual articulations of ruins in modern and contemporary China

Chinese reformists and Nationalist activists made frequent reference to the destruction of the old order, to the point that some termed the thinking of the time as a "mentality of tearing down walls" (*chaicheng de sixiang*).[33] Ruins, betraying a sense of historical discontinuity, served to comment—usually in a critical tone—on the state of the nation and the necessity for change. Different intellectuals and writers took the opportunity of the collapse of the Leifeng Pagoda in 1924 to express their views on the country by making reference to the new ruins. Poet Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897 – 1931) expressed his disdain for all things past and oppressive: "What is it to lament about?/ This pagoda was oppression; this tomb is burial"; Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881 – 1936), for whom China was a country in ruins that his countrymen stubbornly insisted in parching up, asked for characters like Rousseau, Nietzsche, or Ibsen, who "not only destroy but blaze a trail and lead a charge, sweeping aside all the old tracts, whether whole rails or fragments, that get in men's way" (Wang 2003: 519-525).

The question that this and other examples raise concerns the when and how ruins became so ingrained in the intellectual repertoire of modern China. For Wu Hung, the answer has to be traced back to the introduction of the first depictions of Chinese ruins by Europeans visiting China in the late 18th century, and the posterior development, in the growing proliferation of ruin images in photography, lithography and illustrated journals. In a context in which Chinese art "ceased to be a self-contained cultural system and was brought into a global circulation of images, mediums and visual technology" (Wu 2012: 95), ruins gradually entered the visual repertoire and imaginary of China.

The diplomatic contacts between European nations and China in the 18th century included painters and draughtsman who participated of the picturesque taste of their time. In their representation of Chinese landscapes, indigenous sites and monuments

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[33] So it read an editorial in *The Nationalist* (*Aiguo bao*) of September 8, 1912 (cited in Visser, 2010:14).

were brought "into a non-Chinese frame of perception and representation", and, in this process, they were "rediscovered, reinterpreted and reframed for a global viewing public" (Wu 2012: 101). In this semi-imperialist framework, not only were these monuments discovered anew but also reinterpreted, a process of epistemological violence common to the violent European irruption in China that James Hevia has disclosed as a process of "disenchantment" (2003: 264-267). Divesting the object of its original, indigenous meaning, Europeans were able to reframe it for different uses (commercial, political, artistic, etc.) in a global sphere of circulation.[34]

A case in point is William Alexander, draughtsman in Lord Macartney's 1792 embassy to Qianlong, in whose drawings Chinese landscapes and buildings were brought within the depiction system of the picturesque (Wu 2012: 97-105). Though a bit posterior, the emphasis of this dissertation on the simultaneity of visual and discursive articulations of ruins justifies a brief note on the illuminating case of French artist Auguste Borget's (1808 – 1877) record of a trip to China in 1838. Right upon arriving, Borget discovered a "very picturesque spot" with the inevitable ruin, which he sketched and described in his diary:

> Near where we landed starts a ruined wall, from which springs a trees, leafless except at its summit, its roots perforating the wall in every direction. Close by is a little court, formed by three buildings, at the end of which stands a temple... From this temple proceeds a wall, formed of flat stones, enclosing a beautifully wooded and very picturesque spot. At a short distance is a little cottage, at the door of which stood an old Chinese. He advanced towards us and received us with the greatest hospitality, offering us tea, &c. Seated under the bower which shades the door of his cottage, I sketched the scene before me; and although, as an artist, I dislike the rice fields, I could not help admiring the skill with which they distribute over them the scanty suppy of water, but for which any harvest would be impossible, and all their labour vain." (Borget 1838:1)

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[34] A case in point is William Chambers, who purportedly based his theoretical contributions to the new English landscape movement on Chinese models. Yue Zhuang's research (2013) has found evidence that Chamber not only did not visit China nor have direct sources; he also acknowledged of using an imaginary Chinese style of gardening to frame and back his own ideas.

In his textual record, the artistic and cultural conventions of the time are made manifest in their full force. Borget's acknowledgement that "as an artist, I dislike the rice fields" betrays the influx of the picturesque ('in the manner of painters') taste, for which the convention of landscape painting articulates the on-spot appreciation of natural setting. For its part, Arcadian and pastoral motives are hinted by the elderly, hospitable and hard-working Chinese. Finally, the "ruined wall" is magnified in the accompanying sketch by the composition, in which boulders, rocks and ruins scalate with dynamism the hills that provide the background for the scene. The fortunes of these ruins from China offer a perfect example of the fact that, as Robert Harbison has noted, "the perceiver's attitudes count so heavily that one is tempted to say that ruins are a way of seeing" (1993: 99).

Figures. 30 and 31. (Left) Auguste Borget, *Sketches of China and the Chinese*, Plate I, 1842; (right) Henry Charles Cammidge, *Garden on Tsu-Chin Pagoda hill 5 Miles from Soochow*,[35] mid-1870s.

Source: Borget (1842); Bennet (2010)

This process of articulation of the Chinese landscape and buildings from the perspective of European representation traditions did not remained limited to drawing and painting, but extended to the new medium of photography, which inherited many of the representational traditions of oil painting, and with them, of

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[35] Terry Bennet corrects Cammidge's caption and identifies the pagoda as the Yunyan ta, badly damaged during the Taiping occupation of Suzhou between 1860 and 1863 (2010: 126).

ruin painting. The persistence of the picturesque manifested in the selection of themes and compositions that highlighted the old age and decay of pagodas, arches (*pailou*) or temples. Participating of the "imperialist nostalgia" that "concealed the brutality of the imperialist endeavor and captured the imagination by posing as 'innocent yearning'" (Rosaldo 1989: 70), photographs portrayed an exotic and ahistorical China, in which the presence of Chinese people—when they appeared at all—responded to the technical requirements, like expressing scale, depth of field, or scenic effect.[36]

With the introduction of photography, pictorial magazines had a profound affect in the dissemination of the ruinous imaginary. Photography of the destruction caused by war and bombardments, in particular, had an important presence in the printed media. The "witness value" (*jianzheng*) of photography was articulated around its evidentiary power (*zheng*, 'evidence') and "testifying gaze" (*jian*) (Wu 2012: 143). Photographs of shell-shocked Shanghai pertained to a kind of images that, at the time, were still novel, the documents of bombardment to civil population, which actualized the global repertoire of ruined nightmares at the speed of cable news.

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[36] Historians of photography have noted the recurrence of depopulated landscapes in photographs of foreigners in the context of imperialism. The technical conditions of early photography are a first reason for this characteristic. The extremely long exposure times of the calotype and wet-collodion systems made it difficult to photograph people, who would disappear of appeared blurred unless they had posed still for a long time. In contrast, static elements, either natural (landscapes) or man-made (buildings, objects) appear distinctly in these early photographs (Jones 2010: 608). However, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes, and "[a]lthough it was the conditions of early photography that determined the human absence, it is reasonable to assume that such photographic documentation, showing so much of the world to be empty, was unconsciously assimilated to the justifications for an expanding empire" (Solomon-Godeau 1981:100). In this sense, the photographs of foreign photographers in China like Felice Beato (1832-1907) offered a visual counterpart of the imperialist aspirations of Western powers in Asia. In the next quote from an editorial of *The Illustrated London News,* a pictorial to which Beato submitted photographs, the vocabulary of vision and space is unmistakably imperialist:

> What a *prospect* is hereby opened to us! What *space* for the expansion of trade! What *endless* variety of new resources does it bring within reach! What an *expanse* for the exertion of scientific, literary, philanthropic, and religious enterprise! Here is more than enough *room* for the most adventurous imagination. It is as though Western energy had recovered for itself a *third part of the globe*, for nearly two centuries as lost to it. The effect will probably be incalculable, transcending that which followed the discovery of America. (my italics, "Return of Lord Elgin", *The Illustrated London News*, 38, no.1083, April 13, 1861, cited in Harris 1999)

Figure 32. "A view of the Demolished North Station".[37]

Source: *Pictorial Review of the Sino-Japanese Conflict in Shanghai* (1932)

The evidentiary and propagandistic potential of images of war destruction also offered a setting for dramatizations of a sense of political awakening. The film *Three Modern Women* (*Sange modeng nüxing*), directed by Bu Wancang 卜万苍 (1903–1974) in 1933, offers a good example of the narrative uses of the rubble of Japanese bombings. In the film, a politically conscious Zhou Shuzhen 周淑珍 (played by the famous actress Ruan Linyu 阮玲玉) takes the male protagonist for a stroll around the ruins of the bombings, after which he awakes to the dramatic reality of China and joins the ranks of resistance (Figure 33).[38]

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[37] Shanghai's North Station was destroyed during the bombardment of Shanghai by Japanese forces in January 28, 1932.

[38] Artworks created to record and reflect on the destruction of modern warfare serves us to confront, once again (and with the necessary caution when comparing non-homogenous and open-ended phenomena such as *cultures*) different representational strategies and conventions as regards ruins. In England, the strong cultural imprint of the picturesque reached over paintings of bomb destruction; conversely, the recurrent *theatralization* of ruins as a stage for human drama in China supports the connection, previously explored, between different representation metaphorically invoking re-awakening and rebirth. In the context of the Second World War, the German Blitz in England left on its wake much destruction and devastation. In 1940, London was bombarded during 57 consecutive nights, destroying over one million London houses. The city of Coventry, site of an important industrial hub, suffered a severe bombing by 400 German bombers only on the night of 15 November 1940; its destroyed Cathedral was to become an icon of resistance and patriotic enthusiasm. The War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC), led by the eminent art historian Kenneth Clark, coordinated a group of some of the most reputed painters of the time (like John Piper, Ethel Gabain or Graham Sutherland) to document the effects of bombardment and contribute to memorialization and patriotic mobilization. For Clark and the WAAC artists, "[b]omb damage is in itself Picturesque." (Woodward 2001：212). In offering a commission to Duncan Grant, Clark wrote,

Figure 33. Still from *Three Modern Women* (dir. Bu Wancang, 1933).

Source: Baike

The reformist mentality of destruction and revolution, and the political instrumentalization of ruins, reached a feverish peak in Mao Zedong's thought. In the essay "On New Democracy", for example, written in 1939 in Yan'an, Mao set the basis for the policy of "Destroy the old and establish the new" (*pojiu lixin*), which posited the destruction of imperial, feudal and bourgeois ideas as a precondition to carve the new social reality.

> Reactionary culture serves the imperialists and the feudal class and must be swept away. Unless it is swept away, no new culture of any kind can be built up. There is no construction without destruction, no flowing without damming, and no motion without rest; the two are locked in a life-and-death struggle. (Mao 1940)

During the movements to "destroy the four olds" (old customs, culture, habits, and ideas), the Red Guards directed these destructive energies at physical, as well as

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I know you have painted St. Paul's a great many times but I hope you will not mind painting it once more because I don't think it has ever looked more beautiful than it does rising out of this sort of Pompeii in the foreground and the Pompeii has all the elements of colour which I think you enjoy painting. (Brandon 2012 :65)

It might be difficult to find such aesthetic enjoyment among Chinese painters of wartime destruction, such as Gao Jianfu, Wu Zuoren or Han Jinsheng 韩景生 (1991 - 1998). As noted with reference to history and its interdependence with traces, ruins and aesthetics also go hand in hand in the Western tradition, to the point that it might seem that "the aestheticization of ruins is unavoidable" (Schönle and Hell 2010: 1).

ideological, remnants of former times. Along with Confucian ideas and values, a myriad of temples, shrines and artistic and religious objects succumbed to the hammers of the Red Guards, with rubble participating of the general passion for violence and ruthlessness, as Mao had advised: "Be violent!" (*Yao wu ma*!). In this tumultuous context of destruction, the destruction of all that was deemed old and reactionary transferred smoothly to the campaigns of demolition of city walls, temples and buildings, with ideological engineering reaching urban planning and design (Visser 2010:16).

Figure 34. Red Guards pulling down an Archway in Qufu in 1966. Photographer unknown.

Source: Creative Review

By the end of the Cultural Revolution, ruins were called upon to serve the collective reflection on the extreme events that have taken place during the last decades and centuries, and in a more general vein, on the fate of the country: the social body was felt to be, quite literally, ruined and shattered. In the reemergence of avant-garde initiatives in the late 1970s[39] favored by the relative political relaxation, artists

[39] The term 'reemergence' points to the present revision of the periodization of Chinese contemporary

looking for symbols for their works and locations for their performances were attracted to ancient relics and derelict spaces. Painters, poets and writers took over ruins (often, the *Haiyang tang*, the ruined palaces of the Western section of the Yuanming Yuan) as a motive and symbol for their works. In addition to Huang Rui's triptych about the Yuanming Yuan noted before (Figures 26, 27), other members of the Stars Groups, like Yin Guangzhong 尹光中 (Guizhou, 1944), Boyun 薄雲 (Beijing, 1948) and Mao Lizi 毛栗子 (Shanxi, 1950) incorporated the Great Wall in their paintings. In works of so-called "misty" poets, like Jiang He 江河 (Beijing, 1949) and Yang Lian 楊煉 (Switzerland, 1955), linked to the independent magazine *Jintian* and with friendship and affinities with the Stars artists, ruins were again a frequent topic (Wu 2012: 188-201).[40]

The fact that the first issue of *Jintian* included a translation of Heinrich Böll's "On Ruin Literature", gives an idea of the impact of rubble in the imaginary of the most experimentally bended artists. The same issue also featured a short tale by Bei Dao 北岛 (Beijing, 1949), written under the pseudonym of Shi Mo and titled "In the ruins" (*Zai feixu shang*). In the story, a Peking University professor called Wang Qi, who has been accused of being a spy and a counter-revolutionary, walks along the ruins of the Western palaces of the Yuanming Yuan planning to commit suicide. The ruins, "and he himself was just a little stone among them", are equated with historical violence:

> Standing before him was China's history, the history of the last decades, or even of the last centuries and millennia. The endless arrogance and revolt, dissipation and

art, in the face of different antecedents, such as avant-garde initiatives design and the arts in the 1920s and 1930s; the reappraising of revolutionary art and design and the connections with international schools of socialist art, such as Mexican muralists; and isolated examples of modernism during the Cultural Revolution (like the No Name-*Wu ming* group, the members of which painted clandestinely in Fauvist, Expressionist and Symbolist styles since the early 1960s).

[40] Yang Lian's poem "Apologia to a Ruin" (*Zibai - gei yizuo feixu*) offers a similar image as Huang Rui's paintings (Figure 27): "Here in the gray shattered sunlight/ arches, Stone pillars cast shadows/ cast memories blacker tan scorched earth/ as if frozen in their death agony/ their arms convulsed into the sky/ as if to bestow their final/ testament to time/ this testament/ becomes a curse muttered at my birth" (Yang 1983).

vice; the rivers of blood and mountains of bones; the sumptuous yet desolate cities, palaces and tombs; the thousand upon thousand of horses and soldiers mirrored against a huge canopy of the heavens; the axe on the execution block, dripping with blood; the sundial with its shadow revolving around the glossy Stone lab; the thread-bound hand-copied books piled in dusty secret rooms; the long, mournful sound of the night-watchman beating his wooden rattle...all these together formed these desolate ruins. (Bei 1989: 152)

This vision of ruins echoes that of Walter Benjamin, probably the most influential for the modern understanding of ruins. For Benjamin, ruins stand as embodiments of discontinuous, significant moments of emancipation, as materializations or traces. In his ninth *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, a propos a painting by Paul Klee, Benjamin describes an Angel of History that looking backwards perceives human history as a single catastrophe "which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet". The Angel is drawn to piety by these remnants, but a storm "blowing from Paradise" takes his wings and pushes the Angel towards a future of social and political progress.[41] In the willful optimism that pervaded China after the Cultural Revolution, History was perceived in the making, as a process moving again towards progress. Whereas the *telos* of progress of Benjamin was probably different from the one of China's young intellectuals, ruins were, in both cases, not a final destination but a signal of movement and change. In Bei Dao's story, the narrator makes this aspiration quite explicit: "History would not stop at this scene of ruin, no, it would not, it would proceed from here, and go on into the wide world" (Bei 1989: 152).

Ruins also participated in the process of national reflection that articulated artistic and intellectual movements like Roots-Seeking Literature (*Xungen wenxue*), Native

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[41] The whole thesis reads: "A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." (Benjamin, 1969: 257-258)

(Fuzhou, 1955) and Zhou Chunya 周春芽 (Chengdu, 1955) (Lai 2009: 70), and, by the turn of the century, for paintings of demolition by Li Dafang 李大方 (Shenyang, 1971) (Figure 36).

By the mid 1980s, in the context of the artistic '85 *New Wave*, pioneering performance groups were also called upon the ruins. The group "Concept 21" (*Gainian* 21)[43] conducted performances at the Great Wall, the Ming Tombs, Beijing's Ancient observatory, and the Yuanming yuan between 1986 and 1989 (Figure 37). For their part, Xu Yihui 徐一晖, Cai Xiaogang 柴小刚 and Sen Dada 森达达 conducted in 1986[44] a performance titled *Archeological Excavations on a Waste Disposal Site* (*Wa jue*) in a large "desert" of phosphate ore in Lianyungang, Jiangsu (Figure 38). The extant photographs of the performance show the artists completely dressed in white and wearing dark glasses, digging the terrain and unearthing skulls.

Figures 37. Wang Wenlan, *Performance at the Yuanming Yuan*, 1987.

Source: Sohu

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[43] Formed by Zhao Jianhai 赵建海, Sheng Qi 盛奇, Xi Jianjun 袭建军 and Kang Mu 康木.

[44] The performance is usually credited solely to Xu Yihui and Cai Xiaogang, but according to his own record, Sen Dada was part of it since the start. Moreover, Berghuis (2006:69) dates the performance in the summer of 1986, while Sen marks the beginning of the project in 1982, when Xu Yihui found the desert and started planning the performance with him (Sen n.d.).

Figure 38. *Archeological Excavations on a Waste Disposal Site* (performance), 1986.

Source: Berghuis (2004)

The metaphor and imaginary of uncovering and archaeological research, already noted by Sigmund Freud when he used as a simile for his analytic method, permeates many of the works that, starting in the 1990s, began to populate Chinese experimental art with ruins. Yin Xiuzhen's 尹秀珍 (Beijing, 1963) installation *Ruined City* (*Feidu*, 1996; Figure 39), for which she recovered furniture and tiles from demolished houses, as well as four tons of cement powder, and Song Dong's 宋东 (Beijing, 1966) collecting of door plates from demolished houses, are based on the positionality of the archaeologist to reclaim objects from their premature obsolescence, and bring them back into cultural significance as *yi wu*, the objects left behind by deceased owners impregnated of their "moisture" (Wu 2012: 209). Subjective and collective identity where thus articulated in site-specific projects like those examined in chapter 4, contributing to bring the phenomenon of urban demolition in the focus of the most contemporary art practice in connection with the notion of ruins.

Figures 39 and 40. (Left), Yin Xiuzhen, *Ruined City*, installation, 1996; (right), Wang Zhong 王中, *Project 95, Demolish Chaoyangmen,* 1996.

Source. Asian Art Archive; Lai (2009)

Critical, academic and curatorial work rapidly engaged around the notion of ruins. Besides his research, and critical and curatorial work, Wu Hung convened in May 17, 1997 a symposium under the title "Ruins in Chinese Art, Literature, and History" at the University of Chicago, in which a group of the most reputed US-based historians of Chinese art examined the history and articulations of Chinese representations of ruins.[45] While some participants explored the implications of the absence of ruins in China's past and some of its modern expressions (Wu Hung, Jerome Silbergeld), others, like Jonathan Hay, Eugene Wang, and Robert Harrist offered case studies that revealed cultural particularities in the social and cultural articulation of architectural remains in China. The notion of ruins was rapidly appropriated also in Chinese academic and critical spheres. Zhang Zhaohui 张朝晖 use it in curating two exhibitions of photography in Macao (2005) and in the United States (2006),[46] which included artists like Wang Qingsong, the Gao Brothers, Liu Jin, Chen Qiulin or Zhang

[45] While the proceedings of the symposium were not published, the contributions of each participant can be extracted from published materials shortly after. In this sense, see Jerome Silbergeld (2000), Jonathan Hay (1999), Eugene Wang (2003), and Robert Harrist (1998).

[46] "Ruins' Flowers: Contemporary Photographic Works Exhibition" (*Feixu shang de hua/ Flores Decrépitadas*), 19-2/ 10-4, 2005, Old Ladies' House Art Space, Ox Warehouse, Macau; "Ruins: An Exhibition of New Video and Photography from China", March 10-May 14, 2006, Peck School of the Arts, Institute of Visual Arts

Dali. For his part, an article by Lai Zhiqiang 赖志强 in *Fine Arts Journal* (*Meishu Xuebao*) connected urban change and and art by means of ruins (2009).

Beyond the field of contemporary art, these voices critical with the new direction of the country in the wake of the Tiananmen movement, including the intensified push for market-oriented policies, and the new social contract based in providing opportunities for economic wealth, often made reference to the notion of ruins, fragmentation and decay. As in other contemporary articulations, ruins were invoked "in a critique of the spatial organization of the modern world and of its single-minded commitment to a progress that throws too many individuals and spaces into the trash" (Hell and Schönle 2010: 8). New Left scholar and intellectual Wang Hui 汪晖, for example, would declare that "[i]n the wake of declining New Enlightenment thought, what we see are its remnants; on these ruins sits the capitalist market that crosses all national boundaries" (Wang 2001:187). The intellectual jargon of the period, as Jason McGrath underscores, abounded in 'ruinous' language: a risk of collapse (*bengkui*, *bengta*), of fractured (*posui*) values and sense of social totality, etc. (2010: 20). Significantly, in 1993, a group of writers and intellectuals discussed current directions in the artistic and literary fields in a published conversation titled "Ruins in the Wilderness: The Crisis of Literature and the Spirit of Humanism" (*Kuangye shang de feixu: Wenxue yu renwen jingshen de weiji*). The debate reached national level, with two sides arguing in the pages of liberal journals like *Dushu*. For literary critic Xu Lin 徐林, for example, the success of the most sensationalist writers (he was thinking of people like Wang Shuo 王朔, who emerged to public notoriety and commercial success in the early 1990s) was a direct result of the collapse of the value system (*jizhiguan bengkui hou de chanwu*) and a sneering at the ruins of culture (*wenhua feixude chaoxiao*)[47] (Wang 1996). Finally, another ruinous icon of the the first half of the 1990s was Jia Pingwa's 贾平凹 (Shaanxi, 1952) novel *Ruined Capital*

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[47] "其实，在文学上，'王朔现象'并不罕见，它是《儒林外史》及以 后的谴责小说，和四十年代包括《围城》在内的所谓"讽刺文学"的恶性重复。尽管作者们的社会角色迥然不同，但从他们对语言的态度和操作中可以找到许多相似 之处。它们都是正统价值观念崩溃后的产物，并都是对文化废墟的嘲笑。" (Wang 1996)

(*Feidu*, 1993), a banned yet widely read novel the protagonist of which, Zhuang Zhidie, is a polygamous and fetishistic novelist that typified the perceived spiritual decadence of the times, symbolized in the title's old walled city, figuratively in ruins.

2.3.1. Yu Qiuyu, "Ruins" (1992)

The following section analyzes a short text by scholar and writer Yu Qiuyu (Zhejiang, 1946), of which an original translation is included in the annex (all citations from this translation). Titled "Ruins", it is an example of the genre of cultural prose (*wenhua sanwen*), which Yu championed in the early 1990s. "Ruins" is a text particularly imbricated with its social and cultural milieu. As the editors of the Chinese literature website *Paper Republic* unambiguously state, Yu Qiuyu "is one of, if not the most, well-known contemporary Chinese cultural and literary figures" (Paper Republic, n.d.). An art scholar and head of Shanghai Academy of Drama, Yu's fame stems from the publication, in 1992, of *A Bitter Journey Through Culture* (*Wenhua Kulu*), a book that became a meteoric and somewhat unexpected best-seller among Chinese readers (with a large success in Taiwan even before than in the P.R.C.). The popularity of "Ruins" was further increased by its inclusion in a reader for secondary school students.

Adopting the genre of *sanwen* or short proses, in *A Bitter Journey…* Yu combines the travelogue, the historical reflection, and the personal essay to explore issues affecting Chinese culture and history. Yu's main focus is on the status and preservation of China's cultural and material heritage, including ancient relics and cultural landmarks (like the Dunhuang caves, the Ming dynasty encyclopedia *Ye hang chuan*, the Yuelu Academy in Changsa, or the Tianyi Pavilion), as well as intangible heritage, like Shanghainese identity or the Jiangnan culture. His enormous success prompted a revival of the genre of cultural essays, and Yu himself later explored similar topics in other works, such as *Notes From the Hills* (*Shan ju biji*, 1995), *A Sigh Of a Thousand*

Years (*Qiannian yi tan*, 2000), or *A Life Borrowed* (*Jie wo yi sheng,* 2004), as well as in TV shows.

Gong Haomin (2011) situates the book in the post-1989 context,[48] when the idealism of the previous decade faded giving rise instead to a sudden rush towards consumer culture. This change of gear and direction had a strong impact on the cultural sphere, with intellectuals undergoing a process of repositioning and professionalization, with a growing importance of the mass media, as epitomized by the figure of writer Wang Shuo. In this context, Yu's prose seemed to offer an alternative to the vulgarization of mass culture. It reconnected a generation, barred from traditional knowledge by Maoist iconoclasm, pro-Western idealism, and commercialism, with their cultural heritage, and capitalized on a kind of cultural nationalism that pleased both readers and the government. The paradox, though, is that *Bitter Journey…* was a great popular and commercial success, achieved by means of what many Chinese scholars of literature deemed as affected sentimentality (Gong 2011: 354-357) and a strong complicity with the mass media.

"Ruins" is the title of chapter 28 of the book. Instead of focusing on a particular relic or ruined site, Yu offers a general reflection on the complex conditions of architectural ruins in China and their conservation. The lack of a "ruin culture" constitutes, for Yu, "a hole in the heart of Chinese people", which ultimately poses a problem that risks jeopardizing China's quest for modernity.

Yu divides the contemporary attitudes towards ruins in two antagonistic groups: "One the one hand, a pedantic, uncompromising commemoration of the past; on the other, a fashionable pragmatism. While nostalgics only want to recover the past, trendy people only want to eliminate it." The former are narcissistic and aloof, and celebrate the poetics of ruins; the later, privilege utilitarianism and progress, and do not care about the past. Yu's position aims to bridge between these opposites. Criticizing those

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[48] While the book was written in the 1980s, a series of accidents delayed for over four years its publication.

projects of renovation that conceal the effects of time ("a dishonest trick"), Yu defends a careful renovation of architectural relics that have kept alive their power of attraction, as "ruins are the magnetic field created between two poles, antiquity and modernity, where the compass of the heart reacts with intensity". But ruins also have to serve the present and the future: their ultimate purpose and function is to allow the Chinese people to become more calmer and more magnanimous, to acknowledge their past so as to self-confidently "move forward to modernity". In this sense, Yu's text reads as a piece of cultural activism, striving to provide contemporary China with the indispensable imaginary of ruins which, for Andreas Huyssen, it is necessary for any theory of modernity (2010: 21-22). Yu's text is pregnant with *youhuan*, or "patriotic worrying", which Gloria Davies has identified as a characteristic of the contemporary critical thought in China (2007). In this sense, Yu seems to be concerned with the necessity to acknowledge the past, even at its most tragic. As a prerequisite for greatness and sublimity, his call for a sober acceptance of "tragedy", as well as the ruinous past, can be read as a necessary and unavoidable confrontation with the nation's ghosts.

It is interesting to note that the tension between nature and culture, which recurs in the philosophical articulations of ruins in Europe, is symptomatically absent in Yu Qiuyu's characterization of ruins. Moreover, he offers no characterization of the aesthetic of ruins. Comparing ruins to the yellow leaves of autumn trees, and the wrinkles and white hair of the elderly, the value of the old, that which "serenely embellish the world's countenance with benevolence", stems from the acceptance of the essence of life as process, and the acknowledgement of tradition.

Chapter 3. Photography, ruins and urban dereliction

The photographic context for this work is structured in two parts, which progressively narrow the focus over the development of experimental photography in China since the mid 1990s. The first part of the chapter foregrounds the photographic engagement with ruination at an international level, noting the way in which the new medium rapidly became a crucial tool in the context of archaeology, war journalism, and programs of urbanization, three different fields in which ruination was to become paramount. In these three areas, the indexical nature of the photographic process (the mechanic-chemical procedure of light-capture as evidence that the object *was* there) added a heightened evidentiary power (as proofs, archive, witness, etc.) to images of ruins.

Photography added further complexity to the representation of ruins as both shared the condition of being traces—though no indexes—of a former entirety.[49] Ruins and photographs refer to a previous reality (the whole building, the object in front of the lenses): a photograph of a ruin, then, is the trace of a trace. Moreover, photography helped to solve the paradoxical nature of ruins, between uninterrupted decay and some degree of preservation that makes it possible to recognize it. The ultimate value of a ruin is a function of the simultaneity of these two forces. A photograph can virtually stop the process of ruination, and stabilize decay, without intervening and altering it.[50]

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[49] The notion of index comes of course from Charles Sanders Pierce (1839 –1914), who analized and categorized signs giving birth to semiotics. His well-knows division focuses on the different relationship of the signs with their refferents: an *icon* resembles the referent (as the drawing of a face); a *symbol* (like words) is abstract, and exists along other sets of symbols (like in a language). For its part, an *index* has a material, sensorial relationship with its referent, like the smoke that signals a bonfire symbol. The analogical photographic process, based in the capture of light on an emulsionated surface, is indexical in so far as a photograph *needs* the referent, and by the same token, becomes an index of the referent. Conversely, ruins do not need an original referent, i.e., they can be faked or created as a ruin, but in their general appearance and meaning, they are the trace of a former object.

[50] As Michael Roth notes, the photographic arrestment of a ruin is ultimately an illusion, "based, in part, on our forgetting that the representations, whether on photographic paper or on canvas, will also age and become with time ruins of another sort" (1997: 13). In this sense, a photography of a ruins, rather than *the trace of a trace*, as previously noted, turns into *the ruin of a ruin*, a notion that informs

After noting this early and multifaceted connection between photography and ruination, the chapter presents some of the most influential artists in the area of the photo-conceptualist engagement with ruins starting in the 1960s. Works by Bernd and Hilla Becher, Robert Smithson, and Gordon Matta-Clark, representative of what Pamela Lee terms the "Austerlitz Effect", provided new strategies to visualize ruination and dereliction in the contemporary milieu, extending the meaning of transience with an awareness of entropic cycles, the creation of waste, and the economic dynamics behind development and obsolescence. Euro-American photo-conceptualist photography serves to contextualize the photographic engagement of experimental artist in China with ruination within the wider context of transnational capitalism and its visual regimes.

The second part of the chapter sketches a brief historical itinerary across artistic photography in China, from its origins in the 19th century to the present, and with a special emphasis on photographic works on changing urban landscapes and images of demolition. It notes the main developments (such as the founding of the illustrated journal *True Record Pictorial* or the first photographic salons and associations) and practitioners, like Lang Jingshan 郎静山, the major pictorialist photographer of the first quarter of the century in China, who also explored modernist aesthetics and early abstraction with studies of architectural volumes and urban geometry. After briefly commenting on the conditions of photography during the revolutionary period (1950 and 1960), ample space is devoted to the inception and development of contemporary photography in the late 1970s, with the amateur photographs of the April 5 movement, and the exhibition *Nature. Society. Man*. It then proceeds to examine the main strands of the 1980s *Photographic New Wave,* and the beginning of experimentalist proposals since the mid 1990s. In this regards, the chapter detects three main paths of experimental photography, and their relationship with photo-projects on demolition and dereliction.

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contemporary photographic practices of found photography, as examined a propos the work of Rong Rong (chapter 5).

The first is a highly analytical reflection on the characteristics of the photographic medium and the development of conceptualist strategies, in which the members of the Pond Society, Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, had a major role. The second path is based on the importance of photography as documentation of performance artworks. Finally, and as an outcome of the relation of photography and performance, a third strategy of experimental photography in China, which would prove key for the photographic engagement with demolition, is the staging of scenes and performances, leading to the recreation of ruinous tableaux by Wang Qingsong and 3-D imagining of demolition by Cao Fei and Zhang Xiaotao.

3.1. Ruins and photography

> The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking, in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model. (Bazin 1960:8)

The above quote, by film theorist André Bazin, takes the indexical power of photography to the limit. In the essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1960), Bazin defends that photography responds to a centuries-old human fight against death initiated with Egyptian mummies. In his view, the allure of photography resides in the preservation—partial, as a likeness—of an object once it has ceased to exist. Roland Barthes gave this relationship of photography with death a personal aspect, in deriving his analysis of the nature of photography from an image of her recently deceased mother, "the only photograph which assuredly existed for me" (Barthes 1981:73). One of the most revealing examples of this connection of photography and mortality is the early use of photography as *memento mori* in post-mortem portraiture (Burns archive 2014).

The potential of photography in this relationship with death is provided by what Bazin refers to as its "very process of its becoming", that is, the technical characteristics of the photographic medium. As the result of the process of capturing the reflection of light on an object in an emulsionated surface, photography is an index, that is, is a kind of sign that has a material connection with its referent, which the sign cannot do without. As an indexical trace, photography establishes a direct, necessary connection with the object whose light it has captured, and becomes proof that the object it reproduces had, at one point, existed. Even in the present context, when digital technologies and software have begin to affect the ontological status of photography, the interdependence of digital photography with notions of realism and regimes of truth still connect it to the epistemological universe of analog photography (Rosen 2001).

In this regard, photography participated, since its very invention, of the "epistemological prestige" of "documents, remains, survivals, ruins and edifices, fossils—in short, indexical traces that attest to a past by emerging into the present from it" (Rosen 2001: 115). In his comments on the Salon of 1859, Baudelaire, critical of artistic photography, granted the new medium with many good uses. Besides betraying the artistic role that photography had rapidly achieved, Baudelaire's comment foregrounds the potential of photography's indexical nature, and its connection with the archive, the catalogue and science.

> It is time, then, for it to return to its true duty, which is to be the servant of the sciences and arts—but the very humble servant, like printing or shorthand, which have neither created nor supplemented literature. Let it hasten to enrich the tourist's album and restore to his eye the precision which his memory may lack; let it adorn the naturalist's library, and enlarge microscopic animals; let it even provide information to corroborate the astronomer's hypotheses; in short, let it be the secretary and clerk of whoever needs an absolute factual exactitude in his profession—up to that point nothing could be better. Let it rescue from oblivion those tumbling ruins, those books, prints and manuscripts which time is devouring, precious things whose form is dissolving and which demand a place in the archives of our memory— it will be thanked and applauded. But if it be allowed to encroach upon the domain of

the impalpable and the imaginary, upon anything whose value depends solely upon the addition of something of a man's soul, then it will be so much the worse for us! (Baudelaire 1955: 232)

The Enlightenment privileging of positivist knowledge was almost simultaneous with European imperialism. The imperialist archive, notes Thomas Richards in *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (1993), "was not a building, not even a collection of texts, but the collectively imagined junction of all that was known or knowable, a fantastic representation of an epistemological master pattern, a virtual focal point for the heterogeneous local knowledge of metropolis and empire" (cited in Doane 2002: 221). Starting in the mid 19th century, photography would be called upon to assist in these initiatives of orientalist knowledge production.

Photographs taken in foreign and exotic lands displayed an ambivalent fluidity between the artwork, the souvenir, and the scientific evidence (Makarius 2005: 160). The aesthetic legacy of the picturesque taste, the musings of the philosophers of history, and the positivist impulse of the "orientalist renaissance"[51] and archaeology, combined in the works of pioneers of photography, such as Maxime Du Camp (1822 – 1894) and Francis Frith (1822 – 1898) in Egypt (Figures 41, 42), Giorgio Sommer (1834 – 1914) in Pompeii, Alfred P. Maudslay (1850 – 1931) in Palenque, Mexico, or Felice Beato (1832 – 1907) in Asia, and "helped disseminate visions of the colonies that were amenable to the logic of imperial domination" (Jones 2010: 602).

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[51] Raymond Schawb, characterizing the 'oriental renaissance' that by 1771 turned the world "truly round," notes how under the new impetus to oriental studies, "Antiquity ceased to be the subject of compilations of conjectures or a pantry of commonplaces. It rose from the earth in the form of restored cities where the shadow of human endeavor could be followed anew" (Bygrave 1996: 296).

Figures 41, 42. Francis Frith, (left) *Fountains Abbey*, c.1860; (right) *The Broken Obelisk, Karnac,* from the album *Egypt and Palestine*, 1857.

Source: Museum of Modern Art, New York

A second source of images of architectural destruction came from wartime photojournalism. The same evidentiary power that energized the positivist impulse of the colonial archive was now put to use to reveal the truth of war destruction. Circulating in illustrated journals, it served the purposes of information, denounce, mobilization, or propaganda. Contemporary to the first important practitioners, like Roger Fenton in the Crimea War (1853 – 1856) and George N. Barnard in the American Civil War (1861 – 1865) (Merewether 1997: 28-29), Felice Beato, an Italian photographer who worked in Crimea and India before joining the Anglo-French army during the Second Opium War, contributed to the global imagination of warfare with his photo-reportages of the 1860 attack to the Qing defenses at Dagu, the forts by the Hai River in Tianjin that blocked the Anglo-French advance to Beijing.

Figures 43 and 44. (Left), Felice Beato, *Interior of the Angle of North Fort,* 1860; (right) Charles Marville, Charles Marville, Construction of the avenue de l'Opéra- the Butte des Moulins from the rue Saint-Roch, 1876.

Sources: Getty; Met

A third aspect in which photographs of architectural destruction entered the visual culture of modernity was as record of demolition and urban renewal, a social practice that, starting at this time, would become one of the main sources of images of ruination worldwide, as this dissertation testifies. In the mid nineteenth century, Charles Marville (1813 – 1879) was commissioned to photograph and document the reforms of the Baron Haussmann in Paris, and captured the advance of the *percements*, which cutting through old quartiers opened space for the new wide thoroughfares and boulevards (Figure 44).

This characterization of images, based on the different source for destruction, should not conceal the fact that photographs of ruins did accommodate different and simultaneous purposes and responses. The detachment and sobriety of the document coexisted with the allure of romanticism. Images of urban reforms in Paris found an echo in the photographs of destruction at the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune in 1871. Different contemporary authors could not help but note the picturesque beauty of these ruins. This tension is particularly evident in Louis Enualt's *Paris brulé par la commune,* cited by Daryl Lee:

one senses the desolation too acutely not to feel an indeterminate remorse and shame in the face of dilettantish enjoyment, which would be nothing other than impiety [...]! But this night, in this silence, in this relative solitude of the grand monument [of the Hotel de Ville], all alone in the middle of this empty and cleared out space, for a moment, the artist murdered the citizen in me, and I could not stop myself from saying under my breath: This is terrible, but it is beautiful! (2002)

In the hands of the police, photographs by Alphonse Liebert and Bruno Braquehais turned into forensic evidence for prosecution of communards (Luxenberg 1998). In addition, the ruins became a touristic attraction, giving rise to a market of guides (i.e. *Guide à travers les ruines*, by Hans and Blanc), photographic series (i.e., Jules Andrieu's *Désastres de la guerre*), prints, and postcards, sold in a sudden and booming market of souvenirs of the destruction (Lee 2002).

Figure 45. Eugène Atget, *Rue de la Parcheminerie, après sa démolition,* March 1913.

Source: Musée d'Orsay

Eugène Atget (1857 – 1927) also undertook the record of the vanishing quarters of old Paris during Haussmann's urban reforms, but in his case it was an individual endeavor (he was not commissioned by the government). Atget's photographs focused on empty, strangely quiet streets (about which Walter Benjamin famously

commented that they looked like the scene of a crime [1969: 226]), and had a significant influence on the visual poetics of the modern city. Different schools and trends of artistic photography later claimed Atget as an antecedent, from the Symbolists and Surrealists who focused on the "ecstatic emptiness" of the city (Jacobs 2006), to the German New Objectivity (*Neus Sachlichkeit*) photography and the Düsseldorf School.

3.2. Photographic experimentalism and ruins: Bernd and Hilla Becher, Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark

In the post-war period, artistic photography underwent a process of emancipation from its previous subordination to painting, very much at work in the tradition of pictorialism (epitomized by Alfred Stiglitz, 1864 –1946) as well as in American social documentarians like Walker Evans (1903 1975). According to the view exposed by Jeff Wall in his influential essay "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art" (1995), photography achieved its own avant-garde self-critique by accepting its essential and indissoluble connection with the depiction of an event, its defining characteristic by virtue of the chemical-physical process of image creation. Photography addressed issues of representation, and of the status of the art object in a society growingly based in consumerism, while embracing popular and commercial cultures and non-artistic genres such as photoreportage and commercial photography, and the styles and methods of amateur and family photography. The resulting "marks of indifference" vacated the authorial position, challenged the very notion of artwork, and took to the fore notions such as idea and process, in alliance with artistic conceptualism and minimalism (Wall 1995).

Some of the most important artistic projects of this transitional period displayed a close relationship between photography, architecture, and temporality, which resulted in a renewed emphasis on architectonic ruination and decay. This triangulation has been termed by Pamela Lee as the "Austerlitz Effect" (2003), taking

the term from W.G. Sebald's (1944 – 2001) character and eponymous novel.[52] In line with the social critique characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s, the almost-apocalyptic outcomes of 20th century world wars, and the time-space compression of the postmodern milieu (Harvey 1989), new meanings of decay and ruin shifted the semantic core of ruins from the reflection on History to the representation of entropy, waste, and obsolescence.

3.2.1. Bernd and Hilla Becher: industrial typologies

The work of the couple formed by Bernd (1931 – 2007) and Hilla Becher (née Wobeser, 1934) supposed an innovative and influential approach to photographic art practice, in particular to architectural photography and its relation to derelict or ruined structures. Since the late 1950s, the Bechers devoted four decades to document different typologies of industrial buildings, first in the Ruhr valley and later extending the project to other sites in Western Europe and the United States. Accepting the legacy of the New Objectivity (*Neus Sachlichkeit*) movement from the 1920s and 1930s Germany, which in photography gave rise to a serialized approach to social documentary in the work of August Sander (1876 – 1964) and Albert Renger-Patzsch (1897 – 1966), the Bechers were fully committed with objectivity. Their photographs systematically used a non-human, centered perspective and equally scaled composition. In order to minimize distractions and focus on a formalist study of industrial buildings, they chose days of hazy clouds to shoot with a similar pale background, and eliminated all other elements, such as trees, human figures, signs, etc, aiming to suppress authorial subjectivity and any "effect that carry symbolic, anecdotal or expressive interpretations" (Rorimer 2001: 22).

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[52] As in other works by Sebald (*The Rings of Saturn* (1995); *The Emigrants* (1992)), the reflection on European identity by means of its architecture and ruins *in Austerlitz* (2001) is accompanied by many photographs by the author. In another work *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1999), translated as *On the Natural History of Destruction,* Sebald analyzes post-Second World War literary responses in Germany, with particular emphasis on the epistemology of rubble and the experience of living among the ruins.

Their series were organized by the function of the buildings, such as silos, water towers, refineries, cooling towers, blast furnaces, steel mills, etc., and exhibited the photographs grouped in a grid to explore similarities as well as differences within the typology. Within this conceptual subsuming of a photograph in the whole project, the individual photographs, as Anne Rorimer notes, "serves not only as a visual record of some aspect of reality, but also participates within the totality of a representational construction made up of single but co-dependent, elements (2001: 119).

Besides his photographic practice, Bernd Becher has had an enormous influence as teacher, giving raise to the so-called Dusseldorf School, which includes some of the major names of contemporary photography, such as Thomas Struth (Germany, 1954), Thomas Ruff (Germany, 1958), and Andreas Gursky (Germany, 1955) (Gronert 2009). The legacy of the typological approach has been particularly fruitful among those photographers working on urban landscapes, built environments, and modern and industrial ruins, like John Davies (UK, 1949), Thomas Jorion (France, 1976) or Jorge Gronemeyer (Chile, 1971). Photographers of urban decay and demolition, such as those analyzed in chapter 8, frequently acknowledge the influence of the Becher's typological approach.

Figure 46. Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher, *Coal Bunkers* 1974.
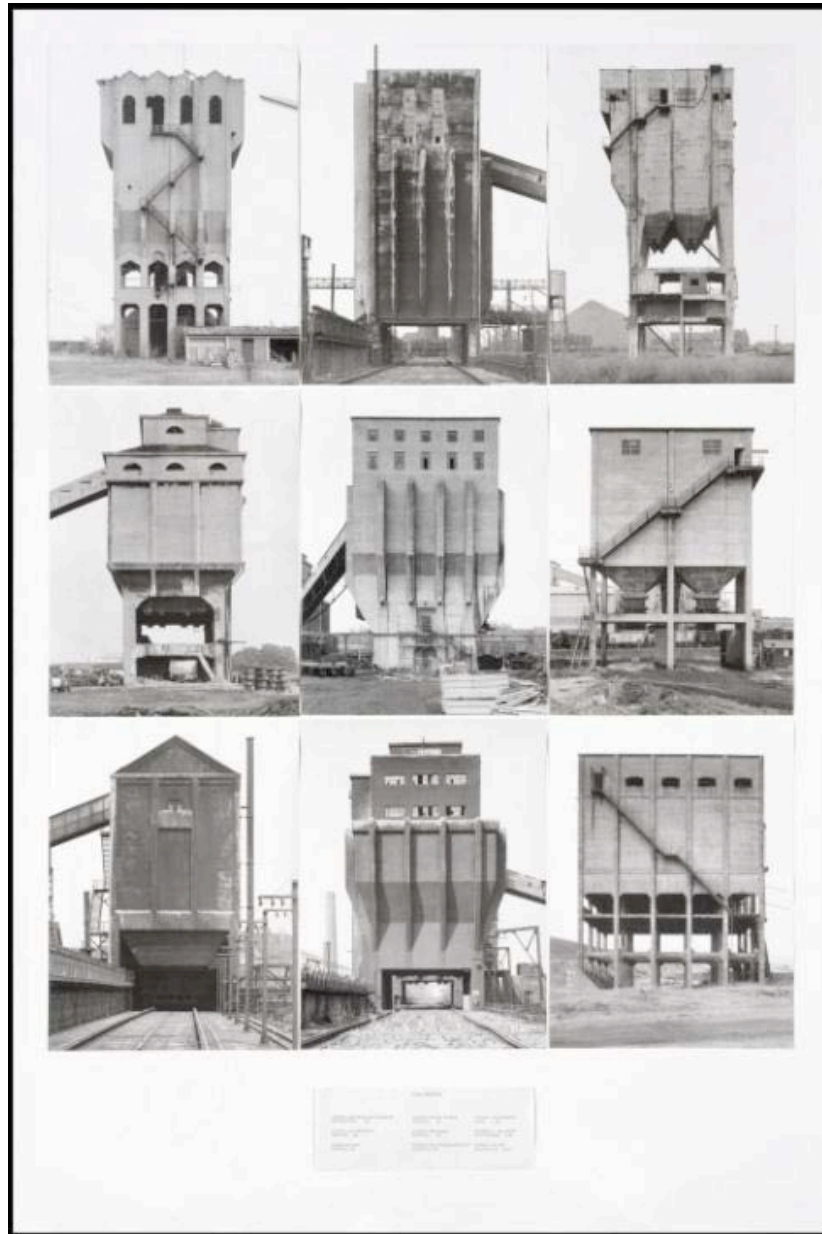
Source: Tate

3.2.2. Robert Smithson: Monuments of Passaic, Hotel Palenque

Radically different in approach and style, Robert Smithson (1938 – 1973) also focused in industrial environments, creating approaches to ruin and decay that would prove influential for the development of conceptual photography. A key example of the connivance of photo-conceptualism with commercial genres illuminated by Jeff Wall in "Marks of Indifference", *Monuments of Passaic* (1967; Figures 47, 48) takes the form of a photo-reportage in which the artist describes a bus trip from New York to Passaic (New Jersey) to visit the "monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures" (Smithson 1967: 50). Black/white, carelessly taken Instamatic shots (out of focus or underexposed, or even showing a finger) of a simple wooden bridge, a pumping derrick, smokestacks and pipes of undefined industrial facilities, are described in the accompanying text as monuments, emblematic of a post-industrial and entropic territory. Parodically but insightfully, Smithson asks: "Has Passaic replaced Rome as The Eternal City?" (Smithson 1967: 51).

Figures 47, 48. Robert Smithson, *Monuments of Passaic,* (left), *Monument with Pontoons: the Pumping Derrick;* (right), *The Fountain Monument – Bird's Eye View*, 1967.

Source: Estate of Robert Smithson, James Cohan Gallery

In another project, *Hotel Palenque* (1969), which Smithson presented as the slides of a lecture, his attention was directed to a derelict hotel close to the ruins of the Mayan city of Palenque, in Mexico's Yucatan. Smithson describes a run-down, half-finished, crumbling hotel appropriating the style and vocabulary reserved to significant ruins. The dereliction of the hotel, caused by unskillfulness, paucity, or mere laziness, is related, in Smithson's account, to the Mayan cultural substratum, and acquires aesthetic and architectonic intentionality:

> This is really the old hotel and you can see that instead of just tearing it down at once they tear it down partially so that you are not deprived of the complete wreckage situation. That's very satisfying to me; it's not often that you see buildings being both ripped down and built up at the same time. (Smithson 1969:120)

Figures 49, 50, 51. Robert Smithson, *Hotel Palenque*, 1969.

Source: Estate of Robert Smithson, James Cohan Gallery

Smithson understands these new 'monuments' as "ruin in reverse",

> that is – all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built. This anti-romantic *mise-en-scène* suggests the discredited idea of time and many other 'out of date' things. But the suburbs exist without a rational past and without the 'big events' of history. (Emphasis in the original, Smithson 1967: 49)

Smithson's new kind of ruin, simultaneously being erected and crumbling, points to the condition of modern ways of construction and development, in which obsolescence predates in occasions the termination, and destruction becomes a necessary part of the temporality of the economic cycle. Notions of linear modernist teleology, along with "many other 'out of date' things", are reintegrated as the paradoxical ruins of a present without past or future. At the same time, Smithson's understanding of the ruin anticipates the contemporary sensibility to ruins, defined, not so much by human agencies replacing natural agencies as the cause of ruins", but by fact "that the very distinction between human and natural agencies has become unstable" (Lucas 2013: 197).

The conceptual approach of Smithson and other early photo-conceptualists, based on a "direct but distantiated and parodic relationship with the art-concept of photojournalism" (Wall 1995) and other social non-artistic discourses (commercial, institutional, academic), articulates the work of some of the mixed-media series analyzed in Part II.

3.2.3. Gordon Matta-Clark: anarchitecture, splits & cuts

Gordon Matta-Clark (1943 – 1978) is the third artist that holds a paramount place in the development of new approaches to photography, architecture, and dereliction. During his short but intense life and career, Matta-Clark developed a unique approach that targeted divisions between architecture and art. In "abhorrence of flat art", and reacting against the rationalism and standardization of modern architecture, Matta-Clark produced cuts, splits, holes and removals in buildings aiming at defamiliarizing Cartesian space and Renaissance perspective, producing a "discrete violation" of the audiences senses of value and orientation (Walker 2009: 13) in a strategy he theorized as anarchitecture:

> ANARCHITECTURE ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE NO PROBLEM BUT TO REJOICE IN AN INFORMED WELL-INTENDED CELEBRATION OF CONDITIONS THAT BEST DESCRIBE AND LOCATE A PLACE…THE WAY OF THIS CELEBRATION IS NOT AS MUCH CHANGING ONES LIFE AS EXERCISING ONES LIFE. (Notecard EGMC #1153, cited in Walker 2009: 19)

Matta-Clark's approach was radical. In 1976 he was invited to participate in a collective exhibition, which was to include many of his former professors at Cornell University. In his statement-work, *Window Blow-Out*, he shot with a BB gun at all the windows of the exhibition venue. For his contribution to the 1975 Paris Biennale, was a critique of ongoing gentrification of the central area next to the newly erected Georges Pompidour museum. Titled *Conical Intercept*, his intervention consisted in opening a conical hole in a 17th-century building slated for demolition, as if a massive drill had perforated the building, offering to the passer-by a view of the inner layers of the building.

Figure 52. Photographic record of the intervention *Conical Intersect*, 1975.

Source: Vague Terrain

Figure 53. Gordon Matta-Clark, *Conical Intersect*, 1975.

Source: MACBA

In intervening buildings that were about to be demolished, Matta-Clark interventions were necessarily ephemeral. For this matter, he depended greatly on the photographic record. In this regard, it is significant how he developed different types of photographic documentation that went beyond the visual evidence, trying to communicate the experience of disorientation, of kinesthetic and psychological unbalance, which his works produced on site.

3.3. Contemporary ruin photography

Ruins have continued to figure prominently in the repertoire of contemporary artists and photographers. In line with contemporary academic lines of enquiry exposed in the literature review, the interest of contemporary photographers have reached out to abandoned and dilapidated sites product of political, economic, and environmental crises, such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Chernobyl accident in 1986, or the bunkers of the Nazi Atlantic Wall (Figures 54 and 55).

Figures 54. Jane & Louise Wilson, *Azeville*, 2006.

Source: Tate

Figure 55. Nadav Kander, *Dust* series, *The Aral Sea I (officers housing), Kazakhastan*, 2011.

Source: artist website

For its part, photo-conceptual works on ruins and traces continue to maintain a central position in international contemporary art, with sophisticated and thought-provoking works. Special mention deserves the work of Sophie Ristelhueber (France, 1949) on marks, traces of violence, and the human impact of landscapes. Intervening with digital manipulation over stock photographs of military hostilities (*Eleven Blowups*, 2006), or painting with acrylic over the images of geographic surveys (*Track*, 2012), her work puts to the fore many of the elements participating in turning an image of disaster and wreck into a significant photograph or work of art.

Tacita Dean (UK, 1965) in *The Russian Ending* (Figure 56)*,* makes reference to the convention, in early Danish film, of creating two versions of each film, one with a happy ending that would be destined to the North-American market, and another with a tragic ending, for Russian audiences. On images of disasters she founds in different flea markets, Dean writes short lines of text, in the guise of film script directions, which interpret the image of rubble and destruction for the "Russian ending", that is, for a dramatic understanding of the scene. Over an image of First World War

destruction, for example, it reads: "chimney collapses", "SILENCE then crash!", "café", "such gratituous destruction", "THEY CANNOT CHOSE", "Arras no longer the front", DESERTED". The combination in the photographic space of image and text points to the close interrelation of the visual and the discursive in the interpretation of catastrophe and the emergence of ruins.

Figure 56. Tacita Dean, *The Russian Ending, La Bataille D'Arras,* 2001.

Source: Tate

3.3.1. New techniques of ruin photography

In addition to developments in art photography, and coinciding with the massive spread of digital technologies, new techniques of photography have appeared that extend the interrelation between photography and ruins. History has reemerged in the last decades with a renewed, popularized fervor. Databases, digital photographic

archives, social networks like Facebook, Flickr or Douban, and applications like Instagram and Timera, contribute to democratize the archive, and bring the documentary impulse beyond the fields of social research and artistic practices. Collaborative projects like Shanghaimage.com, administrated by photographer Xi Wenlei (Figures 83, 84), serve to produce visual archives of urban reality, to which many contribute with a massive body of images of the demolition of old quarters and derelict architecture.

A photographic technique that benefits from digital technologies and online sharing-platforms is rephotography, consisting in the superposition of photographs of the same place or object obtained at different historical moments (Figure 57). Pioneering in this regard was the Rephotographic Survey Project, a collective project to search and photograph, with a difference of a hundred years, the sites of a collection of photographs of the American West taken in 1870 (Swensen 2013). Among contemporary photographers, and part of his engagement with urban ruins, Chilean-American photographer Camilo José Vergara (b. 1944) has documented urban change in the United States resorting to the before and after effect of rephotography.

Figure 57. Rephotography combining an impact of mortar shell in a house from Barcelona Gracia neighborhood (11 Torres Street, corner with Tagamanent Street) during the first air raid over Barcelona during Spain's Civil War with a present photograph.

Source: Arqueologia del Punt de Vista

Another practice closely connected with ruins is found photography. The recovery and posterior editing and exhibiting of lost, unclaimed and usually damaged photographic film and prints demands, in itself, the exploration of abandoned or ruined places and buildings, where they are more likely to be found. In addition, found photographs frequently display, at a visual level, elements of ruins esthetics, like the appeal of the organic (molder, fungi), rugged edges and surfaces, asymmetry, fragmentation, while adding a veneer of nuclear pollution and the shock of documentary realism.

Figure 58. Arianna Arcara and Luca Santese, *Found photos in Detroit,* 2012.

Source: artists website

3.4. Photography in China

This chapter focuses next on the development of photography in China. It starts by providing a panoramic view of the arrival of the new medium from Europe, where it had been first tested, via the cities of Shanghai and Hong Kong. In spite of this semi-colonial entry point, photography adapted rapidly to China, with Chinese practitioners pursuing vigorous commercial, artistic, and journalistic careers. By the turn of the 20th century, the medium and language of photography was firmly integrated in the cultural practices of China. In the 1880s, the newspaper *Shenbao* started to publish a free pictorial supplement (Jing & Yun 2007: 33).

The inception of contemporary photography in China is usually dated in 1976. From that moment on, and finely attuned with the social and cultural development of reform China, photography was used to experiment, along the 1980s and 1990s, with social documentary and growingly subjective aesthetics. It was in the mid 1990s when experimental photography began its own exploration of the limits of photographic representation, to which the phenomenon of urban renewal and demolition established a productive artistic symbiosis.

3.4.1. Origins and early developments

The new photographic technology arrived to China shortly after its invention in Europe. Lai (2000: 21) refers to a Yang Fang 楊昉 who in the 1840s traveled to Japan and Europe and acquired photographic instruments with which he would have taken photographs in Beijing. What is probably the earliest recorded photograph taken in China captured the singing of the Treaty of Whampoa in 1944. In the daguerreotype taken by Juler Itier on board of the French ship *L'Archimède*, viceroy Qiying 耆英 appears next to the French ambassador, the ship's captain, the interpreter，and the legation's secretary (Roberts 2013: 11-12). In the new foreign settlements, studios run by foreigners and Chinese, like Lai Afong 黎華芳 in Hong Kong and Liang Shitai 梁時泰 in Tianjin catered to clients who bought *cartes de visite*, portraits, vistas and souvenirs (Cody and Terpak 2011; Hay 2007; Roberts 2013).

At the turn of the century, as part of the Nationalist programs to educate and mobilize the masses, a number of magazines began to include images, "not merely to please the eyes and souls of the readers [but] to enrich the readers' knowledge, and stimulate their resoluteness and spirits," as prescribed an editorial in the newspaper *Zhejiang Chao* (Lai 2000: 21). In this context, it was particularly relevant the work of the brothers Gao, the painter Gao Jianfu and Gao Qifeng 高奇峰 (1889 – 1933), the later

founder of *True Record Pictorial* (*Zhenxiang Huabao*) in Shanghai in June 1912, with the aims of "supervising the Republican government, investigating the state of the people's lives, promoting social justice, and introducing knowledge about the world" (Wu 2012: 149), objectives in which photography played an important role.

Figures 59 and 60. (Left), Street scene with the shopfront of Laiwah Photographic Enlarging & Co., ca.1890; (right), cover of the second issue of *True Record*, 1912.

Sources: University of Glasgow, Manuscripts Catalogue; Wu (2012)

In 1919 the first exhibition of art photography took place at Peking University. The cultural atmosphere of the May Forth movement, triggered enthusiasm for photography[53] and the emergence of the first photographic clubs and salons, such as the Beijing Light Society (*Beijing Guangshe*) and Shanghai's Chinese Study Society of Photography (*Zhonghua sheying xueshe*), which organized outdoor trips, shared photography books and magazines, and served as discussion platform for their members the work. The style of art photography at the time, which photographers

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[53] Kent (2013) notes how the interest for amateur fine-arts photography in Beijing University was connected with "the official endorsement of vernacular-language reform by the Ministry of Education in 1921," with the Light Society (first called Research Association for Art Photography (*Yishu xiezhen yanjiuhui*) being founded in 1923.

refer to as "fine arts photography" (*meishu sheying*), participated in the international development of Pictorialism. With the major example of Lang Jingshan (1892 – 1995), pictorialism in China combined aestheticism and emotional tone with the influence of traditional Chinese ink and landscape painting.

In addition to this mainstream trend, some photographers were already moving at the time away from Pictorialism. Notable examples are as Zhuang Xueben 庄学本 (1909 – 1984), a pioneer in ethnographic photography, and photojournalist Fang Dazeng 方大曾 (1912 – 1937). During the war of resistance against Japan, photography joined in the political and military efforts for national mobilization, and the proponents of the movement for "National Defense Photography" (*Guofang sheying*) advocated that "the documentary value comes first, the pictorial is secondary" (*jishi wei zhu, huayi wei fu*) (Lai 2000: 46). The work of photographer Sha Fei 沙飛 (1912 – 1949) epitomizes this bias towards for the sake of Anti-Japanese mobilization, combining documentary photography (*jishi sheying*) with propaganda.

In the mid 1930s, Chinese artists (specially in Shanghai, again establishing a dialogue with the different developments in literature in the two cities) were also receptive to the international development of modernism. The same Lang Jingshan incorporated urban settings and motives, as well as less traditional angles and points of view, to focus on abstracted shapes, volumes, and subjective experience. In the 1940s, Taiwan born photographer Zhang Cai 張才 developed a pioneering activity as urban photographer during his sojourn of over ten years in Shanghai.

Figures 61 and 62. (Left), Lang Jingshan, *Architectural Study*, 1935; (right) Ye Qianyu 葉淺予 *New Residence*, ca. 1935.

Source: Kent (2013)

Histories of Chinese photography frequently jump over the Maoist period, dismissing its photo-practices as mere propaganda. While it is true that during the high-revolutionary times photography become instrumentalized and subjected to the demands of national construction and revolutionary mobilization, recent research on archives of the Chinese Communist Party, and interviews to some of its main actors are providing new insights that supplement the scarce details about the authors of the photographs published in newspapers[54] or included in patriotic exhibitions, which became property of the official news agency (Roberts 2013; Gao & Wang 2013). This process of reappraisal is revealing the importance of the work of photographers like Wu Yinxian 吴印咸 or Weng Naiqiang 翁乃强, among many others. These photographers strived to represent different elements of Mao Zedong's thought, such as the people's epic struggle to conquer nature (Bao 2004), and contributed "to shape the image of the new society, to depict aspirations towards industrialization, i.e. modernization, and thirdly, to promote collectivist values" (Gu 2011: 5).

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[54] Important pictorials of the time were the *Jinchaji Pictorial* (*Jinchaji Huabao*), first published on 1942), the *People's Liberation Army Pictorial* (*Jiefangjun Huabao*), published since 1951), and the *Huabei Pictorial* (*Huabei huabao*).

Figure 63. Zhang Dian 张甸, *Thunderous Nature* (*Shengzhen shanhe*), 1957.

Source: First Dongbei Photography Art Exhibition (1961)

3.4.2. Contemporary photography in China

The inception moment of contemporary photography is dated in 1976 (Roberts 2013: 121; Wu and Phillips 2004: 12-14), with the photographs that documented the April 5 movement, which gathered thousands of citizens and students in Tiananmen Square to mourn the deceased Zhou Enlai, and protest against the prohibition of the concentrations. These photographs, taken by amateur and unaffiliated individuals,[55] and concerned about individual experiences and perspectives, offer a stark contrast with the ideological instrumentalization and institutionalization of photography during the Maoist period.

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[55] The photographers were mostly sons and daughters of officials, which explains the fact that they owned a camera in those times of technological destitution. For example, Luo Xiaoyun, who took the iconic photograph of Li Tiehua, was the daughter of the Propaganda Minister Deng Liqun, and used the old family Leica to take photographs of the concentrations (Ba 2006).

Figure 64. Luo Xiaoyu's 罗小韵, *Turn the Tide* (*Li wan kuang lan*), 1976.[56]

Source: Roberts (2013)

The fate of these images illustrates the rapidly changing political environment at the end of the Cultural Revolution:[57] in 1976, after yet another campaign against the protesters, negatives obtained on the square had to be hidden; in 1979, April 5 activist were rehabilitated and considered patriots, and their photographs published in a memorializing volume, *People's Mourning (Renmin de daonian)*. The atmosphere of relative political relaxation generated a boom of artistic and intellectual groups. An independent photographic group that emerged at the time, the April Photo Society (*Siyue shehui*), chose its name after the Tiananmen gathering, yet another proof of the significance of the event for the development of photography.

One of the first activities of the April Photo Society was the organization of the exhibition *Nature. Society. Man* (*Ziran. Shehui. Ren*), which opened in April 1, 1979 in Beijing's Zhongshan Park.[58] The show included 280 photographs by 51 artists,

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[56] The photograph captured Li Tiehua 李铁华, member of the Beijing Red Flag Peking Opera troupe, haranguing the crowds during the April 5 movement.

[57] A succinct list of the momentous changes needs to include the Presidency of Hua Guofeng, Mao's successor and follower under the policy of the "Two Whatevers" (*Liangge fanshi*) ("We will resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave"); the downfall and final arrest, in October 6, 1976, of the so-called Gang of Four; and the celebration of the 11th Party Congress (lasting from 1977 to 1982), which reinstated purged Party members like Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi, sanctioned a limited criticism of the Cultural Revolution, and set an initial group of policies aimed at economic liberalization.

[58] In the following years, the show reopened twice in Beijig, at Beihai's Huafangzhai (1980) and at the

including Society members Li Xiaobin 李晓斌 (Beijing, 1955), Wang Zhiping 王志平 (Shandong, 1947), Li Yingjie 李英杰 (Changsha, 1947) and Jin Baihong 金伯宏 (Shanghai, 1947; Figure 65). The success of the exhibition was enormous. Not only it was well received by the artistic community and the general public, but it also attracted the attention and favor of representatives of the 'old' or official school who with their presence and support connected the new photographic developments with those of pre-Maoist period experimentalism.[59]

While the photographs included in the exhibition were mostly sentimental and "deliberately 'apolitical'" (Wu 2004: 7), their importance and radicalism laid in their subject matter and approach. As in other artistic disciplines, the end of the 1970s brought an abrupt end to the politization of art of the previous revolutionary decades, when form and content were subordinated to mass mobilization and ideological correction. In this context, an oil painting like Luo Zhongli's 罗中立 *Father* (*Fuqin*, 1980), which portrayed with hyperrealistic detail a non-heroic, ordinary peasant, or the slight criticism of Cultural Revolution partisan fights in *A Certain Month of a Certain Day in 1968*, by Cheng Conglin 程丛林 (*1968 nian X yue X ri xue*, 1979), supposed an absolute revolution. For art historian Gao Minglu, photography went even further in its criticism of society and authority (2011: 75). Those photographers reconnecting with pre-Revolutionary pictorialism, as well as those interested in a realist portrait of the lower edges of society (themes excluded from the celebratory mood of socialist realism), contributed in significant ways to opened new paths for photography and for contemporary art in general.

National Gallery of Art (1981), and it toured widely across the country.

[59] In this sense, it was significant the presence of photographer Yuan Yiping 袁毅平, autor of the awarded photography *The East is Red* (*Dongfang hong*), or Wu Yinxian, who in 1979 was acting as deputy chairman of China Photographers Association. Wu had pioneered in artistic photography in the 1920s and joined the Communist forces at Yan'an, where he became the representative of the film industry at the famous Forum.

Figure 65. Jin Baihong, *The echoing wall (Huiyin bi)*, 1975.

Source: Siyuefeng

Already at this early stage, it is possible to detect two strands in the understanding of photography and the artistic preferences of some of the earlier practitioners, a division that would continue to separate the work of contemporary photographers in the following decades in important ways. Wang Zhiping, one of the founders of the April Society and organizer of the *Nature. Society. Man* exhibition with Li Xiaobin, advocated for the search of a particular language of artistic photography. As he wrote in the preface for the first Nature. Society. Man exhibition:

> News photos cannot replace the art of photography. Content cannot be equaled with form. Photography as an art should have its own language. It is now time to explore art with the language of art, just as economic matters should be dealt with by using the methods of economics. The beauty of photography lies not necessarily in "important subject matter" or in official ideology, but should be found in nature's rhythms, in social reality, and in emotions and ideas. (Cited in Wu, 2012: 7)

Conversely, Li Xiaobin championed a photographic practice with a strong documentary value, which condensed for him the medium's essence. At the time, he coined a slogan that would prove influential: "You cannot left history go away" (*bu yao*

rang lishi liuxia kongbai). His photographs, ranging from political and artistic events (the April 5th demonstrations, Xidan's Democracy wall, the Stars exhibition) to different instances of the great changes underway in Chinese society (as his series on the new fashionable clothing styles; Figure 66), and allying content and form in an indissoluble way (Roberts 2013: 134), were understood as "witnesses of history" (*lishide jianzheng*).

Figure 66. Li Xiaobin, *Fashion* series (*Shishang xilie*), 1981.

Source: Jin (2012)

The April Movement dissolved in 1981, but its influence was large in spreading contemporary photography nation-wide. At the wake of the touring exhibitions, photography groups appeared in different cities,[60] participating of the wave of artistic expression that, under umbrella term of the '85 *New Wave* movement (*Xinchao yundong*) spread across the country. According to Gao Minglu,

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[60] In terms of production and contribution to the development of artistic photography, some of the most notable photographic group created at the time were Xi'an based Shaanxi Group (*Shaanxi quanti*); Guangzhou's Everybody Photography Society (*Renren Yinghui*), Shanghai's North River Alliance (*Beihemeng*), the Rupture Group (*Liebian quanti*), and Fujian Five Ones (*Fujian Wugeyi*). In Beijing, different April 5 photographers grouped under Modern Photo Salon (*Xiandai sheying shalong*) (Wu and Phillips 2004: 16-19; Roberts 2013: 139).

The '85 movement was not a new school of artists working in their studios, art schools, or universities; it was a broad movement encompassing social activities such as performances, meetings, lectures, conferences, and village-factory visits as well as many self-organized, unofficial exhibitions. (Gao 1998: 21)

Only between 1985 and 1986, seventy-nine self-organized avant-garde art groups emerged to organize exhibitions (149 within this period), hold conferences, and write manifestos and articles about their art. New magazines and newspapers were created, such as *Art Trends* (*Meishu Sichao*), *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo Meishubao*), and *Painters* (*Huajia*), while established journals, such as *Art Monthly* and *Jiangsu Pictorial* start to devote their attention to avant-garde art. The movement crystallized in 1989 with the exhibition *China/Avant-Garde (Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan)* at the China Art Gallery, with more than 177 works by over 120 artists.

The so-called *New Photographic Wave* (*Sheying xinchao*) participated of the atmosphere of euphoria and experimentalism that spread across the country. While the rest of the arts gradually moved away from realism, though, photography continued to be attuned with a documentary style until the mid 1990s. For Wu Hung, this can be accounted by the fact that, after decades of a photographic practice circumscribed to official propaganda, the main drive for Chinese photographers—and we can assume, their viewers—was "to regain photography's credibility as a record of real social events and human lives" (2003: 15). Accordingly, photographic experimentalism in the 1980s and early 1990s was mostly a matter of content and approach, rather than a reflective inquiry into the medium. The Chinese countryside, its people and harsh living conditions, as well as minority or minoritized communities (such as ethnic and religious groups, mentally-ill or pauperized populations) became sought-after topics for ethnographically informed series. Wu Jialin's 吴家林 (Zhaotong, 1942) "root-searching" in his native Yunnan province, Hou Dengke's 侯登科 (1953 – 2003) series on migrant workers in Shanxi province *Wheat-Hands (Mai ke,* 1993), or

Lü Nan's 吕楠 (Beijing, 1962) projects on Catholic communities (1995),[61] are representative of its humanist-inflected gaze of this trend, which was put together in the large photographic exhibition *Humanism in China: a contemporary record of photography (Zhongguo renben – Jishi zai dangdai*), organized and first exhibited at the Guangdong Museum of Art (2003), and touring in Germany in 2006.

Figure 67. Hou Dengke, *Demolition*, 1980.

Source: China-Photo Inc.

Among this strand of photographers, the Shaanxi group (including the aforementioned Hou Dengke, Hu Wugong 胡武功 (Xi'an, 1949), and Qiu Xiaoming 邱晓明 (Xinfeng, Jiangxi, 1955) directed their documentarian gaze towards the city of Xi'an, resulting in the 1980 exhibition *Square City* (*Sifang Cheng*). Some of the photographs of the exhibit, showing early development plans in Xi'an Renmin Square, are among the first photographs of urban demolition in China (Figure 67).

A number of photographers attuned to the new social realities and personal alienation

[61] Lü Nan's so-called 'Trilogy of Men' includes *The Forgotten People: Living conditions of China's mental patients (Bei yiwang de ren: zhongguo jingshengbing ren shengcun zhuangkuang); On the road: China's Catholics (Zai lu shang: Zhongguo de tianzhujiao);* and *The Four seasons: The Daily life of Tibet's peasants (Siji: Xizang nongmin de richang shenghuo*).

of the modern city began to explore with new aesthetic strategies. The umbrella term *New Social Documentation* (*shehui xin jishi*) (Li & Yang: 1997) serves to encompass the work of Shanghai's North River Alliance,[62] the members of which started to experimented with perspectives, exposures and incipient conceptual motives, and most prominently, that of Zhang Hai'er 张海儿 (Guangzhou, 1957), one of the most relevant examples of a new authorial position for the photographer (Zhang 2007). Zhang's highly subjective approach to harsh social realities (as in his celebrated portraits of prostitutes; Figure 68) introduced new aesthetics possibilities experimenting with over and under-exposures, flashes and fragmented compositions.

Figure 68. Zhang Hai'er, *Hu Yuanli,* 1989.

Source: Blindspot Gallery

At this juncture, Western photographers began to have an important influence on the experimentalism of many Chinese photographers. First exhibited in China in the

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[62] Members of the North River Alliance include Gu Zheng, You Zehong, Wang Yaodong, and Mao Yiqing.

1980s, photographers like Walker Evans (in 1980), Ansell Adams and Robert Doisneau (1983), Robert Capa (in 1985), and Henri Cartier-Bresson (in 1987) had an impact in terms of technique, content and most importantly, on the reflection on photography's status as art and as a vehicle to capture reality. Mary Ellen Mark's *Ward 81*, a landmark series on the mental ward of Oregon State Hospital, was a direct influence for Lü Nan and Yuan Dongping's 袁冬平 (Guangzhou, 1956) series on Chinese mental institutions. In 1988, a new photography magazine, *Photography* (*Sheying),* visualized the emerging internationalization of Chinese photography with a wide report of the groundbreaking disembark of Chinese photographers (including Zhang Hai'er, Wu Yinxian or Ling Fei凌飛, among others) at Rencontres d'Arles. The first issue presented Christian Vogt's (Basel, 1946) *Red Series* (1979), which supposed a great impact on many artists (Roberts 2013: 154).

In addition, the publication by Taiwanese photographer and theorist Ruan Yizhong 阮义忠 of two anthologies (1988 and 1990) introduced the work of conceptualist photographers like Cindy Sherman (USA, 1954), Bernard Faucon (France, 1950), Joel-Peter Witkin (USA, 1939) and Jan Saudek (Czechoslovakia, 1935) (Ruan 1990). The influence of the milestone retrospective of Robert Rauschenberg's works, which run with enormous success in November 1995 at Beijing's National Gallery, was felt earlier in other disciplines and only gradually among photographic experimental artists. Later in the 1990s, photographers visiting or living in China, like Sam Taylor-Wood (UK, 1967), Thomas Struth, or Lois Conner (USA, 1951), would also influence Chinese photography, on occasions via direct friendship with Chinese photographers (Smith 2002: 42).

It was in the mid 1990s when Chinese photographers started exploring with other subject matters and aesthetics strategies, particularly conceptual photography. This change was greatly influenced by an increased availability of photographic technology (cheaper digital cameras and software), and a growing division between 'pure' or professional photographers, who mostly worked for newspapers, news agencies and

publishing houses, and contemporary artists. The later were almost without exception young men with degrees in art and design schools who have abandoned their assigned factory jobs and moved to big cities, where they precariously survived in the margins of society, a position that catalyzed important personal and artistic synergies (Smith 2007: 16). The self-definition of experimental artists had an important institutional aspect, given the importance of affiliation to associations, institutes or schools. This new bread of artists would strive for independence, a factor that was facilitated by the growing globalization of Chinese art by the second half of the 1990s (Wu 2004: 21-22). Before exploring some of the main paths that photographic experimentalism has taken, and connecting them with the photographic projects examined in this dissertation, it is useful to note the import of some independent publications in the diffusion of experimental approaches to photography.

Between 1994 and 1997, Ai Weiwei, artist Xu Bing and critic Zeng Xiaojun 曾小俊 edited the *Black*, *White* and *Grey Cover Books (Bai, Hei, Hui pi shu).* The first issue, the *Black Cover Book*, included a lengthy analysis of Taiwanese performance artist Hsieh Tehching 謝德慶, discussed emblematic artists of the international avant-gardes (like Marcel Duchamp, Jeff Koons or Andy Warhol), and diffused the work of Chinese artists like Geng Jianyi, Zhu Fadong 朱发东, Song Dong, Xu Bing, and Zhang Huan, among many others, which gives a sense of the books range of interest and key significance as platform for Chinese experimental artists.

For their part, Rong Rong and fellow photographer Liu Zheng 劉錚 started the photo magazine *New Photo* (*Xin sheying*) in 1996. Regardless of its short life (it only run four issues) and precarious resources (edited at Rong Rong's home and published, in 20 to 30 copies each, in coarse black-and-white photocopies) the influence of the magazine in providing a platform for art photography was enormous. The magazine centered on the work of Chinese photographers, shown with minimal explanatory text. Equally important was the role of the magazine in shaping the discourse of art photography, gradually away from documentary and into conceptual photography. While issue 1,

presented examples of documentary photography, albeit with a very personal perspective, such as Liu Zheng's series *The Chinese* and Rong Rong's photographs of artistic performances, the other issues engaged directly with conceptual photography. For example, the manifesto-cum-preface of the third issue read: "When CONCEPT enters Chinese photography, it is as if a window suddenly opens in a room that has been sealed for years. We can now breathe comfortably, and we now reach a new meaning of 'new photography'" (Wu, 2004: 25).

Rong Rong and his wife inri have continued to invest much energy in contemporary Chinese photography with the creation of the *Three Shadows* Photography Art Center, which takes care of an exhibition venue, a research center, and an annual photography award.

Figures 69 and 70. (Left), A page of *Grey Cover Book* (1997), featuring Zhang Dali's *Dialogue*; (right), cover of the first issue of *New Photo*, 1996.
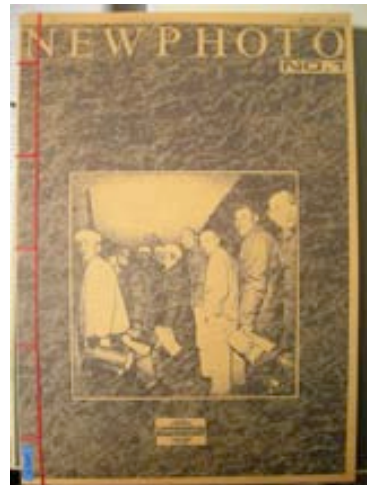
Source: Asian Art Archive

3.4.3. Development paths of photographic experimentalism in China

One important way in which photographic experimentalism developed in China was as an analytical exploration of the intrinsic characteristic of the medium. Wang Youshen's 王友身 (Beijing, 1964), for example, in his *Washing Series* depend on the process of photographic processing to comment on the passage of time, mortality and spirituality. His installations recur to the in-site washing of photographic negatives to reveal or erase images of profound personal and collective meaning.[63] For their part, members of the Pond Society (*Chishe*), created by students from China's Academy of Art in Hangzhou, started by the second half of the 1980s to experiment with new art forms, like installations and happenings. Looking for new ways to address the relation between art and society, the Society members pioneered in emphasizing processes over objects, for which photography became a crucial medium. In *Continuous Repetition* (*Lianxu fuzhi*; Figure 71), Zhang Peili 张培力 (Hangzhou, 1957) iterates the photographic process, repeatedly taking a photograph of an image obtained from a 1970s pictorial magazine, until the image blurs beyond recognition. With this work, Zhang explored the possibilities and limits of photography while reflecting on history and memory, on the way "the past fades through time and repeated viewing until all 'facts' are distorted" (Smith 2002: 39).

Going beyond the document, these photographs introduced new photographic resources to document absences and erasures caused by demolition, as in Pond Society member Geng Jianyi's *Building no. 5* (see chapter 4). Rong Rong's photographs of old posters stuck to the walls of half-demolished houses, and his recycling of found film strips (chapter 5) also participate of the meta-reflection on the possibilities of the photographic medium and its connections with issues of identity, memory and historical record.

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[63] In *Before and After My Grandmother Passed Away* (*Wo nainai qushi qianhou,* 1994), Wang develops photographs of his grandmother before and after her death. In *Washing: 1941 Mass Grave in Datong (Qingxi. 1941 Datong wanren keng,* 1995), photographs of a massacre commited by Japanese forces are repeatedly washed until they wither and the images dissapear. "The water washes the image away just as time has washed people's memories clear of this atrocity that occurred fifty years ago" (cited in Wu 2003c: 93).

Figure 71. Zhang Peili, *Continuous Reproduction*, 1993.

Source: Phillips

A second strand of photographic experimentation has developed in connection with performance and action art, media that entered the repertoire of Chinese artists at the time. In this regard, Chinese artists reproduced the connection, in the American avant-gardes of the late 1960s, between happening, performance and photography, which contributed to move art away from perception and representation, which in the West had been the artistic drive since the Renaissance (Chevrier & Lingwood, 2004: 243-244). In China, performance art had a strong connection with ritual, which expanded the scope of its most subjective expression to a large, collective reach (Manonelles 2006: 241).

The so-called Beijing's *East Village* (*Dongcun*)[64] was an artistic collective that lived

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[64] Ai Weiwei, who had returned from a sojourn in New York City to take care of his aging father, proposed the name, after the New York's namesake. Moreover, in the West of Beijing, in the area between Peking University and the Yuanming yuan, there already existed a "West Village" (*Xi cun*), the Yuanming yuan artists' village. Zhang Dali, along with Hua Qing 华庆 and dramaturge Mou Sen 牟森,

and created artworks in Beijing's suburb of Dashanzhuang, just outside the 3rd ring road. While other artistic villages that formed at the time continued to work with traditional media such as painting, East Village artists, thanks to Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming 马六明, became known for performance and action art. [65] In these developments, photography was of crucial significance. In addition to provide a necessary record of the event, the lenses of photographers became intimately imbricated with the very occurrence of the performances. As photographer Rong Rong noted, it was the act of taking photographs which often motivated a performance, and which turned what could had been the mere ramblings of young *liumang* youth into an artistic act: "In this forlorn and abandoned village, where you would never imagine that anyone would care about art, it was through my camera lens that these guys were recognized—for the first time but without any doubt—as serious artists" (diary entry, November 4, 1993, cited Wu, 2003: 55).

Figure 72. Rong Rong**,** *East Village, Beijing, No. 20*, 1994.[66]

Source: National Portrait Gallery

were the first to move there. Other members were Fang Lijun 方力均, Gu Dexin 顾德新, and Wang Jinsong.

[65] Some of these earliest performances are Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms*, and Ma Liuming's *Fen · Ma Liuming's Lunch*.

[66] The photograph documents Zhang Huan's performance *12 Square Meters.*

Photographs of these and other performances by Rong Rong, Wang Jin, or Liu Anping, among others, opened an important direction in the development of experimental photography, which would inform performances and site-specific installations on the demolition site of artists like Zhan Wang (chapter 4) and Chen Qiulin (chapter 6). In their works, the camera documents both the artist's action and the demotion site, which is often razed down shortly after.

From 1995 onwards, the alliance of photography with performance took a further step in what constitutes a third strand of photographic experimentalism. When artists began to stage actions and private performances only for the camera, photography further advanced into its own development along experimental and conceptualist practices. The influence of Cindy Sherman's parodical self-stylizations became important at this point for a large group of artists who start using photography (like Zhao Bandi 赵半狄, Wang Jinsong, Hong Lei, Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰, Xu Yihui or Huang Rui), as well as photographers who were moving into conceptual terrains (Rong Rong, Luo Yongjin, Liu Shuyong 刘树勇, Liu Zheng, Mo Yi 莫毅) (Li 2000). Photographs of private performances by Yan Lei 颜磊 (Hebei, 1965)**,** exhibited in his solo show *Invasion* (*Jinru*) in 1995, met with general criticism, but other photographers expanded this line of work, most notably Zheng Guogu's 郑国谷 (Yangjiang, 1970), with his series *The Life of Youth in Yangjiang* (*Yangjiang qingnian de shenghuo*) (Figures 73, 74), validating "play-acting to the hilt" (Smith 2002: 41) with seemingly-realistic and amateurish docu-drama photographs in which Zheng and his friends act the roles of young gangsters, joke with guns, abuse girls, or engage in street fights.

Figures 73, 74. Zheng Guogu, *The Life of Youth in Yangjiang,* 1996.

Source: Blindspot gallery

Among the youngest generation of photographers, represented by multimedia artist Cao Fei or the duo Birdhead,[67]attest an abandonment of any claim of collective representativeness which, both in the long tradition of Confucian culture as well as in the agendas of reformist, socialists, and avant-gardist artists, mapped the social commitment of Chinese intellectuals and artists. In words of curator Leng Lin:

> While artists during the 1980s willingly assumed the burden of regional history and social responsibility, artists of the 1990s have instead been trying to join the globalization process, and, as a result, have been rediscovering and reaffirming their self-identity in a global sphere. (cited in Wu 2012: 192)

Born and bred in the popular culture of global consumerism, and native users of digital technologies and software, the work of these photographers shares much of the iconicity of the contemporary transnational milieu. Casual, fragmented, absurd, or diary-like, their images continue to emplyperformance and the staging of scenes, with the artists themselves often in the starring role.

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[67] Birdhead is the artistic nickname of Ji Weiyu 季炜煜 (1980) and Song Tao 宋涛 (1979), both from Shanghai.

Figure 75. Cao Fei, *Un-Cosplayers* series, *Housebreaker*, 2005.

Source: Public Delivery

Part II: Photographic Art Projects on Demolition and Dereliction

Figure 76. Reporter Li Jiangshu shooting from a demolished house in the area of Chanyangmennei, in Beijing. Photograph by Miao Xinzhong, 2002.

Source: Siyuefeng

Introduction

Part II of the dissertation presents an analysis of different photographic projects on demolition and dereliction by experimental Chinese photographers. The different chapters group photo-artists according to a division that underscores recurrences and common strategies, aiming at establish a productive categorization of the photographic engagement with the demolition site among Chinese experimental artists. Employing different strategies from photo-conceptualism, a productive dialogue with other disciplines, and digital technologies, experimental photographers have gone beyond the documentary approach and transformed demolition to invoke memory and identity, directing a self-reflective gaze towards art and photography.

In their appropriation of rubble and decay, their works diverge from those of other photographers who have focused on the visual aspects of the demolition site. Documentary, journalistic, ethnographic, activist and amateur photography have capitalized on the evidentiary power of photography to provide a truthful vision of urban change, highlighting striking contrasts between old and new buildings, and between demolition works and high-rises.

In addition to their respective aesthetic strategies and objectives, the difference between experimental and documentary photographers can also be established in respect to their institutional and professional affiliation. Experimentalism, predicated upon the artists' "own self-positioning and re-positioning...at the *border* of contemporary Chinese society and the art world" (Wu 1999: 15-16), has directed artists to a conscious negotiation of a freelance position as "independent artists" (*duli yishujia*) (Wu 2002b: 4). For this, they have pursued an individual, professional artistic career, dodging regular paid-jobs and connections with institutions, associations, or schools. Conversely, documentary photographers often work in newspapers, magazines, news or advertising agencies. While in their personal projects they can sidestep the eventfulness and shocking effects demanded by photo-journalism and news photography, and can thus devote more time, study and

consideration to the subject and its interrelations with society and culture (Jing & Yun 2007: 42), their series on demolition remain at the level of straight photography. A case is provided by Xu Peiwu 许培武 (Guangdong 1963), a photojournalist of *People's Daily (Renmin Ribao)* who has shot the changing urban landscape of Guangzhou since 1995. Xu's focus has been on Nansha, a rural area on the city fringe that condenses many of the conditions of urban development in China.[68]

Figures 77, 78. Xu Peiwu, *The Lost Garden of Eden*, 2005.

Source: Wangyi Xinwen

Many documentary photographers are affiliated to official institutions such as the China Photography Association (*Zhongguo Sheyingjia Shehui*) or provincial or professional subsections. Yu Haibo 余海波 (Yongcheng, Henan, 1962), for example, acted as Director of Shenzhen Professional Photography Association (*Shenzhen qiyejia shying shehui)* and is currently chief photo editor of *Shenzhen Economic Daily* (*Shenzhen Shangbao*). Starting with works that pioneered in surrealist photography in the 1980s,[69] Yu has focused on documentary photography since 1989, obtaining the

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[68] Some of Xu's series are titled *New Pearl River City* (*Zhujiang xincheng,* 1995-2005), *The Lost Garden Of Eden (Xiaoshi zaixinchengshide shile,* 2005), and *Nansha The last lizard* (N*ansha zuihou yizhi xiyi,* 2006).
[69] His series *On the Other Shore* (*Zai huanxiang suolian de bian*), titled after the Chinese title of Eric Fromm's *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud* (1962), won him 15th

2nd World Press Photo award in 2006 for his series on the painting village of Dafen, one of the world's factories of hand-made painting reproductions. In line with the ethnographic strand opened by photographers like Yang Dongping and Lu Nan in the 1990s, his projects have focused on ethnic minorities, rural life, and even a leper's hospital. In *China's Urban Expansion* (*Chengshi kuozhang*, 2009), Yu portrays urban construction in Shenzhen, emphasizing the massive scale of construction projects, basing the photograph's composition on the contrasts between construction and demolition, and the massive scale of construction works.

Figures 79, 80. Yu Haibo, *China's urban expansion,* 2009.

Source: artist website

In terms of technique, documentary photographs tend to stick to the prerequisites of well-shot photography in terms of exposure, depth of field, and sharpness, an aestheticism that early conceptualist photographers consciously shunned. Nonetheless, as the chronological structure of Part II in part reveals, the aesthetic rebelliousness of experimentalist artist has gradually faded, bringing their aesthetics preferences closer to the glossy surfaces of photo-reportage or advertising. Zhang Xiao 张晓 (1981, Yantai, Shandong) exemplifies the fluidity of a younger generation of

National Photography Exhibition.

photographers who alternate artistic projects, photo-reportage assignments, and even fashion photography. After working in the *Chongqing Morning Post* (*Chongqing Chenbao*), Zhang is now as a freelance photographer. His series *Subdue* (*Zheng fu*) are a remarkable testimony of the gargantuan scope of demolition works in cities condemned to flooding by the Three Gorges Dam, in which the distinction with other contemporary artistic and experimental photographers has significantly vaned.

Figures 81, 82. Zhang Xiao, *Subdue* series, 2008.

Source: artist website

Before closing this preliminary note, it is necessary to acknowledge the role of blogs, websites and sharing platforms, such as Flickr or Douban, in the diffusion of photographic projects targeting the vanishing architecture of the cities. Amateur freelance photographers, such as Xi Wenlei 席闻雷 (1969, Shanghai) have acquired notoriety for their visual archives on the Internet, which in occasions has translated in posterior publications. The photographs of Xi (Figures 83, 84), a well-known photographer of Shanghai's *shikumen* and *longtang* (traditional quarters and lanes) under the avatars Xi Zi 席子 and Gropius, were later published in the book *Shanghai Shikumen* (Tongji University Press, 2012).

Figures 83, 84. Xi Zi, (left), *Another Night of Ruins in Shanghai*; (right), *Death of Shikumen in Shanghai. North Fujian Road*, 2014.

Source: Xi Zi, Flickr

The different photographers presented in part II have been grouped according to two criteria. On the one hand, the different chapters advance along a loose chronology of the development of experimental photography of demolition, since the early 1990s, through the turn of the century and ending, in chapter 9, with photographic series contemporary to the writing of this dissertation. On the other hand, each chapter foregrounds common aesthetics strategies and conceptual frameworks to identify some of the main vectors of photographic experimentalism around the demolition site in China.

Chapter 4 focus on projects by Huang Yan, Geng Jiangyi, Zhan Wang and Zhang Dali that exemplify the growing role of photography in the context of experiments with conceptualism, and in which the different artists have resorted to a combined use of different media: photography, installation, site-specific, performance, and rubbings. Since this early date, the phenomenon of demolition reveals as a privilege site to put to test these different artistic experiments.

The work of Rong Rong serves as the focal point of chapter 5. The examination of some of his major works on the demolition site (and, since the year 2000, of works

created with his wife inri) introduces some recurrent artistic strategies around the phenomenology of demolition, like photo-conceptualism, found photography, performativity, and the transformation of the derelict building site into a stage. These recourses are then further explored in reference to photographic series by Jiao Jian, Liu Jin and the Gao Brothers.

Chapter 6 expands the reflection on the performative impulse, opened by some of Rong Rong's series. Blurring distinctions between temporalities, different apparitions embody the artists' memories or traumas. These ghost-like personifications, which at times evoke specters from the Chinese folk and literary traditions, prompt the acknowledgement of spectrality as a critical category. The chapter also serves to introduce artworks created around other sources of demolition (such as the demolition works triggered by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam) as well as different locations (i.e., urban development in the city of Chongqing).

In Chapter 7, the recreations of ruins and urban demolition in the work of Wang Qingsong and Jiang Pengyi foregrounds a reflection on the visionary potential of photography, later extended, via the use of digital software and 3-D platforms in art projects (as in the case of Cao Fei and Zhang Xiaotao) into virtual worlds that emphasize the fragility of the processes of construction.

Chapter 8 groups those photographers of architectural photography whose approach in indebted to the series on industrial typologies by Bernd and Hilla Becher. The conceptualism of the photographers is expressed in the design of the series, the strategies of edition and visualization, and the relationship between the individual photography and the totality of the project.

Finally, chapter 9 presents works by some of the most contemporary photographers from China, whose work has displayed a consistent engagement with the theme of urban development and the aesthetics of ruinous landscapes.

Chapter 4. Photo-conceptualism and mix-media in early experiments on demolition (1990s): Geng Jianyi, Huang Yan, Zhan Wang, Zhang Dali

Within the short time span since the opening and reform started, different motives and symbols have encapsulated the conditions and fate of the nation in the works of artists, writers and filmmakers. In Root-Seeking literature[70] and 5th Generation films,[71] the arid loess plateau, the traditional courtyard family house, or idealized versions of the ethnic minorities, became loaded symbols in the renewed search for the cultural essence of the country. The wounds of the Cultural Revolution also informed literature and film, and representations of ancient remnants, like the Yuanming yuan and the Great Wall were used in the visual arts as condensations of historical eventfulness and sublime wreck.

In the 1990s, the center of attraction for cultural representation moved to the urban setting. The emphasis on History faded to give rise to an atemporal, global contemporaneity, and to the emblems of the concurrent heightened mobility and speed, such as bicycles, motorbikes, and cars; new outcast and marginalized classes, from migrant workers to self-styled bohemian artists, populated the new cities as precarious flaneurs, generating new forms and foci for growingly subjective and fragmented narratives.[72] In this context, the dusty ruinous landscapes of urban demolition became, as the decade advance, a favourite emblem to symbolize the contemporary milieu. 6th Generation film, and burgeoning independent documentary

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[70] The Root-Seeking school (*xungen pai*) was a literary movement that departed from realism and materialism and searched for China's spiritual roots in ancient traditions (i.e. Daoism, Confucianism, chamanism), incorporating magic realism and folk story telling. Notable examples are Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China (Hong Gaoliang Jiazu*, 1986) and Ah Cheng's *The King of Trees (Shu Wang*, 1986).

[71] Among the most significant 5th Generation films in this regard are Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi,* 1983), Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (*Hong Gaoliang,* 1987) and *The Red Lantern* (*Da Hong Denglong Gaogao Gua,* 1991), and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Horse Thief (Dao ma zei,* 1986).

[72] "While the mythic, larger-than life icon of the repressed peasant woman (embodied by Gong Li) dominates Fifth Generation's glossy canvas in the era of reform, the subjects that populate the new urban cinema are a motley crew of plebeian but nonetheless troubled people on the margins in the age of transformation—ranging from aimless bohemians, petty thieves, taxi drivers, KTV bar hostesses, disabled people, migrant workers, and other marginalized subjects at the bottom of society" (Zhang 2002: 13).

contributed in this process, aiming at a truthful rendering of urban experience of alienation that was often set among demolition.[73] The photographs created by the artists analyzed in this chapter pioneered in this collective visual resituation, and configuration of the demolition site as a key icon of contemporary China.

Figure 85. Lin Yilin, *Safely Maneuvering across Lin He Road*, 1995.

Source: Kadist Art Foundation

Massive acquisitions of rural land and tentative land-use sales began in the area around the Pearl River delta (specially in Shenzhen), prompting the beginning of large-scale real estate and infrastructural investments. Not surprisingly, some of the earliest artistic engagement with urban construction and demolition took place in the southeastern region. In 1995, Lin Yilin 林一林 conducted a performance titled *Safely Maneuvering across Lin He Road* (Figure 85), in which he constructed a 'walking' wall that crossed a busy road in Guangzhou, parsimoniously moving each cinder block forward. While drivers horned past the artist, the performance aimet to raise

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[73] A non-comprehensive list of representative films must include Jia Zhangke's *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiao yao,* 2002) and *Still Life* (*Sanxia Haoren*, 2006); Zhang Yuan's *Seventeen Years* (*Guonian Huijia,* 1999); Zhang Yang's *Shower* (*Xizao*, 1999), and Ning Ying's 'Bejing Trilogy': *For Fun* (*Zhao le*, 1993), *On the Beat* (*Minjing gushi*, 1995), and *I Love Beijing* (*Xiari nuanyangyang*, 2001). See Zhang 2002; 2007. As for independent documentary, The Square (*Gongchang*, dir. Zhang Yuan and Duan Jinchuan, 1994), *Demolition and Rehousing* (*Dingzi hu,* dir. Zhang Yuan, 1997), *Meishi Street* (*Mieshi Jie*, dir. Ou Ning, 2004), *West of the Tracks* (*Tie Xi qu*, dir. Wang Bing, 2003).

attention to the growing impact of construction projects—such as the one in front of which Lin conducted his work. The resulting video record that documents the slow pace of Lin's performance (it took over 90 minutes to cross the road) throws a contrast with the break-neck speed of construction.[74]

The inception of large-scale projects of renewal of old and derelict quarters (*jiuqu gaizao*) targeted old houses and neighborhoods, constituents of the historically layered grid of cities like Beijing, Tianjin or Shanghai. The plans rapidly surpassed the initial objectives of modernization and upgrade, and provided institutional coverage to profit-oriented and speculative operations, affecting citizen's rights and sense of identity. Artists responded to this incorporating the demolition site in works that reflected, questioned, or lamented the scope of these urban and social reconfigurations. Many of the artists themselves were personally affected by demolition, either because of pauperization (which forced many young artists to live in cheap and run down housing), or because of the centrality of some artistic venues (as in the case of the Academy of Art in Wangfujing street). All in all, artists could not help but witness first handedly the impact of renewal plans.

Going beyond the depiction of massive urban development, the projects analyzed in this chapter provide early examples of an engagement with different media, including photography, video, performance, site-specific and procedural art. Aplied to the subject of urban demolition, this multimedia approach serves to elicit questions, criticism, and even interventions on the artists' immediate milieu of urban change and development. Artists like Zhan Wang have also pioneered in the use of strategies of photo-conceptualism, transforming rubble and demolition into a malleable element for visual and discoursive appropriation.

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[74] In an interview, Lin noted the importance of the particular spatio-temporal coordinates in the selection of subject matter: "Later people have called this one of the representative works dealing with China's urban development. I suppose I was lucky to have been living in that moment, and in Guangzhou no less, which was the site of China's earliest urban renewals" (Sans 2008: 36).

The chapter exposes key projects conducted in the decade of 1990 by four different artists, Geng Jianyi, Huang Yan, Zhan Wang, and Zhang Dali, and concludes with a section that reflects on the significance of their work in relation to photo-conceptualist strategies of Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark.

4.1. Geng Jianyi. *Building No. 5*

Geng Jianyi (Zhengzhou, 1962) co-funded with Zhang Peili the Pond Society (*Chishe*), which, as noted in chapter 3, pioneered in the artistic experimentation with new media and with new approaches that emphasized process over the art object. In 28 September 1990, Geng Jianyi conducted a site-specific intervention titled *Building no.5 (Wu hao lou)* in a two story administrative building slated for demolition in Hangzhou. Geng laid out 380 ordinary white shoes painted in yellow at a pace distance along stairways and corridors, recreating the daily itineraries and interactions of the former users of the building (Shanghart gallery, n.d.).

Figures 86, 87, 88, 89. Some of the photographs that documented Geng Jianyi's *Building No. 5,* 1990.

Source: Shanghart gallery

In 1993, when art scholar Hans van Dijk was selecting artworks for the pioneering "China Avantgarde" exhibition at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin (the first

foreign exhibition to focus on contemporary Chinese art),[75] he selected Geng's performance. For the occasions, nine black and white photographs, with which Geng had recorded his work, were enlarged to 80 x 60 cm prints (Smith 2002: 39). Geng's photographs are an early example of photographic documentation of performance and site-specific art. The aesthetics of the images, with contrasted shadows, angled compositions, and the conceptualist gesture by which images are made to refer to what they *do not* show, herald later developments in photographs of demolition.

Figure 90. Geng Jianyi's *Building No. 5,* part of the exhibition "China Avantgarde", Berlin, 1993.

Source: Asian Art Archive

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[75] Koch (2011) notes that previous to "China Avantgarde", which run from 30 January to 16 May 1993, some exhibitions had taken contemporary art outside the Mainland. In 1989, *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, a large conceptual exhibition at the Center Pompidour in Paris, included some contemporary works by Huang Yongping 黄永砯, Gu Dexin 顾德新, and Yang Jiechang 杨诘苍; and an important exhibition exclusively devoted to contemporary art from China, *New Art China,* opened a few days after in Hong Kong. These two exhibitions later traveled extensively, contributing enormously to the diffusion of contemporary Chinese art outside China.

4.2. Huang Yan: *Sociological Rubbings of Demolition & Relocation Areas*

1993 was also the year when Huang Yan (Jilin, 1966) initiated his project *Sociological Rubbings of Demolition & Relocation Areas* (*Shehuixue chaiqian tapian*) in his hometown Changchun. For Huang, the momentous changes brought about by demolition directly relate with changes in the identity of Chinese people. The modernization of the city and the resulting new urban experience connects with the complex issue of Westenization, which in the case of Changchun is particularly relevant. As acknowledged by the artist (Huang 2002:1), foreigners left an important trace in the architecture and urbanism of Changchun during the 20th century. An important railway hub for Russia and Japan since the late 19th century, it later turned, renamed as Hsinking (Xinjing), into the capital of Manchukuo. An eclectic mix of architectural styles characterizes the streets of Changchun. Foreign authorities added to Ming and Qing dynasty temples and arches, baroque, neoclassical, secessionist or art nouveau style buildings, and later, Soviet monuments and new residential and industrial compounds (Li & Wang 2012).

Figure 91. The Renaissance-style train station build by the Japanese in 1913, and demolished in 1994.

Source: Liu & Wang (2012)

The rapid economic development of Changchun has arrived at the cost of sweeping away significant portions of its architectural history, as in many other cities. From June to November 1993, and focusing on the houses in the central area south of South Square, Huang started to create rubbings of the houses targeted in that first wave of demolition. Using the traditional technique to create rubbings of carved steles, Huang fixed sheets of *xuan* paper on doors, windows, staircases, inner and outer walls, and rubble, as well as in ordinary objects abandoned on site. Tapping lightly with a brush, so the paper sliped in every crack, mark and hole of the stele's surface, and next applying a coat of ink, Huang achieved a detailed negative imprint of the different objects' surface. Starting from this initial experience, Huang's project intervened, over a decade, in many different Chinese cities and countries.[76]

Figure. 92 A photograph showing the rubbing of a wall in a half demolished house in downtown Changchun, 2002.

Source: Huang (2002)

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[76] Among others, Beijing, Nanjing, Suzhou, Shanghai, Jilin, Shenyang, Kunming, or Hong Kong. Out of China, his project has included Thailand, Sweden, Norway, and Australia.

Huang's vast project, accumulating rubbings that would cover over a thousand square meters, was undertaken in the spirit of a sociological inventory. Producing different rubbings at different stages of demolition, documented it as a process, which brought it close to experimentalist approaches to art practice. In addition to the large (100 x 200 cm) rubbings, Huang also collected doorplates, bricks and tiles, and included these materials in the exhibition of the project along with video and photographic documentation of the urban context of the demolished houses and the process of rubbing (Wu 2010: 205). The archaeological references are unmistakable. As in other contemporary projects by Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen, the artist intervention stems from a positionality in a mid way between the arts and the social sciences from where it is possible to articulate a discouse over the configuration of remnants as ruins. This interrelation between an aesthetic approach and the sober perspective of the social researcher testifies of the arrival in China of the influence of conceptualist photographers of the late 1960s. In contemporary China, as was the case in the United States of the post-war era, theinfluence of photo-conceptualism would go beyond the immediate scope of artistic photography, and affect the status and understanding of art practice at large.

Figure 93. A page from the book documenting Huang Yan's project. The photographs show rubbings of demolition sites on different streets in Changchun streets: Wusong street, Shanghai street, Xiamen street, Dongertiao street, and Xi'an avenue.

Source: Huang (2002)

4.3. Zhan Wang: *Temptation, Outdoor Experiment, Ruins Cleaning Project*

Zhan Wang (Beijing, 1962) has also witnessed first-handedly the radical changes that affected his hometown city. "As someone who has lived all his life in Beijing", he notes in an interview, "I have seen this regime demolishing nonstop. They don't let you choose a place and make it special and meaningful sooner or later, they will take it down. By trying to reach a level of Western-oriented modernization, we are destroying the continuity of our own tradition" (Dal Lago 2000: 84). This process of development and demolition reached Zhan personaly when the Central Academy of Fine Arts, in the Sculpture department of which he had graduated, and where he was at the time acting as professor, was targeted by development plans. While the building was not particularly old or in bad shape, it became part of Beijing's ODHR plan, and was accordingly razed. Its central location, in Wangfujing Street, was leveled to give way to the development of a commercial area funded by Hong Kong investor.

Zhan's career evinces an artistic evolution from his education in modern sculpture into experimental and conceptual approaches, in which site-specific interventions and photographic documentation are paramount. The demolition site has served Zhan to experiment with an expanded understanding of the sculptural object, as well as with the role of the artist in convulse historical times. Zhan's exploration of the medium of sculpture evolved into what critic Yin Shuangxi has termed "conceptual sculpture" (Erickson 2001: 76). As in the case of other Chinese artists, Zhan's conceptualism differs from the radical division between idea and object that characterized Western pioneering conceptual practices such as Sol LeWitt's, whose definition famously reduced the execution of the actual work to "a perfunctory affair" (LeWitt 1967). Rather, and appealing to Chinese artistic and philosophic traditions, for Zhan there is a strong bound between concept and materiality, the medium arising from the concept in "a seamless, indivisible pair" (Erickson ibid.). Many of his projects evince a strong relationship between the idea behind the work, sculpture, and the environment where the work takes place.

After initial attempts of questioning artistic academicism—i.e. taking the sculptures out of the galleries[77]—Zhan contributed to an 1994 sculpture exhibition[78] with a work titled *Empty Soul Empty – Temptation* (*Kong Ling · Kong—Youhuo*), consisting of 18 casts shaped as Mao suits.[79] Zhan had previously molded the suits on figures that, when removed, left the stiffened suits as bodiless carcasses in dramatic postures. The artist equates the casts with the slough of a cicada, the skin that the insect casts off periodically over cycles of transformation. Though not explicitly stated by Zhan, many critics and art scholars have understood this work in relation to the transformations of Beijing's urban landscapes as well as that of its inhabitants' spirit. The reference to the cicada and to desire for change (the 'temptation' or 'enticement' of the title) points to the hopes and aspirations to national strengthening and better living conditions; while the casts/slough, the leftover of the process of metamorphosis, put the focus on the remains, the wasteful matter produced and left behind after a traumatic event.

Both processes, the cicada slough and urban demolition, are similarly characterized by two elements: an extreme violence and a high degree of depersonalization. To cast off its skin, the cicada needs to undergo an intense struggle, the new being (the callow) being able to abandon the old skin only at the moment of maximum convulsion. At its own level, urban renewal also involves a dramatic alteration of one's environment, way of life, spatial orientation, and sense of identity. The new 'skin' provided by new construction only comes into being after the violent demolition of one's neighborhood and home, and involves a sense of alienation from the new spatial coordinates, in frequently newly urbanized—if at all—residential compounds in the outskirts of the city which complicate the usual economic, familiar and social interactions that constitute the ties to a place. In this sense, Zhan, as "many Chinese artists in Beijing in

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[77] A first transition is discernible between the works with which he graduated, *Street* (1988), under the influence of the modern Western sculptors (particularly Marino Marini) he had known during his education, to *Sidewalks* (1990), for which he took superrealist sculptures out to the street (Liu 2012).

[78] *Sculpture '94* exhibition at the Art Gallery of the Central Academy of Art also included works by Sui Jianguo 隋建国, Fu Zhongwang 傅中望, Zhang Yongjian 張永見, and Jiang Jie 姜傑 (Shao 2013).

[79] Although in the West the tunic suit is mostly known as Mao suit or jacket, its Chinese name (*zhongshan zhuang*) refers to Sun Zhongsan 孫中山 (or Sun Yatsen), the founder of the Guomingdang and first president of the Republic of China (1911).

the mid-1990s were vehemently opposed to the lack of attention to the human subject in contemporary urban development" (Visser 2004: 297). In this view, the casts can be seen as Zhan's initial exploration into the complex significance or urban ruins.

The connections between the anthropomorphic molds and urban demolition was further heightened when Zhan exhibited the casts in a half-demolished building in downtown Beijing, in a temporal installation that he titled *Temptation—an Outdoor Experiment 2.* Among rubble and half-standing structures, the sculptures acquire the poignancy of war or earthquake victims. Moreover, *Outdoor Experiment* reveals the growing importance of photography in Zhan's work as he ventured into experimental and site-specific media, that is, into ephemeral interventions. As evident in this early example, photographs went beyond the role of providing a documentary support to the interventions. Their low angle and pale lighting, blending the humanoid figures with the surrounding rubble, add to the sense of mute defenselessness of the casts.

Figure 94. Zhan Wang, *Outdoor Experiment 2*, 1994.

Source: artist website

Zhan's most important work on demolition took place in October 1994, when taking advantage of a break of a demolition crew, he entered a demolition site (the same of the *Outdoor Experiment,* in Wangfujing street) to conduct a site-specific intervention titled *Ruins Cleaning Project (Feixu qingxi jihua).* Using brushes, detergent, oil colors, and interior coating material, the artist cleaned bricks and decorative ceramics, washed windows and repainted doorframes, walls and brick pillars. Zhan's prosaic account of the intervention runs as follows:

Ruin cleaning plan: proposals and results (1994)

Time: October 12 to October 14, 1994
Place: East relocation area of Wangfujing Street, Beijing
Overview of the plan: As the urban construction and reconstruction tide approaches, Wangfujing Street, the most flourishing street in Beijing, has also became the object of reconstruction. Although there were beautiful buildings with Chinese and Western styles of architecture combined, they could not escape from the fate of being demolished. Because the capital needs modernization, needs a commercial district. Therefore we decided to decorate these ruins just for one day while the workers involved in the demolition where at rest.

The decoration and cleaning process is as follows:
1. Clean a pillar with red bricks; then repaint the pillar with red paint;
2. Clean the half-leftover white door frame; then repaint it with white paint;
3. Clean the decorative ceramic tiles with a piece of cloth;
4. Decorate a wall with indoor coating materials.

Cleaning tools employed: brushes, detergent, oil colors, interior coating material, etc.

On the same evening, the bulldozers continued to clear out the house and razed all the nearby houses to the ground a few days later. Many years later, new buildings rise here.

Figures 95, 96. Zhan Wang, *Ruins Cleaning Project,* 1994.

Source: courtesy of the artist

Indeed, on the evening of the same day, a bulldozer of the demolition company entered the site and razed down what remained of the house. Anticipating the demolition, the intervention was amply documented by photographs taken by fellow artist Zhu Yu 朱昱. The images show Zhan at work, delineating with red paint the joists of a brick pillar, repainting a threshold with white paint, cleaning the remaining blue and black decorative ceramic tiles, or whitewashing standing walls (Figures 95, 96). Framed by demolished and broken walls, the pictures offer intriguing perspectives and focal points across the neighboring houses. A wider focus allows a panoramic of the area: the white walls of Zhan's house contrast with its neighbor, gloomy and dark in the dusty and hazy atmosphere of a Beijing afternoon. Another photograph, in this case black-and-white, reveals a bulldozer climbing over a heap of rubble and advancing towards the house. In the final image, the artist is portraited in middle foreground, back to the camera, watching the bulldozer destroying a day's work (Figures 97, 98).

The full extent of the project extended beyond the day of the intervention, with documentation including images and descriptions of the site years after the demolition was completed, during the construction of the Oriental Plaza (a landmark shopping mall), and the final aspect of the area. In a perhaps ironic twist, Zhan would install, years later, one of his *Artificial Rocks,* the stainless steel interpretation of traditional 'scholar rocks' (*gongshi*), in the site of the commercial compound. His intervention and commentary on Beijing's urban renewal, narcissistically reflecting itself in a new, ready-made version of its tradition, had come full circle.

Figures. 97, 98. Zhan Wang, *Ruins Cleaning Project,* 1994, (top), the artist's cleaning and painting, on the right side of the image, contrast with the next house on the foreground; (bottom), a buldozer tears down the whole area.


Source: courtesy of the artist

4.4. Zhang Dali: *Dialogue, Demolition*

Zhang Dali (Harbin, 1968) is another artist whose work capitalizes on the relationship of photography and urban demolition. Like Zhan Wang, Zhang belongs to a generation of artists who pioneered in the experimentation with new media and art practices. After a time in Beijing during which he joined the artistic community of the Yuanming yuan,[80] Zhang fled the breakdown following the 1989 Student Movement and left for Italy, where he spent six years living in different cities. Upon returning to China in 1995, he felt alienated by the rapid and widespread changes in the city, to the point that he could not recognize the city anymore:

> When I returned, I noticed how many physical changes the city had undergone. In the beginning, I was trying to follow the changes. I would take a map and try to retrace them around the city center. After some time, I could not follow them anymore; they were too many and too sudden. If I don't go to the western part of Beijing for a few months, I now have a hard time recognizing it. (Dal Lago 2000: 83)

Figure 99. Zhang Dali, *Dialogue,* 1999.
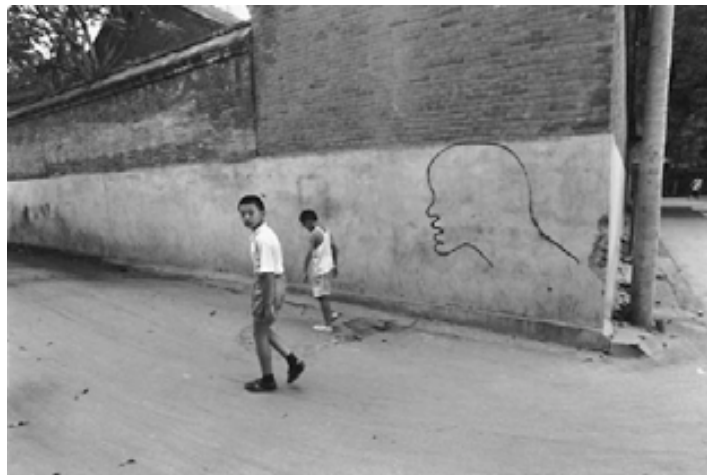
Source: Wu (2000)

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[80] Zhang Dali is one of the young artists featured in Wu Wenguang's pioneering documentary *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (*Liulang Beijing-Zuihou De Mengxiangzhe*, 1999).

As a response to these feelings, Zhang began spraying a bald human profile on walls, in his words, "a condensation of my own likeness as an individual" (Wu 2012: 228), usually in areas and sections of buildings in the process of being demolished. His graphitized sketches were big, usually one or two meters tall, and in occasions Zhang added the tag 'AK-47', the name of the famous assault rifle which he had adopted as nickname in Italy. In the next three years, he drew over 2,000 of such profiles across Beijing.

When Zhang first graffitied his profile in Bologna, he was thrilled to discover that other graffiti would appear in response. But in Beijing, where walls only displayed small ads, official communications, and the ubiquitous *chai* character that marked a house for demolition, his bald heads were generally despised and criticized as hooliganism, and only gradually attracted the interest of sociologically-bended intellectuals or fellow artists. Sensing the failure of his intended dialogue, Zhang focused in the photographic documentation of his interventions, which he displayed in large, 90 x 60 cm prints. These images focus on Zhang's iconic profile, or in occasions a row of them, sprayed in a wall of a half-demolished building, facing in the same direction. Scattered bricks and rubble at the feet of the walls are a recurrent index of on-going demolition. New high-raises, glass surfaces and construction cranes extending over and beyond the walls in the upper section of the photographs, indicate the recurrent simultaneity of construction and deconstruction processes. On occasions, his photographs emphasize the clash between different temporalities by juxtaposing demolition works with culturally significant buildings, like the Forbidden City or the National Art Gallery (Wu 2012: 229-230).

The lack of impact to *Dialogue* decided him to strive for a larger visual impact, in line with the changes the city was undergoing. In 1998, Zhang started the related project *Demolition*, for which he hired construction workers to demolish the interior of the profiles he had sprayed, opening holes in walls that were, in most occasion, already half demolished—sometimes returning to the same wall previously sprayed (Figure 99). The radicalism of the intervention highlights the violence of tearing-down of

Beijing: "I take part in [the demolition] in order to create a direct link with what is happening. I use the same process: demolition. I destroy what is being destroyed while it's being destroyed and take pictures of what I do as documentation" (Dal Lago 2000: 83). The resulting images amplify the violence of urban demolition by giving it a human shape. Issues of personal identity and memory, of collective history are directly materialized in the void opened inside the heads, in the cracked edges of the profiles and walls, in the different layers of architectural history brought together by these anthropomorphic holes.

Figures 100, 101. Zhang Dali, (left) *Dialogue*; (right) *Demolition*, 1998.

Sources: Robischon; ArtSpeakChina

4.5. Photo-conceptualism as a strategy for the creation of ruins

The projects explored above display a parodical and critical appropriation of the actions and discourses of government officials, academic experts, and economic agents, such as land resources and cultural relics bureaus, or the very companies and construction crews. Huang Yan's investment in "sociological" research vacates the authorial position in favor of the institutionalized subjectivity of the researcher. In the case of Zhan Wang, the planning of the ruin cleaning project, stated in the matter-of-fact jargon of a construction—or deconstruction—company, turns the artwork into an activity driven by the clerical purposes of record-taking and archive. Zhang Dali is merely doing what the demolition crews do every day, if only in a more controlled, careful way. In these sense, these projects participate in the appropriation of non-artistic styles, genres and platforms (journalistic, commercial, forensic, etc.) undertaken by pioneering photo-conceptualist artists in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the context of growing industrial diffusion of photographic images in the emerging visual regime of postmodernity, artistic photography faced a radical critique that challenged its artistic value. Aartistic photo-practice based in aesthetics (i.e., Pictorialism) or in immediacy (i.e., Cartier-Bresson's 'decisive moment') was being assaulted by commercial, fashion, and journalistic photography. As a response, in a paradoxical move that achieved to establish photography as one of the most significant medium in contemporary art, conceptual photography prefigured the critique to the bourgeois, self-referential art object as "the model or hypothesis of non-autonomy" of all art (Wall 1995: 35). The way to do so was a self-reflective approach to the document-image as a non-autonomous object, always tied to the discourse of truth it aimed to validate. Early photo-conceptualists projects, such as those of Robert Smithson, presented photography in relation with texts (reportage), academic and institutional discourses (archaeology, sociology, journalism) and genres (photo-journalism, lectures) external to the art world, and by doing so, extended the direct, depictive role of photography into conceptual interventions. Similarly, images by Huang Yan and Zhan Wang acquire their meaning and value within projects

composed of different elements and layers. In relation with the accompanying texts (citations, statements, databases, planning documents, etc.), their images provide journalistic evidence and forensic validation.

Zhang Dali, for whom conceptual art, in the 1990s China, "transcended the limits of aesthetics (*meishu*)…[to ask] questions about the basic problem of existence", aimed at establishing a dialogue about the changes in the city with Beijing's citizens, who were silently accepting the radical intervention in the urban space, and force the citizens "to think about what it means to live in an urban environment" (Stuart 1999:2). Using public walls (the space for modern communication in the form of billboards, notice boards, and advertisement) as artistic surface, Zhang tried to reach a larger, non-specialized audience, beyond the cultural elites who visit museum and galleries. If *Dialogue* defamiliarizes broken walls and houses by turning them into a highly visible surface for the artistic intervention, *Demolition* further alters routine landscapes and sights. As in the interventions of Gordon Matta-Clark, Zhang's cuts and wrecks estrange the experience of urban dwellers by altering their sense of normalcy, orientation and visual perspectives. Imploding architecture from inside achieves to reveal different, concealed layers (of history, of agency, of function) and ways of experiencing urban materiality. Moreover, by giving demolition a human shape—the shape of his iconic bald profile—Zhang forces the viewer to see urban change *through* a human prism, destabilizing the safe perspective from where to regard the art-object, and forcing upon the viewer a sight of the city in ruins that problematizes discourses of modernization and introduces a dystopian reverse, awakening the awareness about received positionalities and discoursive formations.

The rubbing, cleaning, and tearing down of these artists elicit an estrangement of the phenomena of urban development that affords a new, fresh look on urban renewal plans, the legitimizing discourses of modernization, and its implicit values. By defamiliarizing the demolition site, they manage to short-circuit visual and social habits and prompt a critical gaze with wide implications to the notion and aesthetics of ruins. Zhan Wang's *Ruins Cleaning Project* tries to resituate the demolition site by

means of a cleaning and repainting rubble. Going against the classical view of ruins, which wants them as 'natural' as possible for the aesthetic appretiation of their decay, their intervention reintegrates the ruined object in active, critical regimes of seeing.

Commenting on the effects of the massive circulation of images and the aestheticism of modern art, Susan Buck-Morss has discussed the "anaesthetization of reception [and the] viewing of the 'scene' with disinterested pleasure" (Buck-Morss 1992: 38). To underscore the significance of works like Zhan's as an intervention in the visual understanding of the ruined object, it is interesting to see similar strategies at work among different artists. For example, Afghan performance artist Lida Abdul (Figure 102) has painted in white multiple warfare wreckage that spreads over her country to defy their transformation into aestheticized ruins and instead, turn rubble "into a meditation on something other—a non-referential work of art—a visual or sculptural poem that one hopes will open up new spaces for rethinking about society, about ethics and identity itself" (IMA 2008).

Figure 102, 103. (Left), Lida Abdul, *White House* (video still), 2005; (right), Brian McKee, *Detritus #37,* 2002.

Sources: artist website, Johannes Vogt Gallery

Abdul's approach to dereliction and wreck, as in *White House* (2005), for instance, contrast with the aesthetitization of similar remnants by Brian McKee, who creates series of alluring photographs of derelict and ruined houses, temples and villages. McKee's series *Detritus* (2002) focuses on ruinous landscapes of Afghanistan, such as the Darul Aman Palace outside Kabul. For all the artists' stated intention to create visual archives to serve historical and social reflection, his images of the ruins of the Palace do not address the conditions of creation and, perhaps more importantly, of perpetuation of these ruins, one of the characteristics of the so called ruin porn (Finoki) that articulates much of the current fad of ruin photograph.[81]

Zhan Yuan's performance and record achieves, as Abdul's, a similar "visual or sculptural poem that one hopes will open up new spaces for rethinking about society, about ethics and identity itself" (IMA 2008). Cleaning, beautifying, ultimately showing respect to the house and its architectural and human history,[82] elevates dereliction to the status of a significant monument. Similarly, in treating, de facto, derelict houses as if they were steles (where imperial edicts and memorials were carved for posterity), Huang Yan elevates buildings slated for demolition to the category of a cultural emblem with historical value, that is, a ruin. Their shapes and textures, the cracks and crevices of their walls, their decorative motives and architectural styles, become a historiographical and cultural record, achieved by means of a highly experimental approach.[83] The different transformations produce by these artists, then, aim at the

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[81] It is precisely context what is lost in the aestheticization of derelict architecture so common in contemporary photograpahic projects. According to Brian Finoki, the so-called "ruin porn", as epitomized by the enticing images of the ruinous aspect of the default city of Detroit,

> is a war on memory, dislocating the political dynamics of ruin in favor of momentary sensations and lurid plots. The state of ruin is seen as exactly that: a condition rather than a continually unfolding process…Decay is, in this sense, a political morphology, a timepiece for decoding the narratives of social failure, disentanbling the relationship between initial crises and the "second crisis" of political fallout, gauging institutional rot. (2009)

[82] Liu Xinmin (2004) understands the cleaning and beautifying of the ruin site in reference to the folk tradition of cleaning corpses in preparation for burial. For Liu, Zhan's intervention is a contemporary reharsing of a centuries old ritual connected with filial piety, with which the artist responds to the disregard of government agencies and construction tycoons for architectural and urban heritage.

[83] The use of the technique of rubbings connects Huang Yan's project with avant-garde experiments with photography and its capacity to produce an imprint, a chemico-mechanical trace, of an original. A

epistemological appreciation of rubble as a ruin, prompting a refreshed understanding of architecture in relation to its social and political context.

Figure 104. Zhang Dali, *Demolition,* 1998.[84]

Sources: Princeton University Art Museum

tradition that dates back to Man Ray's (1890 –1976) of experiments with photograms and rayograms, it has experienced a revival in the last decades, with contemporary experimentation with photographic processes, even disposing of the camera. In this sense, are relevant the camera-less experiments of Adam Fuss (England, 1961) with light and time, or Floris Neusüss (Lennep, Germany, 1937), who, in his "whole-body photograms" (*Körperfotogramm,* 1967) and *Nachtbild* series (1991), bombards photographic paper with light so that bodies or vegetation, respectively, in contact with the photographic paper are negativized (V&A 2011). Huang Yan's rubbings become a premodern form of these imprints, a connection to which his photographs of the rubbings add further complexity.

[84] Zhang's intervention frames the construction site of China Life Tower (Zhongguo Renshou Dasha), outside the East Second Ring Road in Beijing's Central Business District (CBD).

Chapter 5. Demolition as concept and performance (mid-1990s to mid-2000s): Rong Rong, Jiao Jian, Liu Jin, the Gao Brothers

The feelings that articulate the different photographic projects analyzed in this chapter were triggered by the erasure of what Yomi Braester has called the "spatial semiotics of memory" (2007: 162), the material landmarks that anchor memories to space. To articulate these feelings and experiences, Rong Rong, Liu Jin, Jiao Jian and the Gao Brothers have activated the combined recourses of photo-conceptualism and performance. Whereas other photographic projects analyzed along this work also take recourse of these two elements, what groupd the projects analyzed in this chapter is the fact that they set the basis, in the decade that runs from the mid 1990s to the mid 2000s, for posterior developments of photographic performance and stage photography. As early, tentative experiments, these projects serve to explore the possibilities and implications of conceptual and performative appropriation of the demolition site.

The conceptual approach that activates many photographic projects analyzed in this dissertation is based on the dynamics between the erasure and survival of traces. As noted in relation to the configurations of ruins in Chinese visual culture (see chapter 2), this dynamics pivot over the notions of *xu,* meaning 'void', and *ji*, or 'site'. *Xu*, serving as the etymological basis for the modern term for ruins *feixu*, marked in the first place the vacated, barren space left by the destruction of a city. Conversely, a spatial landmark constitutes, by means of different textual and discursive strategies, a 'site' (*ji*), the etymological meaning of which points to 'footprint' (preserved in its 'foot' radical 足).

> *Xu* emphasizes the erasure of human traces; *ji* stresses survival and display. A *xu* in a strict sense can only be mentally envisaged because it shows no external sing of ruins; but a *ji*, being itself an external sign of ruins, always encourages visualization and representation. The idea of *xu* implies the subjective interaction with a site; but the notion of *ji* embodies the dialectic of nature and artifice. *Xu* lacks physical framing; but *ji* must signal a process through which a specific place or sign is

transformed into a trace of the past that expresses its own process of decay. Imagination related to *xu* is by definition temporal and mythical, while *ji* always translates poetic temporality into a spatial and material existence. (Wu 2012: 63)

Five hundred years after the destruction of Guangling 廣陵 (modern day Yangzhou), Bao Zhao's 鮑照 (414-466) *Rhapsody to a Ruined City* (*Wucheng fu*) described the desolation in the area where the old city used to stand, only inhabited by weeds and wildlife. By becoming a canonical poem in the network of cultural transmission and citation, the poem established the importance of the erased site. The poem also becomes a sort of site for the reflection and longing, and a poetic trope for further poems. In a similar way, photographers have tried to resignify expanses of destruction and ruins, while at the same time, their photographs provide a vicarious trace to activate their memories and feelings, in addition to contribute to their own visual tradition with new articulations of visual ruination.

Writing about elegiac *huaigu* poetry, Stephen Owen notes: "Because we crave to 'be'— in body, in works, in writing—we can never view such erasures dispassionately, as mere blank space" (Owen 1986: 16). Proving this emotional response in front of the phenomenon of erasure, the photographs under examination in this chapter betray a highly personal approach to photo-conceptualism, in which experiences and feelings threatened by the erasure of their material landmarks find in the demolition site the perfect stage for representation and performance. Amidst the landscapes of demolition and urban development, actors, the same photographers, and even images-within-the-image serve to re-establish a connection with the urban space and their associated memories and feelings.

The chapter is structured somewhat differently than the rest, the reason being that Rong Rong's ruin pictures offer an extensive and illustrative catalogue of many artistic strategies triggered by the direct experience of urban demolition. Thus, the chapter proceeds along the different strategies that articulate the photographic series of Rong Rong on the theme of urban demolition, and in parallel to them, it analyzes

photographic series by different artists that display similar approaches. An introductory section, focusing on the period and influence of Beijing's East Village, situates Rong Rong's work in relation to contemporary art and experimental photography. A second section explores the series created as a result of his explorations of demolition sites in Beijing. The use of meta-photographs, and the metaphorical references implied in the series *Fragments* frames the work of photographer Jiao Jian. The third section introduces Rong Rong's use of demolition as stage for performance in relation with staged photography by Liu Jin and the Gao Brothers, and the forth, introduces Rong Rong and inri's series *Liulitun*, which incorporates many of the previously examined performative strategies. Finally, a fifth section summarizes the findings of the chapter.

5.1. Rong Rong: *East Village*

Rong Rong (born Lu Zhirong 卢志荣, Zhangzhou, Fujian, 1968) arrived to Beijing in 1993 with only a few savings and the Chinese-made Seagull camera, which he had bought working at his father grocery store, looking to make a place for himself in what Wu Hung has characterized as the "unquestionable center of experimental art" in the China of the time (Wu 2008:37).[85] Rong Rong has had, and continues to have a crucial role in carving and consolidation of a space for experimental approaches to photography, as testified, in addition to his photographic work, by his role as editor of the first journal of experimental photography, *New Photo*, in the mid 1990s, and as co-founder, in 2007, of the major center for art photography in China, the Three Shadows Photography Art Center, whose annual photography award has become on e of the best termometers of the state of experimental photography in China.

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[85] Wu Hung notes a marked difference between the 1980s and the 1990s. In the 1980s, the development of avant-garde artistic initiatives had a strongly decentralized nature, with many groups and hubs in the provinces. Conversely, and though Wu takes notice of experimental communities in most major cities (Guangzhou, Shanghai, Chengdu) and second-tier (Changchun, Yangjiang), in the 1990s Beijing attracted many of the young artists to-be, giving rise to the creation of artist villages and their particular collective dynamics.

Back in 1993, freshly arrived to the expensive capital, young Zhirong found cheap lodgings in the suburb of Dashanzhuang, outside Beijing's Third Ring Road, where run-down and cheap courtyard houses attracted a group of young art students and would-be artists.[86] As another of his artist-friends, Xing Danwen 邢丹文 (Xi'an 1967), Rong Rong used his camera to record the life of the community, self-styled as Beijing's *East Village* (*Dong Cun*). The frequent events, parties and happenings turned, under the camera's lenses, into artistic performances: "In this forlorn and abandoned village", reflects Rong Rong, "where you would never imagine that anyone would care about art, it was through my camera lens that these guys were recognized—for the first time but without any doubt—as serious artists" (diary entry, November 4, 1993. In Wu, 2003: 55).

Figures 105, 106. Rong Rong, *East Village,* 1994.

Source: Wu (2003)

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[86] Wang Shihua, a middle age student at the Central Academy of Art from Inner Mongolia, is credited to be the first to move there, quickly followed by fellow students Tan Guangye, Li Guomin 黎过缗, Yang Lei, Zhang Yang, Xiang Weiguang, and Zhang Huan 张洹. During 1993 and 1994, when some of these artists graduated, they were joined by jobless or impoverished artists, most of them foreigners in Beijing, like Ma Liuming, Cang Xin, Zhu Ming 朱冥 (from Hunan), and the same Rong Rong. Poet and rock musician Zouxiao Zuzhou 左小祖咒 (nickname of Wu Hongjin 吴红巾) and art critic and curator Kong Bu 孔埠 would also join the village.

In addition to shooting his friends and their performances, Rong Rong also captured the environment of the village, a sort of garbage dump of the neighboring Chaoyang district. His photographs focused on dirt, rubbish and waste (abandoned sofas, broken dolls and mannequins, dirty parches of snow), on fragments that acquiered a eerie lyricism in Rong Rong's lenses, who at the time started to build a corpus of work on the master figure of contemporary ruins (Wu 2002: 37).

Returning, in 2002, to the area where the East Village stood, Rong Rong discovered that the whole area, affected by development plans, had been razed down and leveled. Instead of the courtyard houses that hosted their parties and artistic experiments, Rong Rong found a wasteland that awaited the initiation of construction works. His photographs on the occasion illustrate the barrenness of the expanse of removed soil, only disrupted by marks of bulldozer tires and a few scattered trees that compose a particularly forlorn topography. In the distance, identical and anonymous apartment blocks foretold the future of the area. In the accompanying record, Rong Rong wrote: "No, there was nothing left. I wandered around. The earth was new and soft, preventing memories from surfacing" (Rong Rong's note, December 2002, in Wu, 2003: 180). His density memories felt at odds with the flattened, freshly removed land. Accordingly, he portrayed himself as a blurred, ghostly figure at loss under the sky of dusk.

But as other photographs make more evident, his dramatization was not only inspired by the objective of providing a record of his sense of alienation. Devoid of leftovers and remains, a wasteland still provides an opportunity to express the desire for belonging, to establish a new relationship with space, even at its most exhausted. Upon discovering a strip of ice, Rong Rong shot a series of photographs in which he enacted, in the act of leaving a mark, a sort vicarious ownership of space. "But I suddenly saw it—I have found it—that shining thing quietly covering the earth. I ran with excitement and grasped it in my hand. It belongs to me" (ibid.). Carving the ice, leaving the trace of his avid fingers, becomes the way to relate with that desert of

erasure; clutching and shaping the only natural, real thing at hand, becomes the only way to participate in that vacated space, to own it, to experience it.

Figures 107, 108, 109. Rong Rong, *East Village*, 2002

Source: Wu (2003)

5.2. Meta-photography and concept: Rong Rong, Jiao Jian

By 1996, after the East Village community had disbanded,[87] Rong Rong began to focus on the rampant effects of urban construction in Beijing in his *Untitled* series. By the mid 1990s Rong Rong would not have much difficulty to find remains of recently demolished houses, but in addition he felt a particular attraction to ruins: "I cannot bring myself to pass a half-destroyed house without entering it: I feel that I can always find something—no matter what—inside" (Wu 2009: 69). And indeed he found many things among the fresh ruins and the blatant erasure of landmarks, traces and human presences. His photographs reveal best than others "the anxiety and silence adrift in these modern ruins" (Wu 2001:13), the "uncanny quiet" (Edensor 2007:6) that these

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[87] A police raid in 1994, and growing divergences among the artists about the authorship and royalties of the photographs of performances, which began to acquire commercial value after a Rong Rong's exhibition in Japan in 1995, were responsible for the village's disbandment. For the history of the East Village see Wu Hung's *Rong Rong's East Village 1993 ~ 1998.* Xing Danwen's notes and photographs also provide a first-person insight in the life of the village, see "A Personal Diary", *Art Asia Pacific* 61 (nov-dec) 2008.

demolished lots share with ruins. In Rong Rong's black and white photographs, the sonic stillness of demolished Beijing becomes particularly acute.

Figure 110. Rong Rong, *Untitled, No. 1(2),* 1996.

Source: Chambers Fine Art

But Rong Rong's images of demolition go beyond the documentary and the aestheticization of rubble. Essaying a first foray into photo-conceptualism, Rong Rong combined general views of half-demolished houses with zooms on the posters and calendars that remained stuck in the walls. Showing smiling and enticing effigies of actresses and singers (like Marilyn Monroe, Gong Li 巩俐, Deng Lijun 邓丽君), these images contrast with the grim landscapes that surround them. As mementos, decoration or erotic fetishes of the houses' former inhabitants, the posters and calendars emphasize the links between the destruction of households and of memory by bringing to the fore feeling, affections, and desires. As a meta-photographic conceptual strategy, Rong Rong's photographs silently comment on the fact that while the material home is easily replaceable (and even improved, by relocation to an apartment with better equipment and conveniences), immaterial memories and affections often remain stuck to its landmarks.

Figures 111, 112. Rong Rong, *Untitled,* (left), *No. 9;* (right), *No.4,* 1996.

Source: Chambers Fine Art

Rong Rong's exploration of Beijing's demolition areas also revealed other visual remnants amidst the demolished houses, like commercial and propaganda images, and family portraits. In addition to the sentimental or sociological implications of such findings, Rong Rong's interest was also attracted by the decay and defacement that the images' surface registered. Editing and displaying them, in a pioneering engagement with found photography in China, Rong Rong touched upon the aesthetics of ruins—rugged or clipped edges; organic outgrowths; cracked or discolored surfaces—while at the same time commented on the ultimate mortality of the images themselves, which "will also age and become with time ruins of another sort" (Roth 1997: 13). During one of his explorations, he also found an envelope full of cut-out photographic film, which turned out to be a series of nude portraits of an identified woman—probably someone who lived in the demolished house. In the resulting meta-photographic project, the differences between images, bodies, and architecture collapse, and their shared fragmentation serves the photographer to create a project of highly conceptual value, as well as an intriguing visual allure.

Figure 113. Rong Rong, *Fragments*, 1998.

Source: Wu (2012)

Rong Rong's first hand exploration of demolished lots foreground the role of the artist's body in mediating the encounter with ruined spaces. In this sense, as different photographic projects testify, the phenomenological disruption caused by demolition and razing also has the effect of enhancing the sensual characteristics of urban space, a dimension confined within repetitive and sanitized channels in the experience of contemporary cities. As Tim Edensor notes, "In the ruin, the dissolution of sensual

familiarity and the advent of sensual surprises may be initially overwhelming, repulsive or arresting, but is also has the potential to provide a stimulating experience by this distinction from the familiar" (2007: 22). Ruined houses and sites are spaces that have "loosen up" (Franck & Stevens 2006), in which the function, meaning, and perception of space has been altered, affording an exploration of the sensual qualities of space and non-linear temporalities outside the normative-functional configuration of urban space.

As a side effect of the shared sense of obsolescence and fragmentation, the body becomes meleable and affords opportunities to renegotiate the relationship with the demolished and decayed spaces and architectures. Rong Rong's meta-photographs are based on visual metaphorical references, in which images and photographs come to play the part of the former inhabitants. In the work of Jiao Jian (Shanghai, 1962),[88] the body of the photographer becomes the instrument that serves to visualy articulate a twofold metaphor. At a first level, the images show the artist laying or standing in contorted positions, trying to occupy and fill holes and cracks in damaged or broken architectures. The photographs are a document of the futility of these actions, because not even the camouflage afforded by the images' pale grey pallete can succesfully blend the artist with the architecture. At a second conceptual level, and starting by the title of the series that Jiao has created since 2002, his actions are visual intents "to fill the gaps of the nation" (*tianbu guonei kongbai*), by which popular culture and the media often refers to any achievement in sciences, sports, or the arts that helps to close a perceived gap separating China from other Western powers, and bring China closer to the much desire status of a first-rank power. Jiao impersonates the dictum with literality, foregrounding the responsibilities and sacritifices bestowed on Chinese citizens in the reform process.

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[88] As Zhang Dali and many others, Jiao Jian spent part of the 1990s abroad, in his case in Australia, where he expanded his previous education in Fine Arts with a degree in Photography. By 1998, he returned to his alma mater, Zhejian's China Academy of Art, to act as teacher in the newly created New Media Department.

Figures 114, 115. Jiao Jian, *To Fill the Void,* (left), *No. 3;* (right), *No.4,* 2002.

Source: OFOTO gallery

5.3. Demolition as stage: Rong Rong, Liu Jin, Gao Brothers

Between 1997 and 2000, Rong Rong further explored connection between demolion sites and the body. In three series of staged photographs, a recurrent figure, clad in a wedding dress and the naked photographer pose languidly in the background of ruinous houses. The white satin dress,[89] which encapsules hope, glamour, and, in the Chinese cultural context, mourning, establishes a poignant dialogue with the urban ruins, whereas the naked body of the photographer reinforces the aura of fragility and decay of the images. The most narrative is the series created in the remains of a "ghost" town in Beijing's Western Hills abandoned after being burned down during the Sino-Japanese war. Starting with the standing figures of the photographers and the actress dressed in white facing the ruins, the photographs visualize a performance of death in which the figures gradually disappear, ending with the ultimate cremation of the white gown.

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[89] The wedding dress has been connected, first of all, with Rong Rong's former experience as a wedding photographer (Wu 2002: 46).

Figures 116, 117, 118, 119. Rong Rong, *Wedding Gown* series*, No. 1* (*1, 2, 3, 4*)*,* 2000.

Source: Blindspot Gallery

In the case of Liu Jin's (Lianyungang, Jiangsu, 1971) series *Injured Angel*, the connection between body and ruined architecture is established by an angel, who hangs from scaffoldings or tree branches above unhospitable demolition sites, or sitting on top of a wall. With wounded and bleeding wings and unable to fly, the injured angel is stranded in these spaces of indeterminacy created by rapid and radical urban change. With its back to the viewer, it is difficult to decide whether the angel tries to accommodate to the new habitat, or is looking for a way out. For critic Gu Ming, the angel relates to the auspicious green turtle (*shen gui*) of Chinese folklore that "dwells under every harmonious courtyard house—he anchors the house, blesses the family and cultivates harmonious "Qi" (cosmic energy) for the generations to come" (Yu 2006). Enigmatic and rich in allegorical connotations, Liu Jin's angel also

undescores the cultural hybridity of contemporary China, and the absence of an "authentic cultural past" (ibid.).


Figures 120, 121. Liu Jin, (left), *Angel Hanging On The Tree;* (right)*, Angel Standing on Wasteland,* 2005.

Source: artist website

For their part, Gao Shen 高甡 (Jinan, 1956) and Gao Qiang 高强 (Jinan, 1962), who since the mid 1980s have worked together under the pen name of Gao Brothers, combine performance and digital manipulation to turn demolished, derelict and abandoned architecture into a stage of fragility, alienation and loneliness. Unfinished buildings (the so-called *lanweilou*), digitally mirrored in oppressive symmetrical structures of concrete, provide the framework for human figures at loss and longing for communication.

Figure 122. Gao Brothers, *Silent Space,* 2000.
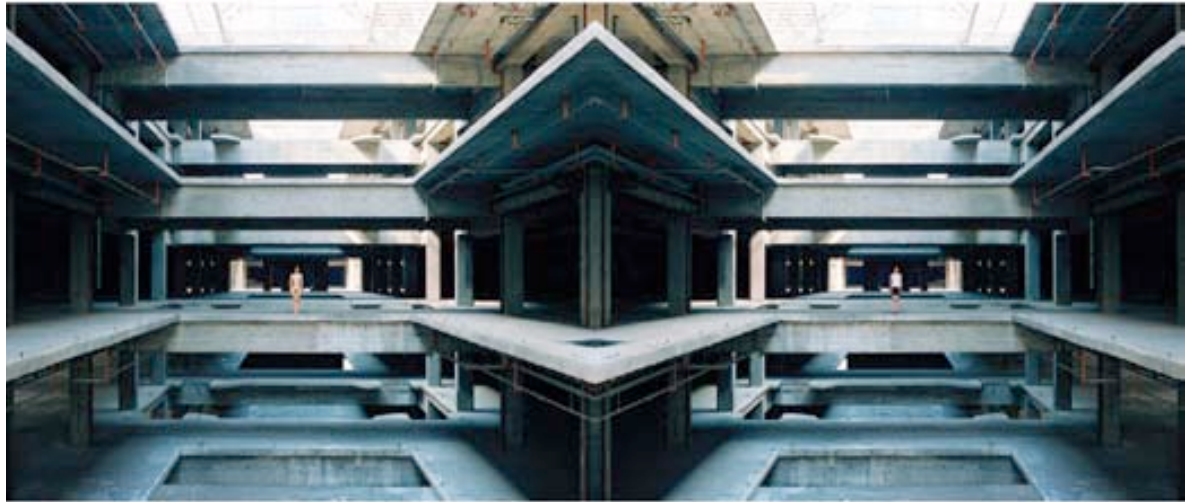
Source: Hua Gallery

5.4. Rong Rong & inri: *Liulitun*

Rong Rong met the Japanese photographer inri[90] in 1999 with whom he would work from that moment on. In 2003, a run-down suburb of little farms and courtyards called Liulitun, where the couple and other artist friends lived,[91] was affected by demolition. The result was the series *Liulitun,* which shares some of the elements of Rong Rong's previous engagement with demolition but also reveals the new influence of inri in his work.

Having lived there for over five years, the house hosted a cargo of intense memories for Rong Rong: endless discussions on art and life with friends and peers, the editing of *New Photo* magazine, working on his photographs in the north room, and after inri arrived, their life together, their difficult communication in broken English and signs,

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[90] inri is the artistic name of Inri Suzuki, deliberatedly decapitalized by the artist.
[91] Rong Rong moved to Liulitun in 1994, after the disbandment of the East Village. Performance artists Ma Liuming, who also lived in the East Village, filmmaker and photographer Zhao Liang 赵亮, and photographers Wang Lei 王雷 and Huang Lei 黄磊 were also residents in Liulitun (Zhang 2006:17).

their common projects, etc. The neighborhood retained a sense or rural life, even when it was beginning to be engulfed by the expanding urbanization. Painter and friend Zhang Li stresses the almost pastoral feeling of life in Liulitun:

> One's senses would never be dumb in such a place, not only the sense of seasons, but also new feelings of everyday. The lights, the taste, natural scent, the changes keep fresh feelings flowing. Trees, vines, cats, swallows and bees, all are a different world from human individual. The repeating details of life, as well as the inconvenience of life, enhance our senses and bring more vivid taste into life. (Zhang 2006: 19)

Figure 123, 124, 125. Rong Rong and inri, *Liulitun, No.12, 13, 14,* 2002.

Source: Blindspot Gallery

A first group of photographs shows them enacting intimate rituals and activating memories by means of performances and a strong connection with the space, naked, laying in their almost empty bedroom, playing common games, or holding an old wall clock in the courtyard. A second group of photographs were taken on the day in which the demolition crew tore down the house. The couple, dressed in black and holding white mournful flowers, walk or pose amidst the fresh rubble. Sitting on top of the standing gate, they seem to blend with the house and face the inevitable destruction.

Figures 126, 127. Rong Rong and inri, *Liulitun No. 1, No. 8,* 2003.

Source: Chambers Fine Art

Meanwhile, deconstruction workers hurry along them (sometimes as blurred shadows due to long exposures), toppling walls or selecting timber and rebar for recycling. The fact that the workers seem to ignore the couple, and their half concealed appearance in hidden corners and rooms full of rubble, gives the couple a spectral aura.

Figures 128, 129. Rong Rong and inri, *Liulitun,* 2003.

Source: Wu (2006)

5.5. Ruin performances and the politics of erasure

> The days you lived and passed through are just an image in your hand, but the feel, the air, the smell, all will emerge at once. You would remember everything along with the details of the image, and there's no way of finding the right feel without the image. In the long river of time, we are always blank, but the photos are evidences, memories, and everything. (Zhang 2006: 20)

The above characterization of what Rong Rong posits as photography's "magic power" throws light on the some of the strategies of his series examined in this chapter. Intended as memory aids for future recollection, the photographs of *Liulitun* strive to capture not only the material house but most importantly, the *experience* of living in the house. While both are obliterated in the "spaces of disappearance" (Visser 2004) created by demolition, it is often the perceived dematerialization of personal memories and affects what artists—and in general, people affected by demolition—lament the most. To do so, photographs are set to record a performance (of the couple's private habits, rituals, and games), for which demolition becomes a stage. Something similar occurs in the works of Liu Jin and the Gao Brothers, for who decayed architecture and demolition serves the stage for performances of sacrifice, alienation, and loneliness.

If images serve future recollection, the sort of funeral that Rong Rong and inri perform on the day of the demise of the house would prompt hurtful memories. But in light of Rong Rong's corpus of work, as well as that of other contemporary artists working on urban demolition, the presence of the artist within the ruinous landscape cannot be reduced to a nostalgic longing or a personal victimization. Rather, as Robin Visser has noted, it constitutes "a refusal to highlight the wounded condition...These self-referential images indicate that the destruction derives from within, implicating both subject and spectator, and critiquing prevalent forms of urban 'renovation'" (2004: 281). Instead, the focus of the artists' work is put on providing visibility to void and erasure. Such intervention has wider implications in relation to the aestheticization,

even monumentalization of rubble and erasures, a process in which ruins, and their visual representations, often participate. Taking into consideration that "void seeks to preserve and acknowledge absence and, therefore, to refuse the completion of mourning" (Merewether 1997: 36), the visualization of said voids and erasures are intervention that touch upon artistic, social, even political aspects. Such elements has been noted, for example, in relation to the practice of counter-monuments, the artistic interventions on issues of memory (i.e., of the Holocaust) that resist monumentalization, "for once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember" (Young 1992: 273). Rong Rong and inri's photographs in *Liulitun* participate of the understanding that the "surest engagement with memory lies in its perpetual irresolution" (ibid.), and in so doing, intervene on contemporary discourses about China's quest for modernity and development.

This active engagement with social and official discourses is particularly evident in the works of these artists, in which the effects urban development become ruins, "incessantly seen as pointing beyond themselves, to some absent totality" (Beasley-Murray 2010: 215). The relationship between the fragments and the former whole, however, needs to be narrated: ruins are no transparent and immediate. The resulting space of discoursive indetermination offer possibilities for appropriation: in the *Untitled* series and in his found photography projects, Rong Rong visualizes the silenced voices, experiences and feelings of the former inhabitants of the houses; the *Forever Unfinished Building* series of the Gao Brothers magnify ad infinitum the laberintine precocious ruins of the *lanweilou*; whereas Jiao Jian tries to impersonate the imperative to 'fill the gaps', and in so doing, question its value, fairness and rationality.

Chapter 6. Performance and phantasmagoria (2000s): Qin Wen, Chen Jiagang, Chen Qiulin, Yang Yi

As seen in previous chapters, the artistic searches of experimental photographers have found in urban demolition a fertile ground. As a document of the artists' performances, as the space for photographic stages, or as a visual metaphor of concepts and social discourses, photography has been able to channel the phenomenological alienation caused by the erasure of traces into gripping visualizations. For some artists, demolition and decay has posed a conflict of heightened personal dimensions. When landscapes of childhood and youth, with their associated memories, as well as those of family, friends and neighbors, fall prey of hammers and bulldozers, demotion sites are bound to turn into a "magnetic field between the two poles of past and present to which the heart reacts with intensity," as Yu Qiuyu describes a ruin site (see annex). Such intensification opens a liminal space of indeterminacy that blurs boundaries between different temporalities and states of being. In the photographic projects analyzed in this chapter, the sense of fragmented identity, memory and alienation is expressed by means of ghostly apparitions among derelict and demolished architectures. In materializing the impregnation effected by memories and identity, these spaces are turned into evocative ruins.

The photographic medium has had a particularly close relationship with the photography of ghosts from an early date. The technical conditions of the new medium made possible—i.e., juxtaposing two negatives in the dark room to create a composite image—the 'materialization' of spirits and ectoplasmic presences. Spirit photography rapidly became a tool of séances and mediums, a practice that has been ironically quoted in photographic works of major contemporary artists such as John Baldessari, Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, or Mike Kelley (Ferris 2001: 45). In the case of the Chinese photographers under examination, the evidentiary potential of photography is appropriated as if it was capable to reveal the layers of non-synchronous existence concealed under the glossy screen of everyday spaces. The gaze of the photographer summons the apparition of resilient memories and cultural

emblems, and the photograph, as a false rephotorgaphy, captures different realities in the bidimiensional space of the image. In a series by Miao Xiaochun 缪晓春 (Wuxi, 1964), *A visitor from the past* (1999 – 2004), makes obvious this strategy, photographing an enigmatic man dressed as an ancient literati solemnly standing in inauspicious urban landscapes and phone booths, in the Great Wall or in somebody's living room. The aapparitions have the effect to collapse temporal and spatial categories, and in so doing, bestow contemporary spaces and architecture with the liminal characteristics that sometimes are awakened by ruined spaces.

Figure 130. Miao Xiaochun, *A Visitor from the Past* series, *How Time Flies!,* 2002.

Source: artist website

The photographic works analyzed so far have mostly focused on urban demolition and decay in the city of Beijing. Such prevalence responds to different intrinsic elements, such as the city's ample architectural heritage, the early and mass-scale scope of the ODHR program, and the effects of construction projects unleashed by the organization of the Olympic Games, which took place in 2008. At the same time, Beijing had an important role as capital of experimental art in the 1990s. As a result, experimental projects on urban demolition focused in great numbers in the city of Beijing. This

194

preeminence, though, should not occlude the diversity of causes and locales of urban development, the resulting demolition and decay, as well as the apparition of other important hubs of artistic experimentation in China. The photographers examined in this chapter are native from the southwestern region of China, an area conformed by the province of Sichuan and the municipality of Chongqing, where their photographic projects have also been conceived and produced. In addition, the chapter expands the examination of the causes responsible for the emergence of ruinous and derelict landscapes in contemporary China, with the example, in the images of Chen Jiagang, of the obsolescence and abandonment of industrial compounds. The chapter also reflects on the effects of the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, the largest hydroelectric project on earth, the construction of which, beginning in 1992,[92] demanded the demolition of many villages and cities that would be flooded by the waters rise. Facing the demolition and flooding of their hometowns, Chen Qiulin and Yang Yi's works document the resulting apocalyptic landscapes, but most importantly, encompass a powerful personal response to the demolition of one's landmarks and memories.

In the last decade, a yet another impressing contribution to the visual imaginary of ruins was the 7.6 Richter Scale Wenchuan Earthquake, which hit Sichuan province on May 12, 2008. Feng Xiaogang's film *Aftershock (Tangshan Dadizhen*, 2010), while diegetically set on the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, arrived at China's cinema theaters when the images of devastation coming from Sichuan were still fresh. The melodrama starts with a breathtaking recreation of a destructive earth tremor and the resulting landscapes of debris. In 2009, multimedia artist Chen Qiulin created one of her signature video performances in the area, revealing the extent of the destruction. The accompanying photographs, of appalling beauty, show the artist's impersonation of feelings among a landscape of utter desolation.

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[92] The idea to construct a dam at the Yangtze River gorges had circulated since Republican times. In 1919, Sun Yat-set's article "A plan to develop industry" put forward the idea to build dams along the Yangtze, and in the 1940s, a smaller plan was created with US assistance. The outcome of the Great Leap Forward, first, and the Cultural Revolution, obliged to postpone the project, which was only reactivated in the late 1970s, when it definite location was agreed. The National People's Congress approved the project in 1992, to be implemented in three stages between 1994 and 2013 (Ponsetti & López-Pujol 2006).

6.1. Qin Wen: *Old City* series

Urban renewal in the city of Chongqing has been as intense as in other major cities, while at the same time it has had its own characteristics.[93] Old neighborhoods have been demolished to make room to new residential projects, in order to bring forward urbanization and densification. This process and the numerous temporal ruins of urban demolition have been the focus of photographer Qin Wen (Chongqing, 1954) in the *Old City* series (*Gu cheng*). Qin's photographs show neighborhoods of Chongqing or surrounding villages that preserve traces of architectural history (such as the characteristic steep layout of its streets) or architectural elements like bricks and tiles dating from ancient times. Along with traditional markets and street fairs, crowded with traders and buyers, these spaces provide the settings for the apparition of a female figure dressed in a traditional *qipao*. Unaware of the surrounding hustle and bustle of the markets, or the dusty gloom of neighboring demolition, these figures stare at the camera and throw a cloud of white papers into the air, resembling mournful white flowers, and which the photographer has described as letters to the deceased (Gettner 2012).

Figures 131, 132. Qin Wen, *Old City,* (left) *Qing dynasty tiles*; (right) *Qi pai fang*, 2009.
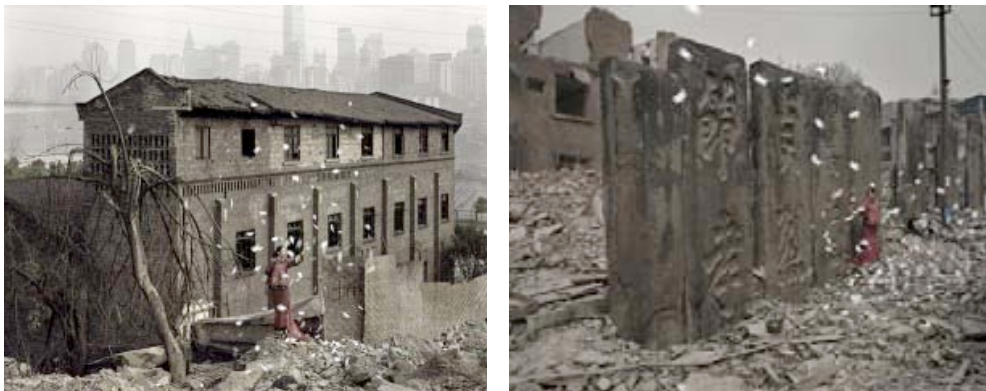
Source: Gallerie du Monde

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[93] The Chongqing model of urban growth, directed by the demoted and polemic figure of Bo Xilai, has been characterized by a strong intervention of the public sector, which has incentivized urbanization (even with relaxation of *hukou* requirements) while attending the rural areas outside the city center with a market of certified. See Keith *et al* 2014: 121-125.

In one of the most powerful images, a group of tall, carved steles take the center of the image (Figure 132). These are the *Qihpaifang*, seven steles dating from the Ming dynasty, which were affected by renewal plans in the area of Daping (Yuzhong district). A public debate arose about the need to preserve them, and the steles were finally relocated to another area (Figures 133, 134, 135).

Qin's photograph captures the steles standing precariously on a floor totally covered with rubble amidst demolition works. Half-demolished buildings in the background and an electric pole in the right seem to close over these remnants of the imperial past and literati culture. A construction worker, visible behind a stele, contrasts with the girl wearing a red dress, dwarfed by the steles and half concealed behind the fluttering white papers that aim at connect her to the past. The dress (far more common in previous decades) and her out-of-place presence in the demolition sites, seem to connect the girl with the past, rather than with the present. The letter, then, would not be aimed towards the past, but actually towards the present, which threatens to engulf all that is left of the past. In any case, Qin achieves to turn the demolition site into a site of temporal indeterminacy, where the real and the imaginary, the past and the present, meet.

Figures 133, 134, 135. (Left), An old photograph of the *Qi pai fang*; (middle), derelict state of the steles, engulfed in the city; (right), new relocated Qipaifang Steles Forest of Daping, opened in March 18, 2010.
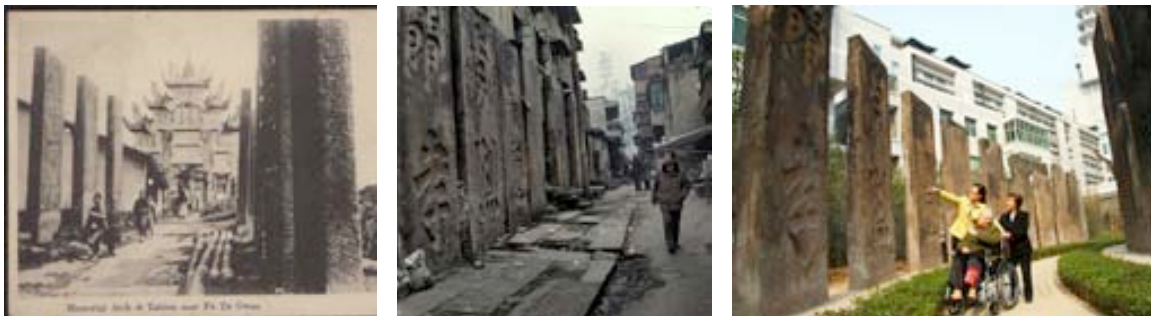
Sources: *Old Images of Dear Chongqing*, CKGBBY (2012); Ashes Zheng (2010); Xinhua.

6.2. Chen Jiagang: *Third Front* series

Another Chongqing photographer with a very important photographic career and reception, Chen Jiagang (1962), has used a similar strategy as Qin Wen, including the incorporation of a female figure (sometimes, two or three) dressed in traditional attire in his photographs. Chen's work has focused on the urban and industrial transformations affecting the area of Chongqing and the Yangtze River, the ills of new urban realities (*Diseased City/ Bingcheng*), the dismantlement of industrial compounds (*Third Front /San xian*; *Great Third Front /Da san xian*), and the construction of the Three Gorges Dam.

Ruinous aesthetics are particularly evident in his series on the industrial compounds of the so-called Third Line (or Third Front) of Defense, which were facing closure and decay. In the 1960s, when the escalation of tension between China and the USSR seemed to make inevitable a military conflict, the central government deemed necessary to protect the most important industries by moving them away from the borders. Factories and military units of China's Northwest were relocated to Western and Southern provinces (especially in Sichuan and in Chongqing), along with workers, technicians and military personnel, in a massive internal migration of people and resources. Chen's series reveal the current state of closing, abandonment and decay of many of these large industrial compounds as a result of reforms in the industrial sector affecting State Owned Enterprises, and the privilege of coastal areas in the first decades of the reforms.[94]

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[94] The Third Front has also attracted different filmmakers, which has seen in it a representation of China's recent history. *Shanghai Dreams* (*Qing hong,* dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 2005) and Jia Zhangke's *24 City* (*Ershisi cheng ji,* 2008) have examined the significance and scope of these massive compounds, cities in their own right.

Figures 136, 137. Chen Jiagang, *Great Third Front* series, (top), *Abandoned Warehouse,* 2008*;* (bottom), *Third Front* series, *Intruder*, 2003-2006.

Source: artist website

With a great control of technique, large production resources (his photographs are the result of the work of large crews), and using large and ultra-large formats (4x5, 8x10, and even panoramic 12x20 inches), Chen creates prints of over 4 meters wide that show compositions of industrial and architectural volumes with minute detail. In contrast with the detached approach of Bernd and Hilla Becher to obsolete factories and industrial facilities, Chen's photographs want to be "memories" of an urban, political and social reality that is disappearing (Li 2006). Going beyond the study of the formal characteristics of the different types of buildings, Chen's work aims to

capture what critic Li Xianting has called "a tangled mess of national disaster and personal pain"[95] (2008), turning abandoned and derelict factories into emblems of personal memories and historical reflection. He does so by photographing the unexpected apparition of female figures in the empty and decayed workshops, storehouses and furnaces. Blurred, fuzzy, and underexposed, as ghosts not fully present or distinguishable, these figures seem unaware of their surrounds and look intendly, melancholically, to the camera. As in the case of Qin Wen, they wear traditional outfits, usually a *qipao* dress, which add to their blurred and transparent quality in connecting them with different past temporalities: to the glamour of colonial Shanghai and its movie stars; to Chen's memories as a young worker in the factories; to his financial and personal problems in a previous career as a businessman; etc. If memory is a "pool of stagnant water", the girls are, for Chen, the stone that causes a ripple in the water" (Li 2006).

Figures 138, 139. Chen Jiagang, (left), *Third Front* series, *General Factory of Abestos*, 2003-2006; *Great Third Front* series, *Ghosts*, 2008.

Source: artist website

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[95] Chen's personal involvement has to do with his personal history. Before becoming a professional photographer, Chen, who had been trained as an architect, was a successful real estate businessman. Li's reference points to Chen's eventual business bankrupt, which motivated his artistic career.

6.3. Chen Qiulin: *Ellisis, Rhapsody of Farewell, Peach Blossom*

Chen Qiulin (Hubei, 1975) grew up in the city of Wanxian, a city by the Yangzi River affected by the construction of the dam. She moved to Chongqing and later to Chengdu to study, and graduated in 2000 in the department of Prints at Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. Since the moment, after graduation, when she joined the avant-garde artistic scene of Chengdu, her works have been characterized by a multimedia approach, combining visual media (photography, video) with installation and performance. In that sense, Chen serves to underscore the fact that, while Beijing attracted many of the experimentally bended artists in the 1990s, other important artistic hubs developed in other areas. The Chengdu biennale, first organized in 2001, stands as one of these nuclei of artistic experimentation outside the circuits of Beijing and Shanghai.

Her first incursion in experimental art took effect during the satellite show of the First Chengdu Biennale, called "Parabola" (*Paowuxian*). In her performance titled *Ellisis*,[96] Chen sat at a vanity table placed in a wasteland of a city suburb, surrounded by factories and cheap housing, and absorbed in applying makeup while a young man approached and threw cakes at her.

Figure 140. Chen Qiulin, *Ellisis Series No. 1*, 2002.

Source: Meulensteen Gallery

[96] Pepper (2010) points out that the original title of the performance was a symbol for ellipses (…..). The first time Chen wrote the title in English, she accidentally dropped the 'p' from the word 'ellipsis', and the work has since been known as *Ellisis* outside China.

In 2002, Chen returned to Wanxian and found the city in the midst of a radical transformation. Starting in 2000, the old city center started to be demolished to avoid underwater hazards to boat navigation on the gorges after the water rise to 135 meters above sea level. About 230,000 residents were relocated and resettled in the new uphill city of Wanzhou, for which much of their construction materials was recycled and reutilized. Her visit to Wanxian had a profound effect in Chen, who in the curse of the following years developed different multimedia projects that reflected her feelings and changing attitudes towards the demolition and flooding of her city: *Rhapsody of Farewell*, 2002; *River River*, 2005; and *The Garden*, 2007. During the recording of these "layered, fragmented, daydreamy, and aesthetically stunning documentaries" (Pepper 2010), Chen takes photographs that accompany the videos when exhibited in museums and galleries. The powerful character of these photographs, make them artworks in their own, which ask to be placed in dialogue with demolition-related photographic works as the rest analyzed in this dissertation

The first of the videos, *Rhapsody on Farewell* (*Biefu,* 2002), was produced under a commission by Gao Minglu to contribute to the exhibition *Harvest: Contemporary Art*, which took place at Beijing's Agricultural Museum in 2002. While technically less accomplished than posterior works, the video offers a poignant examination of her emotions upon facing the erasure of her hometown. In Wanxian, demolition was undertaken in a disorderly and ad-hoc way, mostly by hand or rudimentary tools. Life strived to persist its normal course among the emerging fields of ruins: shops still in business in empty stores, street stalls shadowed by heaps of rubble, ferries cruising the river. Demolition had become part of the ordinary life of a city that stood, in Chen's mind, with the force of childhood memories.

The 9 minutes video opens with a superimposed text that explains the artist's intense emotions upon returning to Wanxian and finding the city torn open: "I experienced again the joy, happiness, despair, and tears in my memory. Only then did I truly feel a kind of unspeakable feeling, a feeling that blood is thicker than water". The video,

recorded in a rudimentary way with two simple digital cameras, combines different types of images.

Figures 141, 142, 143, 144. Stills from Chen Qiulin's *Rhapsody of Farewell,* 2002.

Source: China Institute of America (2008)

A first set of documentary-style footage shows the slow dismantling and controlled demolition of buildings. Scenes of daily life and river scenes contrast with the rubble that covers the streets and the shell-shocked appearance of the half-demolished houses. Gradually intersected with these shots, a second group of images focuses on the dressing and performance of two *jingju* performers. With expressive close-ups, the scenes of the two actors introduce a dreamlike, fantastic athmosphere to the video, blurring the realistic style of the city images. The sections of the opera which the actors represent, in addition to awaken childhood memories in Chen, establish a

dialogue with the city's fate at the level of plot.[97] Lastly, the artist also appears in the video, dressed in a child-like white dress, running amidst the rubble or, clad herself in the *jingju* costume, revolving, as in trance, in the grounds of a demolished apartment block.

The "unspeakable" bounding with the city and her memories is ritualized both at the individual and at the collective level. Running among the rubble, Chen calls upon her childhood experiences and memories. Being the only black and white section, and edited in slow motion and a blurring filter, it accentuates the dreamy sense of flashback to the past. For their part, the *jingju* sections amplify the scope of the city's demolition to the whole community. But appearing herself in the costume of a *jingju* performer, the two levels coalesce in the ambiguous figure of the artist, whose identity, in this moment of indeterminacy created by demolition, appear fluid and unstable. The editing of the final section of the video, alternating the artist undressing from the costume into a plain white shirt with the slow collapse of a building, reinforces the connection between public and private memories, and the effect of experiential space and build environment in the identity of the subject and its social group.

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[97] The selected piece, *The King Bids Farewell to his Mistress* (*Bawang bie ji*) (also known as *Farewell my Concubine*), narrates the story of Xiang Yu, king of Western Chu, who gets encircled during a battle with Liu Bang, later to become emperor Gaozu of the newly founded Han Dynasty. Even in this fatal situation, Yu Meiren, Xiang Yu's favorite concubine, refuses to leave his side and dances a last dance, after which she commits suicide, echoing the self-demolition of the houses carried out by the villagers.

Figures 146, 147. Chen Qiulin, *Peach Blossom,* 2009.

Source: Hammer Museum

6.4. Yang Yi: *Uprooted*

Photographer Yang Yi (Kaixian, Chongqing, 1971) was born and raised in another city affected by the Three Gorges Dam, As Chen Qiulin, Yang left for Chengdu, where he worked as a graphic designer, and later to Beijing, where he studied photography at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Aware that his hometown would be flooded

documentary work (*Disturbing the Peace* [*Lao Ma Ti Hua*], 2009; *Never Sorry* [*Daoqian ni mei*], 2012), in *Straight* (2008–2012) he achieved to create perhaps the most poignant, and aesthetically powerful artwork dealing with the Wenchuan earthquake. The installation, presented at the 2013 Venice Biennale, displays 150 tons of rebar salvaged from demolished schools with a resemblance of an earthquake fault.

shortly,[100] he returned to Kaixian to conduct a photographic project that resulted in the series *Uprooted* (*Mei · guli).* Yang's digital photographs portrait daily scenes and familiar characters of Kaixian: men playing *erhu* or holding a birdcage, children playing on the street, a group of elderly chatting at the stadium, a barber trimming a young man's hair. The whole city is in ruins, as if it had suffered an intense bombing: the Boiler Factory on Ring Road, the Bank, the different dormitory buildings, all stand like huge half-demolished carcasses pouring rubble onto the devastated streets. The scenes display the shock and fascination of photographs of shell-shocked cities, where the surviving inhabitants vicariously try to carry on with normal life.

With these performances of daily routines among the ruins, Yang's photographs would have remained, as in Chen Qiulin's videos, at the level of performance and staged photography. But Yang added an extra element, digitally-manipulating the images so as to anticipate the city's flooding. A waning light filters from a sky that turns out to be the water edge, giving a blurry, eerie stillness to this underwater ghost city, in which all the characters wear a scuba set. Yang Yi's strategy exploits the possibilities of digital technologies to bring together different temporaralities, something that is amply used in the practice of rephotography (see chapter 3). However, in his case, instead of superposing an old photograph on a present one, Yang combines the present and the *future*. As the photograph from the past, Yan's digital visualization of the future fate of the city serves as a testimony; the present is thus turned into an ante hoc past, into a ruin.

While the photographs offer a document of the destruction of the village in its final stages, Yang understands the disappearance of social mores, memories and traditions as the real loss: "It is about all that we have in common there: our accent, our spicy coriander, the nod we give each other, a friendly signal to say hello when we pass one

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[100] The momentousness of this event has had a reflection in several projects. In addition to the aforementioned documentary series by Zhang Xiao, *Subdue* (Figures 81, 82), it is worth noting Yan Chun Su's short documentary *The Last Town* (2009) and Xie Xiaoze 谢晓泽 and Chen Zhong's 陈忠 project *The Last Days*, in which they plastered half-demolished walls with newspapers commenting on the construction on the dam and the demolition of Kaixian.

another on the street, these streets that we have traveled alongside our ancestors, that have herded us along together…" (Yang 2008). As critic Gu Zheng notes, the *mo* of title of the series refer both to 'flood', and to 'vanishing' and 'loss' (2011: 120). Digitally-flooding his neighbors and relatives, Yang highlights the connection between space and identity, and the simultaneous losing of both under the water.

Figures 148, 149, 150, 151. Yang Yi, *Uprooted*, (left to right, top to bottom) *No. 2, No. 12, No.8,* 2007.

Source: Galerie Paris-Beijing

6.5. Phantasmal presences

Notions of the ghostly and uncanny have featured prominently in critical theory and cultural studies, especially after the publication of Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* in 1993, prompting a "critical language of spectral or haunted modernity" (Luckhurst 2002: 528). Characterized by their transgression of clear-cut definitions and categories, and existing in an undetermined space between the material and the symbolic, ghosts are growingly invoked in representations and interpretations of pregnant realities, because of past trauma or repressed energies of the present, in which uncertainty and hesitancy can turn into productive approaches. In line with these approaches, the resulting "hauntological understanding of spatiality" (Holloway and Kneale 2008: 308) is particularly productive when confronting the modern city, characterized by the anonymity of multiple interactions and the spatial layout of different temporalities. Cultural geographer Tim Edensor has contributed to the understanding of urban and industrial ruins as sites that resist the normative and profit-oriented ordering of space and senses, as well as institutionalized strategies of memorialization, becoming "sites which have not been exorcised", and which, for that reason, "seethe with memories" (Edensor 2005: 829).

In the context of these global academic trends that reframe spectrality as a critical category, the case of contemporary Chinese artists offer particularly revealing insights. On the one hand, they have frequently and consciously articulated a discourse around the ghostly to reflect on the conditions of contemporary China. The rapid changes and transitions in China has created a common situation in contemporary world, in which "imperatives to bury the past too swiftly in search of the new" give as a result a modernity "haunted in a particularly urgent fashion by that which has been consigned to irrelevance but which demands recognition of its historical impact" (Edensor 2005). Kiu Wai Chu had made the point that "modern Chinese ruins are very often 'ghostless'" if compared with post-war or ancient ruins. Rather, ghost are invoked by artists, who "traumatise ruins in order to offer critiques towards the negative impacts

of global capitalism in China, and to mourn the disintegration and loss of harmony between man and his environment" (2010: 14).

Further, vernacular renditions of the ghostly in folk and literary traditions of China have also been frequently invoked in relation to contemporary works on ruins and demolition. For David Spalding, Rong Rong's meta-photographs provide an actualization of a particular type of ghosts common in Chinese folk storytelling. Unaware that they have died, the ghosts:

> try to carry on with their everyday lives, disturbing the fabric of the present through their unwitting haunting. The ghostly figures that pose for us in Rong Rong's photos seem oblivious to the fact that their world has crumbled to dust... they try to appear seductive, unable to comprehend what they have become. (Spalding 2002: 100)

This incapacity of the ghosts to understand their predicament is also caused by the strong spatial character of the connection between the dead and the living in Chinese traditional creeds and folk stories. Demolishing a house where many generations have lived disrupts a spatial bound among generations, symbolized by the altar room destroyed along with the house. Even if the living can move the ancestors' tablets to a new location, the loss of the original site can cause the dead to get lost, roaming endlessly in an indefinite space without landmarks. Demolition thus affects something more than personal memories: it jeopardizes the relationship with those who lived there before. Anticipating the flooding of Kaixian, and (re)locating the familiar scenes that make up the local identity in an illusionistic atmosphere of underwater normalcy, Yang Yi's photographs may freeze the reality of Kaixian for the future, precariously creating an aquatic limbo to counteract the erasure of location and identity.

For his part, and discussing Chen Jiagang's photographs, Li Xianting has noted an atmosphere borrowed from the supernatural stories of a Pu Songling. [101] The

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[101] Pu Songling's 蒲松齡 (1640 – 1715) famous collection of supernatural stories, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai* Zhiyi), published in the second half of the 18th century, create a universe in

apparition of the blurred, evanescent, even translucent figure of a qipao-clad girl "appears to not be fully there, which makes the stagnant ruins appear eerily still" (Li 2008). In Pu's "strange" tales, part of the rich tradition of *zhiguai* (records of the strange) and *chuanqi* (marvel tales), fiction, ghosts, demons, and marvelous beings do not necessarily elicit horror, but also melancholy, romance, even humor. While female ghosts often trigger amorous and sexual plots, the apparition of the dead of the past can motivate elegiac musings about the past of the nation (Mair 2010: 110-116). Chen Qiulin photographs document the resilience of the memories of the photographer, hurtful but also sweetly nostalgic and arousing, taking shape in girls that open the door to reclaim back the past into the present. Reacting to more collective implications, Qin Wen's girls cipher the malaise of ancient culture, referred to by means of architecture threatened by urban development, such as the quintessential gray tiles *(qing wa)* and Qin bricks *(qin zhuan*), or in remnants of old city layout, as in the narrow Zilixiang Street, villages and neighborhoods like Feng Bo or Shazhuba. Testimonies of ancient architecture as well as old ways and traditions, they are growingly isolated remnants of older times, islands of the past amidst the intimidating waters of vertical high-rising modernity.

which ghost, demons, and magic animals share the world with the living.

Chapter 7. (Re)constructed ruins in experimental photography (2000s): Wang Qingsong, Jiang Pengyi, Cao Fei, Zhang Xiaotao

As a necessary record of real-time, ephemeral artistic performances and events, photography provided a new set of images, drastically different from the previous stock of subjects and themes. Shocking, suggestive, at times violent or scandalous, photographs of performances were nonetheless subordinated to the later, in the sense that they were not considered as artworks. This condition began to change with the photographs of performances of Zhang Huan and Wang Jin 王晉 (Datong, 1962) taken by Rong Rong and Wang Jinsong, respectively, in a process of negotiation and redefinition not without its problems, as discussions about the rights and authorship in the context of Beijing's East Village testify.

Figure 152. Bruce Nauman, *Self-portrait as a fountain*, 1966.
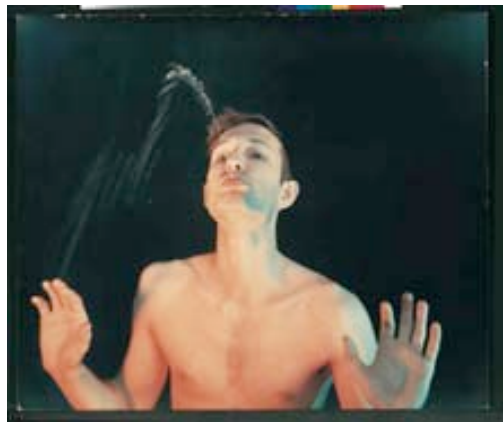
Source: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

In the mid-1990s, some artists began to stage private scenes for the camera. Works like Wang Jin's *To Marry a Mule* (*Qutou luozi*, 1995), or Zheng Guogu series *The Life of Youth in Yangjiang* (1996) challenged perceptions about reality, questioned the definition of a true record, and expanded the possibilities of photography-based art to capture significant events. In this sense, these experiments with staged photography

and private performance reproduce the challenge to the documentary role of photography of artists like Bruce Nauman, whose photographs of studio performances, like *Self-portrait as a fountain* (Figure 152) and *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966), provided a self-reflective commentary on art and the figure of the artist, using the camera to capture intimate studio performances and states of being that questioned the meaning of an 'event'.

In addition to performances conducted in private, staging has also become a way to create arresting photographs able to condense many related layers of meaning. Borrowing from other genres such as film and video art, and styles like commercial or fashion photography, different artists resort to the use of actors, props and costumes to create a self-referential universe. Hong Hao 洪浩 (Beijing, 1965) has created a series in which he poses himself as a generic "Mr. Hong", surrounded by the luxurious icons of China's noveau rich class (Figure 153). For his part, Yang Fudong 杨福东 (Beijing, 1971) shots dreamlike scenes of pristine black and white in which modern men and women acquire a mythical status, as in *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest* (2007).

Figure 153. Hong Hao, *Mr. Hong, Please Come In,* 1998.

Source: ArtSpeakChina

This chapter analyzes the (re)creation of urban demolition and ruinous landscapes in photo-montage and staged photography. In the work of Wang Qingsong, the move from taking pictures from reality to fabricating images in the studio achieves its ultimate expression (Gu 2011: 16). For his part, Jiang Pengyi has included in his photographs miniatures and scale recreations of buildings and ruinous sites. The creation of the three-dimensional landscapes of urban development and ruination leads the chapter beyond the field of photography proper and into a reflection on some of the most contemporary developments in visual arts in China, in which digital software and technologies of 3-D visualization assist artists in the creation of digital avatars of the modern city and its ruins, emphasizing the rapid transformations and fragility of contemporary urban landscapes, and the interrelation between construction and demolition.

As for the overall project of this dissertation, these works visualize the fact that ruins are, on occasions, the product of a quite literal construction, in addition to a discursive construct. In exploring the epistemology of selection and preservation of wasteful material, Caitlin DeSilvey underscores the importance of both conservation technologies and interpretive strategies in the process of visualization and museification. While the former "slow or halt physical decay," the later "present the objects as elements of a static, unchanging past" (2006: 326). Next to discourses that affect the interpretation of an object as a ruin, it is also necessary to acknowledge the active engagement with matter to rescue it from decay, or at least, to slow down the process. Such intervention (that can include chemical, physical, and technological actions) can be of different degrees, ranging from in-site treatment and consolidation, to relocation and re-erection (as in a museum), or even a new reconfiguration of the ruin, as in the follies erected in private states during the English new landscape movement in the 18th century.

Figures 154 and 155. (Left), ruins at the memorial of the village of Oradour-sur-Glane (France), destroyed and massacred by a German Waffen-SS company in 1944; (right), the "Temple of Augustus", a false ruin created in 1826 by King George IV's architect, Jeffry Wyatt, with fragments from Leptis Magna (modern Libya) in Windsor Great Park.

Sources: photography of the author; Wikipedia Commons

The impulse to construct ruins achieved its ultimate manifestation in the formulation of the notion of "ruin value" (*Ruinenwert*), by 3rd Reich architect Albert Speer. Working closely with the Führer in the design of emblematic buildings of the Reich (like the Chancellery and the Zeppelinfeld stadium in Nuremberg), Speer anticipated the future appearance of the buildings once they would collapse and decay. Speer selected construction materials and designed the buildings in order that in the future, the Reich would have appropriate remnants of its glory, as in Rome.[102] In the present, the institutionalization of memory—and its critique, the arresting aesthetics of ruination, and new digital technologies are used to articulate many visual projects that recreate ruined urban landscapes in museums[103] and in film screens for memorialistic purposes.

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[102] We will never know if sites like the Zeppelinfeld would have constituted a noble ruin if the outcome of WWII had been different. But it is an interesting historical twist, and one that helps to further make the point about the constructedness of ruins, to realize that the solid, lasting materials that Speer chose (like the red marble and granite of the Chancellery) ended up being used to erect the Soviet War Memorial at Treptower Park, Berlin.

[103] Puff (2010) examines scale models recreating devastated German cities such as Frankfurt and Heilbronn. For its part, *City of Ruins* (*Miasto Ruin*, dir. Damian Nenow, 2010) is a 3-D minute rendition of the city of Warsaw after being massively bombed and destroyed by the Luftwaffe in 1944. The project, commissioned by Warsaw Rising Museum, was created to commemorate the 66th anniversary

Figure 156. Joseph Michael Gandy, *An imagined view of the Bank of England in ruins*, 1830.

Source*:* John Soane Museum

In the field of art, the growing recurrence of ruins, both as compositional and as allegorical element, made painters select and put together fragments from different views, or displaced ruins to the most effective corner or point of view. By the second half of the 18th century, ruins had become "a structural component of creation, a quarry of lines, spaces and volumes" (my translation, Ospina 2013), as testified by Diderot's comments to the Salon of 1767 (see chapter 2). From here, it was quite a simple movement for different artists and architects to imagine and create fantastic or imaginary ruins. Piranesi's *Carceri d'Invenzione* (Figure 15) cannot be understood without his previous study of ruins in *Vedute di Roma;* in addition to painting real ruins—even those of contemporary accidents and demolition works, as in *Demolition of Saint-Jean en Grève Church*, 1800—Hubert Robert imagined a future Lovre in which ceilings and galleries would have collapsed, and Joseph Gandy offered a view of the newly erected Bank of England that anticipated the bird eye's photographs of bombarded cities (Figure 156).[104]

[104] Whereas Robert and Gandy's ruins celebrate the architectural design, Edward Ruscha's oil painting The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire (1965-1968) directs a fierce critique to the art establishment figuratively burning the newly erected polemic museum of modern art.

In contemporary art, especially in installation art, ruins and devastation have become frequent stock. In addition to those works that create archives of horror (of natural devastation, of warfare) and apocalyptic visions of the future,[105] some artists also articulate a critique of the present by means of striking versions of the contemporary ruin. Doris Salcedo's (Colombia, 1958) installation *Shibboleth* (2007) reflected on colonialism, racism, and migration processes by means of a 167-meter crack on the floor of Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. For her part, Laura Almarcegui (Spain, 1972) frequently deconstructs spaces and creates artificial heaps of rubble and cinders to comment on current events, such as Spain's real estate bubble burst.

Figure 157. Laura Almarcegui, Spanish Pavilion, 2013 Venice Art Biennale, 2013.

Source*:* designboom

Among the international photographers that, in a similar way as the artists analyzed in this chapter, recreate ruins to later capture them with the photographic camera, the work of Christoph Draeger (Switzerland, 1965) and Oliver Boberg (Germany, 1965) stands out. Draeger's multiple engagements with ruins are highly conceptual, including images of disaster printed over jigsaw puzzles, and photographs of the set of

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[105] Perhaps not surprisingly, Japanese artists have created some of the most impressive recreations of ruins. For the Japanese Pavilion in the 1996 Venice Biennale, architect Arata Isozaki (b. 1931) commented on the state of Japanese architecture, after the previous year's Kobe earthquake, by bringing into the pavilion rubble of the earthquake. The lithographs of Hisaharu Motoda (b. 1973) turn contemporary Japan into post-apocalyptic scenarios.

The Impossible (dir. Juan Antonio Bayona, 2012) built next to the actual wreck of a hotel destroyed in the 2004 Thailand tsunami. In the *Catastrophes* series, Draeger photographs scale recreations of natural and man-made catastrophes (Figure 158). For his part, Oliver Boberg photographs hyper-realistic scale models of unspectacular and mundane urban buildings, as well as of dilapidated architecture and wastelands, focusing the attention of the viewers in the less memorable spaces and architectures. While different in each case, the projects and the scale ruins of Jiang Pengyi and Wang Qingsong operate a similar effect of estrangement, creating a reflection on the epistemological and material operations at work in the elevation of dereliction into ruins.

Figure 158. Christoph Draeger, *Catastrophe #1,* 1994.

Source: artist website

7.1. Wang Qingsong: *Dream of Migrants, Home*

Wang Qingsong (Daqing, Heilongjiang, 1966) has developed one of the most successful careers in Chinese art photography, addressing the epochal changes in the country's social mores and values, and incorporating an ironic reflection on the effects of the transnational consumer culture. Some of his photographic works feature among the most widely diffused and representative pieces of contemporary Chinese art. His international status as a photographer was confirmed in a 2001 solo exhibition at New York's International Center for Photography (ICP), *Wang Qingsong: When Worlds Collide*, curated by Christopher Phillips.

Emblematic of the growing cultural interconnections between China and the rest of the world, his photographs incorporate and combine different cultural and artistic elements. His earliest line of work, connected with Gaudy art,[106] often featured elements from Buddhist art along with the icons of consumerism, such as McDonalds, Coca-Cola, cell phones, international cigarrete brands, or simple cash. In later works, Wang has re-staged and subverted classical artworks of the Chinese canon, as in his famous *Night Reveals of Lao Li* (2000), in which art critic Li Xianting posed in the role of imperial minister Han Xizai in a photographic version of the scroll *Night Revel of Han Xizai* (Gu Hongzhong 顾闳中, 937– 975) that commented on the importance of art critics in shaping contemporary art in the 1990s. In *Romantique* (2003), a fake garden brings together elements of Western and Chinese traditions of the Pastoral and Edenic retreat, including a large number of actors in poses copied from cannonical paintings by Velazquez, Botticelli, Matisse, or Manet.

His work also establishes a lively dialogue with some of the most influential photo-artists of the last decades. Hs self-stylization, appearing in most of his photographs as

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[106] Gaudy Art (*Yansu yishu*), a term proposed by critic Li Xianting, designates pop-art works that introduced elements of popular and consumerist culture to convey a critique of the tawdriness and materialism of China's new economy. With Cynical Realism (*Wanshi xishi zhuyi*) and Political Pop (*Zhengzhi bopu*), with which it shared many characteristics, it emerged in the 1990s. Other members were the Luo Brothers 罗氏兄弟, Xu Yihui, Qi Zhilong 祁志龙 and Feng Zhengjie 俸正杰.

a more of less camouflaged presence, has been compared to the camp of Pierre and Gilles [107] and the 'living sculptures' of Gilbert and George [108]; his theatrical compositions are reminiscent of the photomontages of Gregory Crewdson (USA, 1962) and Jeff Wall (Canada, 1946); and the sheer size of his complex compositions connects him with Andreas Gursky (Phillips 2011: 2). Wang's photographs also participate in the return of "the painterly model", which according to the influential characterization of French photography historian Jean-François Chevrier, has been an attribute of photographic artworks since the 1980s. The resulting "tableau format" is:

> designed and produced for the wall, summoning a confrontational experience on the part of the spectator that sharply contrasts with the habitual processes of appropriation and projection whereby photographic images are normally received and "consumed" (…)[with]the primary aim of restoring the distance to the object-image. (Chevrier 2003: 116)

Wang has explicitly addressed urban demolition in two of his photo tableaux, which included the construction of large half demolished and decayed structures. His carefully designed scenes, full of realistic and easily identifiable details, serve Wang to convey a critical stance towards contemporary China's milieu, which Wang (re)creates at its most ruinous. For *Dream of Migrants* (*Mangliu meng,* 2005), a three-stories rundown building was designed and erected in a film studio. The scene includes more than sixty actors and several scenes. The imposing 179x400cm image combines crude realism with parody and performance.

The title of Wang's photograph refers to the massive internal migrations that have characterized reform China. Attracted from rural areas with a promise of job opportunities and fast money, Chinese migrants find in cities a precarious life without

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[107] The artistic couple formed by photographer Pierre Commoy (France, 1950) and painter Gilles Blanchard (France, 1953).
[108] The artistic couple formed by Gilbert Proesch (Italy, 1943) and George Passmore (UK, 1942).

rights or State coverage, as their residence permit or *hukou* connects their rights to the site of registration. Whereas urban economy has benefited—specially its booming construction sector—from the migrants' willingness to accept low salaries, they have constitute a new marginal subgroup of floating population (*mangliu)*, a derogatory term that identifies migrants with tramps or loafers.

Figure 159. Wang Qingsong, *Dream of Migrants,* 2005.

Source: artist website

Dream of Migrants ironically and poignantly encapsulates the aspirations of migrants as the crowd living in a three-stories, rundown building. Groups and couples gather in bursting, small rooms, laying in bed, going on with their daily chores, or looking listlessly to the street. In front of the house, a flat of muddy sand offers diverse scenes of street life, mixing acute realism with the appearance of a circus arena: a policeman beating a youngster on the ground, a street vegetables vendor, a dwarf candy seller, beggars, trendy youth carrying travel trolleys, a street musician, naked couples hugging amidst the rubble, etc. The combination of detailed real life scenes with the atmosphere of a freak circus creates a compelling version of critical realism that renders visibility to the human cost of urban expansion.

The building that hosts this motley crew is fragmented and decayed. The empty ground level, with vacant commercial booths and a doorless gate, echo the widespread phenomenon of *lanweilou*, the unfinished buildings erected as premature ruins. Broken roofs and disheveled side wings, with electricity poles, tiles and antennae, reveal the dereliction of the house. Different *chai* characters, painted inside a white circle, forecast the ultimate fate of the house and its people.

Figures 160, 161. *Dream of Migrants* (details), 2005.

Source: artist website and author's design.

The other work in which Wang explicitly address urban decay and demolition is titled *Home* (*Jia*, 2005). A recreation of a house in the middle of the demolition process serves Wang to further elaborate on the connections between development and demolition. A wearied young man enters the remains of a simple house, of which only the bottom part of the walls still stand. In addition to rubble, the rooms are filled with garbage and waste, including old magazines and papers, broken TV sets, clothes, bicycles and all sorts of domestic junk. *Chai* characters and ads for fake certificates (*banzhang*) complete the precise scenography of this recreation of a condemned house. The dilapidation of the house is further emphasized by the fact that litter and garbage literally emerge from its walls. In reference to this, Wang comments that developers, in promoting ruthless demolition, are revealing a series of hidden "secrets" that plagued his curiosity as a child: ironically, Wang is referring to a

common practice, during the harshest campaigns of the Cultural Revolution, to hide sensible objects and materials in the walls and floors, sometimes the only safe place.

Figure 162. Wang Qingsong, *Home*, 2005.

Source: artist website

Figures 163, 164. *Home* (details), 2005.

Source: artist website and author's design.

7.2. Jiang Pengyi: *All Back to Dust, Unregistered City*

Two early series by Jiang Pengyi (Yuanjiang, Hunan, 1977) provide a different example of constructed photographic setting to articulate a critique of large-scale construction and demolition. Combining photographs of demolition sites and piles of junk with digital post-production, his scenes gesture towards digital and virtual visualizations of the city.

Figures 165, 166. Jiang Pengyi*, All Back to Dust,* (left), *No. 2;* (right), *No. 6*, 2006.

Source: Blindspot Gallery

In *All Back to Dust* (*Wanwu guichen,* 2006), scale reproductions of buildings and architectural elements are digitally superimposed on toxic dumping sites, shrubby no-man-lands, and piles of street rubbish. Iconic buildings, such as the Olympic Stadium or the National Centre for the Performing Arts, as well as anonymous residential housing compounds are treated as ordinary junk, and "collapse onto one another in ruins that lay beyond redemption" (Gu 2013). Engaging with the traditional role of ruins as memento mori, the reminder of the futility of all human efforts against the pull of time and destruction, Jiang's ruins are half covered with weeds or snow. Simultaneous with these references to classical Romantic ruins, his images also exemplify a new type of urban ruin, the by-product of development and construction,

an excrescence close to trash and waste as a result of the kind of city that Linda Vlassenrood characterizes as the "city of objects; that is, a collection of iconic high-rises bearing no relation to the direct surrounding" (cited in Schmatzberger 2011: 40).

The eight photographs that compose *Unregistered City* (*Bu bei zhucede chengshi*, 2008)*, carefully elaborated during three years, show scenes of dereliction and urban ruin: wall paint cracks and rubble accumulate on the floors of unused or abandoned rooms, tenuously illuminated with a dim light that filters though small and dirty windows. Half camouflaged, and emerging from the dirt and the detritus, Jiang situates miniature models of skyscrapers, highways, even a helipad, emblems of the new type of hyperglobalized Chinese megacity, at the same time unprecedented and anonymous city, a duality implied by the 'unregistered' of the title. Hidden corners, broken shelves, even a dingy bathtub overflown with rubble, host dwarfed cityscapes that rise from the dirt and rubble in a strange accord. The result elicits a very dynamic relationship between construction and ruination, one encompassing, and endlessly giving rise, to the other.

Figures 167, 168. Jiang Pengyi, *Unregistered City,* (left), *No. 7*; (right) *No.5*, 2008.

Source: Blindspot Gallery

7.3. From staged city ruins to fragile virtual worlds: Cao Fei and Zhang Xiaotao

The artificially ruined scenes under examination refer to a large reality of urban development and demolition. In being reproduced and framed in the bidimensional space of photographs, they become manageable and interpretative representations and allegories. They also point to the friction between demolishing and constructing, between *chai* 拆 and *jian* 建,[109] two sides of urban development inextricably connected in reality as well as in the visual representation of rubble, which erects ruins from wasteful material.

In the Chinese context, the representation of decayed building metaphorically gestures towards the nation at large, in accordance with a long-standing intellectual tradition of understanding the nation as *jia* 家, the word for family and home (Davies 2007: 20-21). In *Dream of Migrants*, references to China's recent history are coded, architecturally, in references to Chinese, Soviet, and International architectural styles, the components of the palimpsestical urban heritage of many Chinese cities that also refers to the changing political scenarios of the last century. Its horizontal composition, framing a diverse collection of characters representative of China's society, relates with a representational tradition which had a major example in Sun Zixi's 孙滋溪 (Shangdong, 1929) painting *In Front of Tiananmen Gate* (1964), a canonical example of Chinese Socialist realism. In the painting, the idealized members of the Chinese nation (peasants, workers, soldiers, different ethnic minorities), emulating the hundreds of Chinese citizens who daily comply with the ritual of taking a snapshot in the venue, happily gather in front of Tiananmen Gate under Mao's protective gaze; in stark contrast, Wang's tableau substitutes the revolutionary masses with migrant workers and their crude reality of poverty, abuse and indignity. In the central place, where Mao's guiding gaze focus Sun's painting, Wang places a

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[109] Anecdotically, this interrelation was visualized in the popular appropriation of the *chai* character in the promotional t-shirts of a well-known music venue in Beijing, the Yigongyishan (Zhang Zizhong Road, Dongcheng district), which changed the icon of *chai* for a *jian* character along the 2000s. The change also testifies a new sensibility, from the critical lament for the destruction of the city to a more constructive, participative attitude.

dartboard flanked by the flags of China and the United Nations; the Tiananmen gate placards, celebrating a long life to the People's Republic and to "Great Unity of the World's Peoples", turn in Wang's photograph into *chai* characters, neon signs announcing meat sticks, and street signs giving directions to local streets as well as to the new sites of desire, such Park Av., Time Square or Oxford Street (Figure 169). The blue sky has turned into a foggy husk, and the gate is now a ruinous house.

Figure 169. Wang Qingsong, *Dream of Migrants* (detail), 2005.

Source: artist website and author's design.

In Jiang Pengyi's images, the reference to contemporary urban realities is achieved by means of the recreation of their architectural materiality, both in quality and in quantity. The underlying diagnosis is that the difference between development and waste, progress and decay, architecture and ruination, lies in a matter of scale and perspective. As a microscope, which reveals the overall composition of the whole structure by focusing on the extremely small, miniaturization and recontextualization serves Jiang to shed light, beyond the glimmering, blinding reflections of everyday life, on the ultimate nature and destiny of urban development. To do so, Jiang engages in a conscious dialogue with the Western tradition of ruin representation, at its most sublime: echoes of Caspar David Friedrich's ruins articulate his composition and motives (Figure 170).

Figures 170 and 171. (Left), Caspar David Friedrich, *The Sea of Ice* (*Das Eismeer*), 1824; (right) Jiang Pengyi*, Unregistered City, No.8*, 2008.
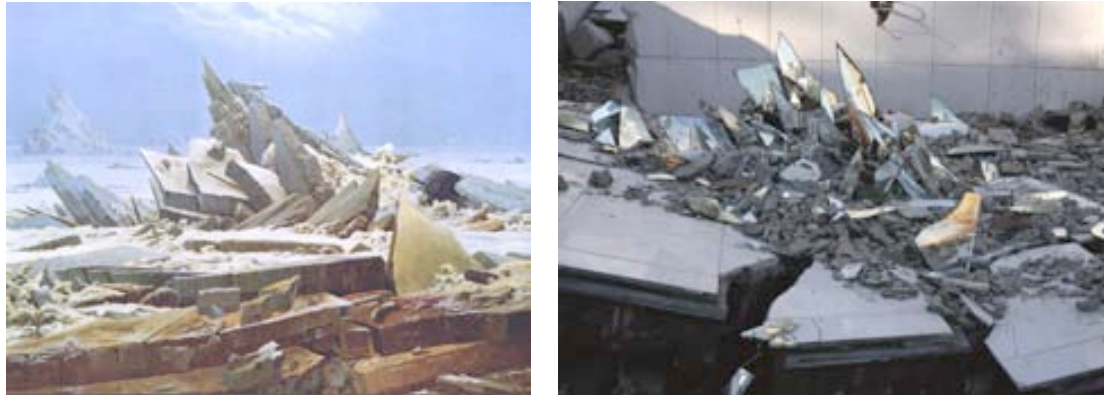
Source: Wikipedia Commons; Blindspot Gallery

The erection, in Wang and Jiang's photographs, of scenographical representations/miniaturizations of contemporary China, forecasts the creation of virtual cities in multimedia projects, a practice that has seen some major examples in the last years. In the *RMB City* Project (2008), Cao Fei (Guangzhou, 1978) and a group of 3-D engineers (Vitamin Creative Space) created a virtual city in the platform Second Life.[110] RMB City hosts the recognizable icons of China's cities (like Rem Koolhaas's CCTV tower, Shanghai's Pearl of the Orient, or the "Bird's Nest" Olympic Stadium, as well as Tiananmen Gate) in a reduced but suggestive replication. Roads, streets, building and billboards can, in this highly ductile space, be erected in the blink of an eye, while impossible mammoth monuments hover over the city. People (or their avatars) visiting this city can move at will, even flying over the buildings and the surrounding sea. The hyperbolic character of *RMB City*, however, has the paradoxical effect of resulting very *realistic*. The absolute possibilities of the virtual world only give full reign to fantasies and projects that already seem to encounter few material and economic constraints in real life. As a constant and monumental spectacle of ubiquitous commerce and advertisement, RMB City seems to constitute the utopia of

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[110] A virtual tour on RMB City can be seen in youtube, "RMB CITY-A Secondlife City Planning", URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MhfATPZA0g> [last accessed: December 2014].

urban developers, architects, and the government. Virtuality only reinforces the replicability of the economic hubs in the global flows of capital and information that caracterize the contemporary generic megacity, certainly not reduced to China but realized there to a massive scale.

Figure 172. Cao Fei, *RMB City, City Views*, 2008.

Source: RMB City Blog

At the same time, the immateriality of the virtual world, which enables its seemingly painless erection in the first place, foregrounds the utter fragility of contemporary urban reality: buildings and roads can crumble and disappear as fast as they are created. In this sense, the virtual rendering of urban reality pinpoints the close connection between construction and ruination. This relationship also articulates the animation short film *Mist* (*Mi wu*, 2008) by artist Zhang Xiaotao (Hechuan, Chongqing, 1970), in which the erection of a tower/skyscraper reminiscent of the Tower of Babel combining urban, industrial and monumental elements, unfolds at the lightning speed of 3-D imagining, just to be destroyed, with equally rapid immediacy, to give rise to a ruinous devastated landscape.

Figure 173. Wang Xiaotao, *Mist* (video still), 2008.

Source: courtesy of the artist

Coming after the tableaux of Wang Qingsong and the miniatures of Jiang Pengyi, as well as the representations of ruins of many other contemporary Chinese artists and filmmakers, the projects of Cao Fei and Wang Xiaotao testify the parallel evolution of visual culture and its immediate urban milieu, a condition that film historian Zhang Zhen has described with a suggestive image:

> When both the body and the city are subject to accelerated disappearance or ruination in our age…the techniques of visualization that give them representation are also quickly turning into sky-high metal scraps as they become ubiquitous and disposable. (Zhang 2010: 97)

Chapter 8. Architecture photography and conceptualism (2000s): Ai Weiwei, Zeng Li, Luo Yongjin, Wang Jinsong, Shao Yinong & Mu Chen

Photography has had a close connection with the city and its architecture since the inception of the medium: the first preserved photograph, obtained in 1827 by Joseph-Nicéphore Niepce, shows a blurry view of the roofs seen from Niepce's window. Photography's initial fixation with architecture was firstly a function of the new medium's technical limitations, as open-air, well-lit static buildings suited the long exposure times demanded by early photographic machines. By the turn of the century, with the development of compact camera formats, a new generation of photographers, such as Paul Strand (USA, 1890 – 1976), Walker Evans, or Robert Frank (USA, 1924), turned the dynamic city and the bustle of cars and people into their primary subject. Photography and the modern city, similarly characterized by speed and transportability, developed along a shared reliance in technology and mass production. As a result, photography has mediated our cognitive understanding and visual conceptualization of the city's architecture, to the point that it has become inextricable from photographic framing, composition, and visual detail (de Solà-Morales 1995: 123).

In the post-war era, architecture played a major role in the development of photo-conceptualism. In the particular context of the second half of the 20th century, the new architectural reality came to be marked by the development of a rapid and mass-produced urbanization:

> On the one hand, the leveling force of urban development schemes quickened the temporal passage of industrial and urban architecture into ruin and disposability. On the other, the concomitant explosion of building in the form of suburban tract homes, strip malls, housing projects, and other ready-made architectural types in the 1960s reveals, dialectically, the structure of repetition that underwrites the very process of construction. (Lee 2003: 187)

New approaches to art photography shared a similar sense of acceleration and repetition. By-now classical examples of the early photo-conceptualist engagement with the new urban realities are found in Edward Ruscha's (USA, 1937) work focusing on transient, ready-made, disposable architecture typologies and uses of space, such as those captured in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, of 1963 (all the gas stations between Los Angeles and Oklahoma City along Route 66) or the photographic record of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966). Rucha's projects effect the substitution of the Renaissance centralized, static perspective[111] for an always moving, transitory gaze, epitomized in the car's windshield. Another pioneer of photo-conceptualism, Dam Graham (USA, 1942) commented on the similarly commodified and serialized reality of architecture and photography in his *Homes for America* (1966), in which photographs of suburban, ready-made architecture is presented in the mass-produced format of the magazine, with photographs intendly displaying the non-artistic style of commercial or stock photography. As Rucha, Graham approaches his subjects with the deadpan attitude of a surveyor.

Figure 174. A page from Edward Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963.

Source: Tate

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[111] Such was the approach shared by early photographers, such as Gustave Le Gray (1820 – 1884), Adolphe Braun (1812 – 1877), or Louis-Auguste (1814 – 1876) and Auguste-Rosalie (1826 – 1900) Bisson, and modernist architects like Le Corbusier (1887 – 1965) in the photography of buildings and streets (Jacobs 2006: 112-114).

Abandoning the aestheticism implicit in fine arts and straight photography, photo-conceptualism's major contribution (and one that turns it so relevant in relation to ruins) was to incorporate a reflection on the interrelation of time with space as mediated by architecture. As examined in chapter 3, projects by Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark explored the temporary contingence of architecture, emphasizing the laws of entropy that inevitably lead architecture to ruin (Smithson), or revealing the extent to which construction and destruction undrewrote the architectural and urban programs of post-War america (Lee 2003: 190).

In addition to the contibutions of American photo-conceptualism, the typologies of modernist industrial facilities created by the Bechers (Figure 46) direct influences the approach to architectural photography of the photographers analyzed in this chapter. The Bechers's pioneering approach to obsolete architecture based on objectivity, serialization, and novel exhibition displays, opened new possibilities for photographers focusing on architectural and urban heritage. The expressionless approach of a researcher sustains visual evidence, while serialization exposes "durational shifts in an object or process over time" (Lee 2003: 188), while different layouts, like grids and juxtapositions, participates in the construction of the intended discouse framing the photographic series. By means of these photo-conceptualist strategies, construction, demolished derelict spaces are elevated from the materiality of architecture and rubble into aesthetic spaces of reflection on the past, the present and the future of China, one possible definition of what a ruin can stand for in the 21st century.

8.1. Ai Weiwei: *Provisional Landscapes*

Ai Weiwei (Beijing, 1957) has had a crucial role in the diffusion of Euro-American avant-gardes in China and the development of local experimental artpractices. Frequently superseaded by his political activism and problems with the Chinese justice, his art practice over the last decades has had an extraordinary influence. A

truly multimedia artist, his works range from sculpture and *objet trouvé,* inspired by Marcel Duchamp and Dadaism, to installations like *Sunflower Seeds*, which inundated the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern with millions of life-sized and hand-crafted porcelain sunflower seed husks. In addition, and even since Ai's sojourn in New York between 1981 and 1993, he has kept returning to the medium of photography, usually with projects that extend many years, as in *Studies of Perspective* (1995 – 2003). A conceptual strand permeates all his artistic production, reaching extreme peaks as in the project *Fairytale* (*Tonghua*, 2007), in which a thousand Chinese citizens were flew to Germany to view and participate in Documenta 12 in Kassel.

Provisional Landscapes is one of these photographic projects that have been conducted over different years. It includes photographs taken in Beijing between 2002 and 2008, a period in which urban construction was intensified in the run out to the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. The protographs show sites under different types of intervention and stages of construction: construction sites with fences, cranes and barracks; half-demolished lots next to new high rises; concrete infraestructures of massive industrial and communication developments; or wastelands of removed land, with a few solitary trees.

The photographs are frequently edited, framed and displayed in vertical sheets of paper, of 298 × 127 cm, juxtaposing three different images, with no information provided as of the exact location of the images. The viewer is invited to take an active attitude, establishing connections among the images in terms of temporality and causality, location, agency, representativity, etc.

Figures 175, 176, 177. Ai Weiwei, *Provisional Landscapes*, 2002-2008.

Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

In other occasions Ai explores a different exhibiting display, juxtaposing two images of the same location from an almost identical perspective, but obtained years apart. As to emphasize the fact that they are photographs of the same place—something that might be very easily missed, given the extent of the changes—information is included now about the location. Such is the case, for example, of a couple of photographs documenting the construction of the Palm Springs Compound in Beijing's Chaoyang Park. The first image, taken in 2005, shows an imposing group of over-twenty-floors apartment blocks, including a Marriott hotel. In the foreground, covering a half of the image, a few standing old houses remain in the midst of construction rubble and materials (incidentally, this is the area of Liulitun, where Rong Rong and his wife inri lived, the demolition of which they also documented in the eponymous series). In the second image, taken in 2012, the background buildings are already half concealed behind even newer apartment blocks built in the grounds of demolition. With

"beautiful Roman style gardens"[112] surrounding the residential compound, the new urban reality offers a stark contrast with the former demolished expanse. But the juxtaposition also evinces the rapid vertical development of a city like Beijing, with similar high-rises appearing in the blink of an eye, as if they the digitally-produced architectures of the virtual projects analyzed in the previous chapter.

Figures 178, 179. Ai Weiwei, *Palm Springs Compound, Chaoyang Park*, 2005-2012.

Source: Ai (2012)

8.2. Zeng Li: *A China Chronicle*

The photographs of Zeng Li (Liuzhou, Guangxi, 1961) combine a powerful documentary value, a particular sensitivity to spatial qualities, and an awareness of the connections between architecture and memory. Zeng brought the former into his photographic practice from his education and posterior career as stage designer. Graduated at the Central Drama Institute in 1988, Zeng has since collaborated with the People's Art Theater, becoming a referent in China's contemporary drama and

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[112] Joanna Real Estate, promotional materials:
<http://beijing.joannarealestate.com.cn/property_show.asp?pid=108> [last accessed: December 2014].

dance scene as responsible for famous stage designs such as the one for the 1997 Zhang Yimou's version of Turandot, staged at the Forbidden City.

The interrelation of memory and architecture has concerned Zeng since his earliest steps in art photography. His first solo photographic exhibition, *Chair and Landscape (Yizi yu fengjing,* 1994), focused on the Ming tombs, which Zeng shot upon learning about plans for restoration and touristic development that would jeopardize the preservation of the monumental site. In Zeng's photographs, the tombs and their surrounding environment fuse in a harmonious unity. His sensitivity towards architectural relics of the past was also directed to urban heritage, presenting to the First Guangzhou Triennial in 2000 a design for a Liang Sicheng Memorial Hall, with which he reclaimed the legacy of the great pioneer of Chinese architectural preservation.

His interest in urban history and development has resulted in the gigantic project *China Chronicles,* significantly titled in Chinese, "The epoch of Yu Gong" (*Yugongde shidai*). The reference to the famous legend of the "Foolish old man who wanted to remove a mountain" (*Yugong yishan*) serves Zeng to equate China's current urban transformation with mythical gests, including Mao's appeal to revolutionary voluntarism and perseverance. The large photographs and extensive archive— included in a mammoth book almost a meter wide—seem to partake of the same monumental spirit.

A China Chronicle is an enormous catalogue of recent architectural history, including industrial and residential buildings, as well as construction sites and street panoramas. It aims to be a representation of the changes in architectural and urbanism styles of the recent decades, and with them, of the rapid and widespread changes in China. The images of factories reveal, as in the work of Chen Jiagang (chapter 6), the extent to which massive industrial compounds are, besides a testimony of the industrial development of China, a representation of the urbanism characteristic of revolutionary times.

Figure. 180 Zeng Li, *Capital Iron & Steel Factory, Beijing*, 2005.

Source: *A China Chronicle*

As a "visual archive of residential structures" (Phillips 2006), *A China Chronicle* includes detailed images of buildings from different periods of Chinese recent history: the *danweis* and collective compounds of the 1960s and 1970s; 12-story mid-rises of the 1980s; and luxurious towers built in the 1990s, with highly ornamental finishings. The result, for photography scholar Gu Zheng, reveals that "space is no longer the background for human activity, it is the direct reflection of man's will and specific social practices, and the direct, concrete result of these practices" (2011:136).

Figure 181. Zeng Li, *Beijing Mansion*, 2000.

Source: *A China Chronicle*

Next to residential and industrial buildings, demolition works and razed houses are significantly included in the archive, as if these sites of destruction account for a particular typology of architecture of the current times. Zeng attention has been attracted to important projects of development in Beijing, such as the radical intervention, since the early 2000s, to create an up-to-date version of the commercial neighborhood south of Tiananmen around Qianmen Street, or the construction of the metro lines. His impressing compositions achieve to include the construction works, the resulting rubble, and the immediate context of an ever-growing Beijing.

Figures 182, 183. Zeng Li, (top), *The construction site of subway line 10, Shuangjing Qiao station,* Beijing, 2006; (bottom), *Chongwenmen Wai Street*, 2001.

Source: *A China Chronicle*

8.3. Luo Yongjin: architectural photography and construction mosaics

Luo Yongjin (Beijing, 1960) has been one of the first modern photographers to engage with architecture. His attention was turned to the subject after meeting German photographer Thomas Struth, a student of Bernd Becher in the 1970s, and subsequently identified with the Düsseldorf School. Struth, one of the most reputed contemporary photographers for his street photographs and the study of what Chrevier calls "the scenographical attidues that condition the experience of urban life" (1989: 127), visited China in four occasions between 1995 and 2002, a times during which he created photographic series in Beijing, Shanghai and Wuhan, and participated in a two-man exhibition along with Luo Yongjin.[113] Struth, who by the time had became world renewed for his photographs of depopulated street scenes, was attracted to the busy streets of China and in his streetscapes, combined signs and volumes with a focus on human experience and movement.

Figures. 184, 185. Thomas Struth (left), *Vegetable market,* Wuhan, 1995; (right), *Wangfujing Donglu*, Shanghai, 1997.

Source: artist website

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[113] "Face to Face" (*Mian dui mian*), Art Gallery of the Beijing International Art Palace, Beijing, 22 February to 2 March 1997.

Luo Yongjin felt powerfully attracted to the meticulousness of Struth's photographs, in which mundane elements (street signs, buildings, bikes) and everyday scenes provided material for carefully crafted compositions, differed from what Luo perceived as the repetitive and exhausted motives of Chinese photography. Luo's turning from portraits to architectural photography signals a major cultural shift in China's reform as urban change became a powerful social presence. For him, architecture is perfectly suited to mirror new and changing social configurations (Carter 2012).

Figures 186, 187. Luo Yongjin, (left), *New Residence – Luoyang, no. 5*, 1997; (right) *Watchtower no.1*, 2005.

Source: OFOTO Gallery

The subject of his groundbreaking series *New Housing in Luoyang* (*Xinminju – Luoyang*) (Figure 186) are new residential buildings in the Henanese city, often built by its owners without official authorization and in very simple designs. In Luo's lenses, they turn into almost abstract combination of volumes, lines, and textures. Starting from this series, Luo's engagement with architecture owes much to the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher and their serialized approach to different typologies of buildings and infrastructures, but Luo's choice of edifices has included a wider variety of families of buildings, allowing him to reflect the social changes affecting China: gaudy mansions of the Chinese new rich, new public monuments and governmental

buildings, gas stations, and the fascinating architectures of the watchtowers (*diaolou*) from Kaiping (Guangdong), a set of eclectically designed defensive towers, currently protected as a UNESCO site (Figure 187). In contrast to the Bechers, however, Luo's is not an archive of vanishing structures, but of on-going processes, new configurations of space and capital in architectural form.

In contrast with other continuators of the Bechers, who have approached urban demolition by means of serialization and typological study, Luo abandoned these strategies when he started to deal with the phenomenon of urban construction and demolition. As if willing to acknowledge and include in the images the prolongued, enduring presence, and massive scale of construction works and demolition, Luo has essayed different design for his series, and display layouts. Arranging multiple prints in large mosaics of photographs obtained over different years from a similar point of view, Luo is able to create a composite image of a building that includes different stages (from initial demolition, to the construction stage, and finishing), different types of work (leveling, utilities, formwork, brick work, glass), and different actors and participants (workers, but also passerbys). Grand commercial developments and residential megablocks, such as Beijing's Oriental Plaza (the massive and polemical commercial compound built in Wangfujing on the site of Zhan Wang's *Ruins Cleaning Project*) and the iconic skyscrapers of Shanghai's Pudong, are thus portrayed as a process, as a extended temporal presence, with a result that qualifies the mythology of the "instant city", the glossy new city emerging in the blink of the eye in an allegedly barren and empty space (Tweedie and Braester 2010: 1). In contrast with the visual suport that new technologies of image production provide to this instantenaety, Luo's mosaics include the factors of temporal extension and spatial layering, human perspective and point of view, as well as the material component of the process of urban development.

Figure 188. Luo Yongjin, *Lotus Compound, Beijing,* 1998-2002.

Source: OFOTO Gallery

8.4. Wang Jinsong, *One Hundred Signs of Demolition* and *City Wall*

Repetition of a subject, a frame, or a composition serves to foreground the notions of similarity and difference, and with them, to delve into the meaning and identity of a particular social or architectural reality. By the same token, photographic works can attain large, even impressive proportions. Wang Jinsong (Heilongjiang, 1963) has taken recourse of serialization to engage with a very particular typology of China's demolition: the *chai* character painted on walls. *One Hundred Signs of Demolition* is made of a hundred of equally framed photographs of the character *chai,* organized in a grid of squares of the same size. The repetition explicits the reality of widespread demolition and relocation, while also reveals minor differences in wall coating, paint color, materials, light, etc. Metonimically, the work evinces that each *demolition* is different, that behind the homegeineization that development brings about (turning space, residents, experience, etc, into mere externalities), each case of demolition affects an individual house with a particular history and real tenants. The inescapable reference of Wang's hundred *chais* to the traditional *baishoutu*, the spreads made of a hundred *shou* 寿 characters ('longevity') inscribed in a scroll for good luck, interrogates the promise of a better life behind the process of demolition and development (Chau 2008:205).

Figure 189. Wang Jinsong, *One Hundred Signs of Demolition*, 1999.

Source: Chinese Contemporary Photography

Figure 190. Wang Jinsong, *City Wall*, (fragment), 2002.

Source: Bonhams

In a related project, Wang uses the same display, creating a grid with a hundred photographs of buildings of different styles, parks, and street scenes. The photographs combine color and black-and-white images, and different types of angles and compositions: the most tight and oppressive alternate with those "that seem to open up spaces for breathing and imagination" (Zhang 2010: 101). The resulting effect of these and other projects that capitalize on the diversity within a subject, object, etc, cristalize "the 'dissagregated' postsocialist temporality that does not index a specific time but a host of experiences and their memory images" (ibid.).

8.5. Shao Yinong & Mu Chen: *Assembly Halls*

One of the large contemporary photographic projects based on serialization is *Assembly Halls* (*Da litang*), by the couple Shao Yinong (Xining, Qinghai, 1961) & Mu Chen (Dandong, Liaoning, 1970), who like Rong Rong and inri have formed an artistic duo since 2000. The project consists of over 200 photographs of the rooms and halls used for collective gatherings during the Cultural Revolution. Over two years, the photographers searched and documented halls (which in many cases had been abandoned or repurposed) in Communist Party archives and by means of interviews to local people.

The selection of the halls as the central motive of the series responds to their meaning in the recent social and political history of China. It was in these spaces where the political socialization of the high revolutionary tide was carried on, including sessions of political education (reading Party memorandums, training sessions), and the ominous sessions of 'struggle' and criticism (*pidou*). *Assembly Halls* engages with the process of uncovering remnants and obliterations of the Cultural Revolution. The fact that the majority of the halls have suffered important transformations is a spatial evidence of the social and political transformations of the last decades in China, and of the ways recent collective memory has been transmitted, negotiated, or simply obliterated.

The complex relation with history that the halls testify goes beyond the immediate decades. On the one hand, as it is evident once the revolutionary regalia have been peeled off, many of the halls predate the revolution, as the one in Caozhai (Guangdong), which was previously an ancestral hall. Since the end of the Revolution, some of the halls have had different and consecutive afterlives. Many have been repurposed and now host a range of different uses, from karaoke bars or restaurants to Buddhist temples and community centers, as well as simple warehouses. In only a few instances, the halls have been restored and preserved as monuments, as in the case of the hall of Communist base in Yan'an (Shaanxi) or the meeting hall at the August 1st Uprising Memorial Museum at Nanchang (Jiangxi).

Figures 191, 192. Shao Yinong & Mu Chen, *Assembly Halls* series, (left), *Changting,* 2002; (right) *Gaotang*, 2003.

Source: 10 Chancery Lane gallery

Finally, an important section of these photographs show abandoned, derelict and decayed halls, ranging from unkempt storehouses, like the former hall of Xiaju (Zhejiang), to those in full dereliction, like the hall at Shengli (Shandong), a former cinema hall unused for 30 years in at Renzhaiqian (Zhejiang), or the hall of a textile factory in Xiafu (Zhejiang).

Each photograph is shot with an identical composition: an eye-level symmetrical shot from the back of the room that captures the totality of the space and all its details. Displayed in large 122 x 168 cm prints, the photographs seem to open a space within the exhibition room. The photographs' point of view illuminates the typological unity that unifies these halls. While the halls have been set apart by important changes in use, function or mere neglect, the centralized, always equal perspective of the photographs emphasize their similar dimensions and shape, as large indoor spaces that could accommodate large gatherings, facing towards a stage or platform where a leading group directed the political education of the masses.

Figures 193, 194. Shao Yinong & Mu Chen, *Assembly Halls* series, (left), *Shengli,* 2004; (right), *Shenbian,* 2002.

Source: 10 Chancery Lane gallery

The evidentiary power of photography reveals different layers and fragments of China's history, metonymically captured in its fragmentary traces. A propos *Assembly Halls*, Shan Windscript has noted that, "Time in a ruin is no longer an irreversible, linear, 'one-way street'; rather, it is layered with segments of different historical moments" (2013: 33). In a similar spirit, photographer Wang Tong 王彤 (1967, Liaoning) has searched in China's rural areas for visual vestiges (such is the Chinese title of the series, *Henji*) of the revolutionary period in the form of political slogans

and paintings of Chairman Mao (Figure 195). As in *Assembly Halls*, the serialization of vestiges of the revolutionary period in ruinous state elicits two important reflections around architecture and time: on the one hand, it testifies of the perception of alterity of a present time with respect its recent past, precipitously sealed off as a ruin; on the other, the repetition of the motif, and its different fates, provides a illuminating metaphor of the changes that marked the way from socialist homogeneity to capitalist diversification.

Figure 195. Wang Tong, *Mao on the Wall, No. 39*, 1996.

Source: Noorderlicht Photography

8.6. Serialization and typologies in contemporary photography of demolition

As has been repeatedly noted, the legacy of the pioneering series of Bernd and Hilla Becher on industrial typologies can be perceived in many contemporary photographic projects focusing on derelict, obsolete or ruinous industrial and urban architecture. Thomas Jorion photographs of abandoned industries (*Silencio*, 2011), the ruins of Afghan palaces in Brian Mckee's *Detritus* (2002), or Jorge Gronemayer's typologies of urban demolition in Spain and Chile (series *URBE*) make evident this influence, while at the same time reveal a renewed take on the aesthetics of the sublime by means of

468

researcher, aiming to shed light on ignored, concealed, or silenced historical periods. At the moment of shooting, compositions and points of view that maximize objectivity tend to screen off the individuality of the photographer—though, as Mu Chen acknowledges, "the moment when the shutter clicks would bring a subjective choice or decision" (Jiang 2007: 9). The resulting dynamics, between visual evidence and artistic choice, add complexity and nuance to these photo-projects and provide them the status of artworks. Finally, in organizing the materials for exhibition and display in series, grids and juxtapositions, the photographers still propose viewing itineraries and complicities to the viewer.

Framing, in its different meanings, becomes a highly subjective intervention by which the photographers participate in the negotiation of urban development and architectural heritage. If the photographs of Edward Ruscha, in the context of early photo-conceptualism, proposed the windshield as the new framing perspective for times of enhanced mobility and speed, in contemporary projects of architectural photography in China the square frame—of the photograph lenses, of the print— coalesce with the flat surface of façades, and the cubic box of indoor spaces, establishing a point of view shared by both the photographer and the viewer. As seen in discussing Zhang Dali's *Demolition* (Figure 101), construction works and demolition often serve as framing device for the spectacle of devepment. A major visual metaphor encompassing many of these issues is found in a series by Jiao Jian, which documents the destruction of recently erected villas in the outskirts of Hangzhou (Figures 198, 199). Limiting the composition to different types of openings (windows, holes, collapsed walls) in small rooms under demolition, the photographs share with their viewers the the role of providing a visual frame to urban development and destruction, a visual positionality that offers a truthful document while foregrounding the subjectivity of the viewer. In this process of framing demolition, the photographer invites the viewer to "reclaim it *from* a fall into decay and oblivion" and bestow upon it "a form of cultural attention and care that elevates the value of that object" (1997: 1).

Figures 198, 199. Jiao Jian, *Wushan Cun,* (top), *No.5,* 2007; (bottom), *No. 3*, 2006.

Source: OFOTO Gallery

Chapter 9. Recent figurations of ruin imaginary in China (2010s): Yang Yongliang, Yao Lu, Sun Yanchu, Zhang Kechun

As the 21st century moves on, urbanization continues its portentous expansion in China. In the 1990s, big cities lead the expansion of urbanization, and attracted much of the investment in urban renewal and development.[114] Conversely, in the new century, the Central Government is intent to pursue the development of small cities, and even of new urban centers, with the ultimate objective to stimulate domestic markets and consumption (Johnson 2013).

With the continuation of large-scale urbanization, and the pervivance of many of the structural conditions sketched in chapter 1, landscapes of demolition and ruination are still an inescapable reality in China, and an emblematic presence in the photographic artworks of the second decade of the new century. The difference, perhaps as an effect of the new directions of urban development, is that in the most recent photographic projects, demolition and rubble expand to the countryside. In addition to the accustomed derelict urban locations, ruins unexpectedly appear now in remote and deserted expanses of—apparently—unurbanized terrain, proving the spread of development energies beyond the first tier of big cities. After over two decades of demolition photography, the photographers' gaze in well trained to detect ruined stages to express aesthetic intuitions and reflections on China's milieu. In this sense, new directions and artistic strategies are rehearsed as younger artists receive the legacy of the first generations of demolition photographers while, at the same time, navigate a growingly globalized artistic sphere, in which Chinese contemporary photography is celebrated, as certified by the fact that the photographers presented in this chapter have all obtained important international awards, and are being bought and collected in important institutions outside China.[115]

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[114] Between 1990 and 2010, the number of cities with more than 5 million people increased from 3 to 15, with the proportion o urban residents in large cities growing from 25 to 41 percent, while in small cities the proportion declined from 67 percent to 45 percent (UNDR 2013: 24).

[115] The British Museum and other major museums and galleries have acquired works by Yang Yongliang, who was also selected in last year's collective exhibition of landscape photography

While radically different in terms of style, these photographers display a consistent articulation of the theme of urban development, demolition, and ruins. They represent the most contemporary instances of demolition photography, and provide a closing episode for the historical and thematical itinerary proposed in Part II, one of the first academic attempts to engage with the works of these photographers whose work is contemporaneous to the writing of this work.

Figures 200 and 201. (Left), Bo Wang, *Heteroscapes* (*Yizhi jingguan*)*, 2010; (right), Zeng Han, *Hyperreality China* (*Chao zhenshi Zhongguo*)*, Yunyang,* 2007.

Source: artists websites

Their works, as that of the youngest generation of Chinese photographers, diverge in significant ways from the photographic series presented along this dissertation. As the 20th advances, young Chinese artists normalize a situation in which they study, live and participate in the international venues and markets of contemporary art world. Accordingly, the influence of cultural differences, artistic traditions, and local context become less marked or, in any case, are mixed in different elements composing the

Landmark: the Fields of Photography, along with renewed landscape photographers like Edward Burtynsky, Hiroshi Sugimoto, and Thomas Struth. For his part, Zhang Kechun's *Yellow River* series continues to receive awards internationally, like the recently obtained Discovery Award in Les Rencontres d'Arles (August 2014). Finally, Sun Yanchu, for some critics one of the most promising careers in contemporary Chinese photography, has been awarded in France (Levalois, 2010), Japan (Mio Photo Award, 2010), and China (Jinan, Lianzhou), while at the same time he continues to diffuse his work via the Internet and artist photo-books.

growingly 'liquid' identities of the artists. In addition, as noted in the introduction of part II, many young photographers navigate with ease between professional, commercial assignments, and personal projects, so that the contours delimiting artistic and experimental photography from journalistic, photo-reportage or even fashion photography grow increasingly blurred.

Contemporary ruins have become a visual icon that circulates globally. Its native European tradition is one among the many elements that conform its visual regime. In contrast with the different conceptual photographic projects explored in this dissertation, in which demolition partakes of the artists' experimentation with different media and is appropriated in the construction of conceptual discourses, the work of young Chinese photographers on ruined architecture seem to gradually capitalize on the visual power of the ruin, as in series by Bo Wang's 王博 (Chongqing, 1982) and Zeng Han's 曾瀚 (Guangdong, 1974). "Chineseness" often makes its appearance in the form of a commercially profitable self-exotization (as is often noted in relation to Yang Yongliang), or as appeal to the growing local—and conservative—audiences and buyers. While acknowledging a growing homogenization, and transformation of cultural difference into a commodity, this chapter examines some of the ways in which Chinese photography of demolition continues to propose interesting contributions to the visualization of ruins. In the case of the digital collages of Yang Yongliang and Yao Lu, the emphasis is put on the interplay between different temporal and cultural positionalities, implied by the observational distance put at work in their works. Sun Yanchu offers a witness of the interiorization of the dusty aesthetics of demolition, expanding beyond the photography of actual rubble, to give a ruin-like, fragmented, chaotic, and gritty texture to the experience of the urban dweller. Finally, the photographs of Zhang Kechun foreground an insightful actualization of traditional landscape techniques in combination with the sobrierity of the documentary.

9.1. Digital collages: Yang Yongliang, Yao Lu

The photographic series of Yang Yongliang (Jiading, Shanghai, 1980) approach Chinese landscape painting from new digital technologies of image production and synthesis. Inspired by traditional *shanshui* painting, Yang's landscapes are composed by means of digital combination of thousands of photographs of buildings, construction works, and vacant lots. His photographs capitalize on a dual aesthetic effect that depends on the perspective and point of view of the viewer: from a distance, they resemble (on occasions, as copies of the compositions) Song and Yuan dynasty landscapes; on closer inspection, the trompe-l'œil effect collapses, reveling that the mountains and hills are made of assamblages of images of high-rises and half-demolished houses, and what looked like trees and vegetation, are in fact construction cranes and electric pylons.

Figures. 202, 203. (Left), Yang Yongliang, *Travelers among Streams and Mountains,* 2014*;* (right), detail of the marked area.

Source: artist website; author's design

A student of painting and calligraphy since elementary school, and later a graduate in New Media (Visual Communication Department, Shanghai's Art Institute), Yang actualizes traditional painting in different ways. On occasions, he imitates the composition and layout of an ancient classic work, making reference—though only in the Chinese title of the photographs—to the notion of *fang*, an interpretation (in the sense of a music score), of the work of a master intended to pay homage. Examples of famous masterpieces imitated by Yang include Qu Ding's 屈鼎 (ca. 1023–ca.1056) *Summer Mountains* (*Xiashan tu*) and Fan Kuan's 范寬 *Travelers among Streams and Mountains* (*Xishan xinglu tu*), among many others.[116] Moreover, Yang's work updates traditional brush techniques using with digital media, both subverting and extending their use (Gu 2008). The alternation of brush strokes of different width, the different densities of ink, and particularly, the so-called texture strokes (*cun*) used by ink painters to create volumes and textures,[117] are replicated, digitally, by Yang by means of the combination of buildings of different heights and hues. The main difference between Yang's work and that of the ancient landscape masters is in the ultimate meaning and function of their works. Whereas Song paintes elaborated harmonious compositions to mirror and participate of the perpetual changes of the *dao*, Yang's landscapes put to the fore the dusty texture of omnipresent destruction and demolition, creating a shocking ambiguity between beautiful, peaceful compositions, and the repulsive wasteful aspects of contemporary urbanism and development.

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[116] The series *Phantom Landscapes II* (2007), for example, include, in addition to Qu Ding's *Summer Mountains,* Li Cheng's 李成 (919–967) *Luxuriant Forest among Distant Peaks* (*Maolin yuan zhou tu*) and Xu Daoning's 许道宁 (ca. 970–1051/53) *Fishermen's Evening Song* (*Qiujiang yuting tu)*.

[117] There were different *cun* strokes, created by different brushes and angles and for different purposes: perhaps the most famous being the 'axe-cut' *cun* (*fupi cun*), so called because the brush creates the effect of wood cut with an axe, and which was characteristic of Southern Song dynasty painters like Li Tang 李唐, Xia Gui 夏珪 o Ma Yuan 马远.

Figures 204, 205. (Top), Yang Yongliang, *Phantom Landscapes II, no.1,* 2007; (bottom), Qu Ding (active ca. 1023–ca. 1056), *Summer Mountains*

Sources: artist website; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

The fact that viewers, depending on their distance from the photograph—and thus, also of their more or less inquisitive attitude—activate two different visual realities, brings back comments by painter and theoretician Guo Xi (1020 – c. 1090) about landscape painting:

> There is also a proper way to look at landscapes. Look with a heart in tune with forest and stream, then you will value them highly…Approach [them] with the eyes of arrogance and extravagance, then you will value them but little. Landscapes are

vast things. You should look at them from a distance. Only then will you see on one screen the sweep and atmosphere of mountain and water. (cited in Casey 2002: 151)

Guo Xi's 'distance' is something more than a physical dimension, but it does have a material aspect. At the level of sight, and depending on the distance of the observer, Yang's photographs display the serene beauty of a landscapes or a nightmare of high-rises and shell-shocked ruins. The "eyes of arrogance and extravagance" belong to the probing observer who focuses on details and lifts the curtain of illusion to reveal the reality, or, in photographic terms, to the documentary-style photographs that testify massive urbanization, unsustainable energy consumption, and water pollution. This attitude goes against the 'proper' way to look at an ancient landscape, the observer of which should be content with the illusionistic and atmospheric effect that allows him or her to participate in the sense of continuity of being (Tu 1998). Along with these different temporalities, observational attitudes, and representational technologies, then, Yang's photomontages capitalize on a contrast between *culture*: the transnational—or openly Western—contemporary visual regime of mass-produced digital images is contrasted with traditional landscape painting (which, as in some philosophical and critical approaches, stands for 'Chinese'). The photographs thus activate the enduring debate about the necessity and problems of adopting Western technology and culture in China, or the extent to which such division is attanable at all in the present context.

Yang's proposal acquires larger representativeness of the present moment of Chinese photography in dialogue with the work of Yao Lu (Beijing, 1967), another Chinese artist who has used very similar visual strategies. The photograph for which Yao obtained the 2008 BMW Paris Photo Prize, *New landscape part I – Ancient Spring Time Fey* (2006), borrows a composition from traditional landscape painting. A circular framing shape and red signature seals turn his photographs, as Yang Yongliang's, into anachronistic *shanshui* paintings. However, the landscape hides in fact a photograph of a heap of rubble covered by a green protective net, and shrouded in a foggy atmosphere. A scale temple on top of the mound seems to be the destination of the

261

figures that initiate the ascension of the mountain, but instead of the monks, headers or fishermen that crisscross the rugged mountains in traditional landscapes, Yao's photograph features construction workers wearing safety helmets.

Figure 206. Yao Lu, *New landscape, part I – Ancient Spring Time Fey*, 2006.

Source: Bruce Silverstein Gallery

The illusionistic false landscapes of Yao and Yang capitalize on the juxtaposition of two temporalities, bringing the past, in the form of ancient painting styles, into the modern media of digital photography. Two cultural origins are also brought together in the space of the photograph, connecting China's pictorial tradition with the mass and digitally produced images of a globalized visual regime. This dual and simultaneous encounter is also called upon to elicit two different and contrasting aesthetic impressions, namely, the serene beauty of ancient landscapes, emerged from a deep identification between painter and natural order, and the shock of post-apocalyptic scenarios of documentary and journalistic photography.

9.2. Sun Yanchu: *Obsessed*

The photographs that compose Sun Yanchu's (Zhoukou, Henan, 1978) series *Obsessed* (*Chen mi*, 2004 – 2011) aim at expressing with verisimilitude the state of mind of the photographer by means of a representation of his direct environment (Smith 2011), Zhengzhou, a provincial capital of over eight million people, which in Sun's photographs become a setting for dystopia and affluence, uncanniness and leisure culture at the wake of China's reforms. With the sole stated purpose of satisfying a personal necessity, Sun's photographs represent "a chance encounter between my spirit and something else, which will give me a momentary high and a chance to escape" (Smith 2011), a hunt for thrills and moments of 'revelation'. From 'searching the truth from facts', experimentalism has moved close to a capture of a direct experience, with its brutal realism and something close to a tactile visuality.

Sun's major self-acknowledged influence, the photographer Boris Mikhailov (Ukraine, 1938), created in the series *Case History* a grim image of the predicament of post-Soviet Union Ukraine, focusing on drunk and homeless people inhabiting the urban fringes of his hometown Kharkov. Cruel and vibrant, attractive and repulsive, Sun's photographs similarly portray "decayed environments, decayed bodies and a decayed fabric of life" (Tupitsyn 2011: 296). His pornographic lens zooms in over limps and groins, rubble and scars. In his photographs, unspecified nocturnal scenes set a stage for stray dogs or unattended corpses, and eerie atmospheres and soiled fragments are juxtaposed to tender, almost naïve close-ups and unanticipated details.

Figure 207. Sun Yanchu, *Obsessed*, 2004-2011.

Source: artist website

As any other Chinese city, Zhengzhou has also been affected by urban development. Inevitably, ruin and demolition also make it into Sun's photographs in the form of wastelands and vacant lots, construction sites, graffitied *chai* characters and ads, plots of ongoing demolition, and heaps of rubble. Sun's images of demolition, amidst the myriad of other characters, objects, and scenes that he portrays, become part of a strange, fragmented yet quotidian normalcy. Not new nor modern anymore, ruins have been internalized as one more of the elements that compose the experience of the everyday.

Figures 208, 209. Sun Yanchu, *Obsessed*, 2004-2011.

Source: artist website

In Sun's Zhengzhou, the distinction between urban and rural blurs in a fringe suburbia that witnesses unexpected and lurid events. The undetermined spaces that frame the scenes in Sun's photographs become *terrain vagues*, the undefined territory without use and activity that yet display a sense of freedom and expectancy: "Void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation" (de Solà-Morales 1995: 120).

9.3. Zhang Kechun: *Yellow River* series

The last section of this chapter, and the last photographic series to be explored in this dissertation, is devoted to Zhang Kechun (Bazhong, Sichuan, 1980), a young photographer who moves fluidly from photo-reportages for *Time* magazine and National Geographic, to his artistic series, two approaches that he manages to make coincident at times. Zhang has risen to international recognition in the field of art photography with *The Yellow River* (in Chinese, *Beiluo huohuo*, literally "The River Rushes North"[118]), a photographic series in which Zhang offers a highly original document of life along the banks of the Huang He, China's second river and the archetypical cradle of its civilization, in which ruinous objects and landscapes often serve as the photograph's compositional center.

Inspired by a literary vision of the river in Zhang Chengzh's 张承志 *River of the North* (*Beifangde he*, 1984), Zhang set off, starting in 2010, in a series of walking trips along the river from the estuary in Shandong, upstream across different provinces towards the river's source in the Bayan Har Mountains in Qinghai province. During these sort of pilgrimages, Zhang produced a record of the river that shuns the idealized portrait, and combines the legacy of ancient landscape painting with a documentary approach to urban and industrial development, and its concomitant pollution and waste. His photographs reveal a territory of distant and hazy horizons, with a color palette that ranges from the quintessential yellowish of the loess plateau to the dark and soiled terrains of industries. An occasional saturated green detail highlights the unexpected apparition of human characters in the most remote and forsaken spots: as in a dream, a man sits in a pavilion over a rockery that rises in a dry lake; sculptures of deer and goats graze under an imposing cooling tower in Baotou (Inner Mongolia) that reaches upwards across the smog; construction rubble and waste constitute the precarious

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[118] The Chinese title refers to a poem from the *Book of Songs* (*Shi Jing*), section "Songs of Wei" (*Wei feng),* titled "The Duke's Bride" (*Shuo ren*): 河水洋洋，北流活活，施罛濊濊，鳣鲔发发。葭菼揭揭，庶姜孽孽，庶士有朅 (The Yellow River wide and deep / Rolls northward its jubilant way./When nets are spread out, fishes leap /and throw on reeds much spray. /See how the richly dressed bride keep /Company with her lord on bridal day!).

lodgings of workers and beggars; a Hui elderly calmly stares to a huge discarded head of the Buddha in a coal yard, with Ningxia's Helan Mountains in the foggy background; two men on waterproof clothes fish with nets in a dusty pound where a ruinous tower precariously slants.

Figures 210, 211. Zhang Kechun, *The Yellow River,* 2010-2012.

Source: artist website

In Zhang's photographs there is a subtle yet profound connection with traditional landscape painting, the photographer's main self-acknowledged influence.[119] The images are a document of the calmness and empathy with which Zhang approaches his subject, giving it "the necessary breathing space" (Koo 2013) and allowing it to sink in, an attitude which again resounds with ancient prescriptions governing art by Guo Xi, who in his treatise *The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams*" (*Linquan Gaozhi*) admonished that "an artist should identify himself with the landscape and watch until its signification is revealed to him" (cited in Casey 2002: 107).

As in ancient painting, nature holds, in Zhang's photographs, a starring role, with humans dwarfed by comparison. The comparison of Zhang's photographs with those of US photographer Alec Soth's (Minnesota, 1969), which according to Zhang triggered his project, reveal obvious difference in the treatment of nature and mankind. Whereas Soth's *Sleeping by the Mississippi* (2002), a record of the American Midwest, gives prominence to people, focusing mostly on portraits and photographs of the people's houses and objects, in Zhang's 'river' people is miniaturized in the viewfinder "to show the river as a significant existence both in space and time" (Ou 2014). His work brings up-to-date a view of nature as constant and eternal, while including a record of China under massive urbanization, pollutant extractive industries, and a pervasive human imprint.[120]

In the resulting interplay between the compositions, themes, and spirit of traditional painting, and the contemporary impulse towards photographic documentary, ruinous structures play a major role. They serve as evocative testimonies of rapid development, decay and abandonment, but they also signal human endeavor and persistence. Often of a similar hue as the surrounding terrain, derelict and wasteful

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[119] Private email conversation, 25/2/2013.

[120] The series do not aim at environmental activism. While, as cultural activist Ou Ning has noted, respect for the river does not prevent Zhang to feel sympathy for humans (Ou 2014), the photographer's acknowledgement that the power of humans "is nothing compared to the power of nature, even when we try to change it" (cited in Rauhala 2012), ultimately connects his reverential esteem for nature with the classical doctrine of the futility of mankind's actions.

objects seem to emerge from the river basin, a river excrescence that anchors the composition, and that articulates the connection between the majestic, vast landscapes, and the human figures, drawn to the ruins.

Figure 212. Zhang Kechun, *The Yellow River,* 2010-2012.

Source: artist website

Conclusions

Figure 213. Yang Yongliang, *Greece, Greece*, 2010.

Source: artist website

This dissertation has unpacked the different ways in which the wasteful byproduct of urban renewal has been transformed into meaningful ruins in the work of experimental photo-artists from China, by means of an analysis of photographic projects and different disciplinary approaches and discursive frameworks. While the wide methodological scope has supposed an challenge, it has succeed to shed light into one of the most pervasive phenomena of contemporary visual culture in China, setting the ground for further research into contemporary photography and the different aspects that configure processes of ruination.

In the different photographic series and projects, rubble and demolition become building blocks of highly layered and complex artworks. The research has revealed the extent to which these photographic projects, going beyond the depiction of demolition, have articulated different conceptual and performative strategies that have allowed artists to comment, question, or critique the scale, scope, and implementation of urban development projects, and the affectation of these projects on individual and collective memory and identity.

Part I has contextualized the artists' work in three different frameworks: the development of urban development plans in reform China; the aesthetic engagement with ruins; and the interrelation of photography and ruins. Chapter 1 has argued that the institutional, legal, and economical structures regulating urban development in reform China, particularly the dual existence of a State ownership of the land and a market of land lease rights, has given rise to inter-agency competition and connivance between public and private actors. These factors have favored hastened, speculative and improvised development projects which in turn have resulted in protracted, stalled, or abandoned construction works, and the enduring, ubiquitous, and highly visible demolished, razed, or vacant parcels that have attracted the artists' attention. In this sense, the predominance of demolition-themed art in contemporary art from China can be firstly accounted for by the very conditions of urbanization in China resulting from a particular political and economical context.

Engaging with the aesthetics and various meanings of architectural ruin from a comparative perspective between the European and Chinese traditions of ruin representation, and taking into consideration the material and cultural overdeterminations of ruins, chapter 2 has qualified the alleged universalism of ruins and foregrounded their discourse nature. It has also hinted at vernacular idioms of ruin representation, and provided evidence of the importance of ruins in the intellectual and artistic fields of modern and contemporary China, ending with an analysis of Yu Qiuyu's text "Ruins" as an example of an appropriations of ruins, different to that of the artists yet similarly indicative of the importance of ruins in contemporary China. For its part, chapter 3 has contextualized demolition-themed photography with reference to the specific relationship between photography and ruins, and between ruins and photo-conceptualism, and to the context of the particular development of photography in China. Innovatively, contemporary photographers from China have been put in dialogue with photo-conceptual works on demolition and decay by Bernd and Hilla Becher, Robert Smithson, and Gordon Matta-Clark, among others, amplifying the scope of Chinese experimental photography into a transnational tradition of photo-conceptualist works on ruination.

In Part II, about 40 photographic projects and series have been examined and situated in relation to the artists' individual evolution, their search for expressive and conceptual strategies, as well as to the chronology of experimental photography in China. The different findings have been organized in six chapters according to common aesthetic and discursive strategies. The chapters also follow a chronological sequence, starting in 1990, when Geng Jianyi conducted his intervention *Building No. 5*, and advancing over the next two decades up to the present with a particular emphasis on the 2000s. Chapter 4 has highlighted a recurrent recourse to photography in multimedia projects responding to the emerging phenomenon of widespread demolition in the 1990s. Within a similar temporal framework, chapter 5 has analyzed and underscored strategies of conceptual photography in relation with demolition in the work of Rong Rong, Jiao Jian, Liu Jin and the Gao Brothers. Projects analyzed in chapters 6, 7 and 8 foreground the maturity of experimental photography

of demolition and decay after the initial artistic experiments, and along the second decade of massive construction works and generalized ruinous landscapes. Over the 2000s, the strategies explored in the first two chapters of Part II (mix-media, performance and conceptualism) continued to frame the approach of the artists to demolition, while a growing professionalism, the international success of contemporary Chinese art, and a higher fluency with the discourses and techniques of international art, produced novel and more sophisticated articulations of the ruin. The performative impulse gave rise to impersonations and spectral apparitions (chapter 6), and staged photography evolved into the recreation of the actual ruins (chapter 7), while conceptualism reflexively addressed the design, scope and display of the very photographic series (chapter 8). Finally, in chapter 9, the most recent articulations of derelict architecture, and urban and industrial environments have served to note some of the outcomes of three decades of experimentation, as well as some future paths for ruin images from China.

The works of the artists analyzed reveal an inextricable connection with the context of urban development examined in chapter 1. The analysis of their works evinces the photographers' awareness of, and engagement with the phenomenon of ubiquitous and enduring demolition, the particular typologies of ruinous landscapes, and the different voices in the debates on architectural preservation. Moreover, their works testify the multiplicity of approaches afforded by the "fundamental semiotic instability" of ruins (DeSilvey & Edensor 2012: 4) explored in chapter 2. In particular, different photographic works engage, directly or indirectly, with the productive tension that the Chinese language, in referring to ruins, opens between the term *feixu* 废墟 (pointing at devastation and rubble)[121] and *yizhi* 遗址, which is used for historical memorials and relics. [122] The work of the photographers, while not

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[121] *Feixu* is a quite modern word, which adds to *xu*, the oldest term for ruination, the notion of *fei*, 'waste, rubbish, or uselessness'.

[122]An illustrative example of this dynamics is found when comparing the rubble of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, undoubtedly *feixu*, and the preserved/staged ruins of the memorial site of the Donghekou Earthquake Relics Park (*Donghekou dizhen yishi gongyuan*), in which rubble has been transformed into a *yizhi*.

concerned with the circuits of institutionalized memory of the *yizhi*, has produced meaning out of the wasteful materiality of demolition, highlighting the discursive nature of the ruin that this dissertation has taken as a premise. Further, the *feixu* that we witness in the photographers' works, rather than returning a perfect mirror image of—European, Western—'ruins', contributes to discussions on ruin aesthetics which overcome the national scope, and that expand the original etymology of ruins (from Latin *ruere*, collapsed stones) into notions of the waste, rubbish, and devastation (from the Latin *vastus*; Viney 2011). A visual rendering of this dynamics between *yizhi* and *feixu*, between historical ruins and contemporary waste, is found in a photographic series by Yang Yongliang created in 2009 during a residency program in Thessalonica, *Greece Greece* (Figure 213): from the gnawed corners of ancient Greco-Roman bases and capitals emerge, as an internal excrescence, buildings, electric pylons, construction cranes, thoroughfares, and cars.

Part I and Part II establishes an important connection between photo-conceptualist artists from the post-war period like Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark, and the proposals of Chinese artists on demolition and decay. Rather than a mere document or a critical stance towards the contemporary political economy of contemporary China, the works of Chinese artists partake of an international engagement with ruination in the context of a growingly global interrelation between construction and destruction, growth and waste, and modernization and pauperization. In dialogue, then, with China's urban development, with the cultural dynamics surrounding ruin representation, and with the tradition of photo-conceptualist works on demolition and ruination, the works of the photographers analyzed in this dissertation display a series of conceptual and discursive resources in their artistic engagement with the materiality of rubble. In that sense, and going beyond the visual record of demolition, they achieve to transform rubble into emblematic and highly suggestive ruins, validating the initial hypothesis of this work.

The process of examining the different photographic series has brought to light multiple, complex, and interrelated elements at work in the representations of rubble

and dereliction in the work of experimental photographers, which have been arranged in base of a number of thematic and temporal categories. As noted in the introduction, these categories are not intended to amount to a taxonomy, nor to exhaust or circumscribe the different artistic strategies of the photographers within too defined contours. Rather, they have been a valuable analytical instrument to organize, examine, and present the complexity of a large corpus of works and establish a loose but valid temporal chronology. At the same time, this arrangement has afforded to disclose confluences and influences among artists who, as a condition of their experimentalist attitude towards art and photography, often navigate between different approaches. A transverse reading of the findings of this dissertation reveals a series of vectors that condense different articulations and engagements with demolition in response to the artists' intense involvement with their social milieu.

A first common element is the significance bestowed upon a retroactive valorization of the past. According to Hong Kong *wuxia* writer Ni Kuang 倪匡, in China, "[a] place that lies waste is not in itself a ruin. It needs to have previously been glorious and bustling, a radiant and beautiful place...Only in this case can this place be called a ruin" (my translation, cited in Lai 2009: 68). The intervention of the artists is thus necessarily directed, in the first place, to re-evaluate the former existing buildings, changing the status assigned to them by urban development—as disposable and profitless—into a significant materiality. Zhan Wang achieves this operation by cleaning and painting rubble; Huang Yan, creating rubbings out of demolished houses. The vacated spaces in Shao Yinong and Mu Chen's *Assembly Halls* have their reverse in their "glorious and bustling"—and also, traumatic—past heyday, which accompanies their photographs as invisible negatives. The huge repository created by Zeng Li presupose that Chinese cities are not made of mere space reducible to real estate, but they are also the record of architectural history and a collective gest. In this sense, the valorization of architectural and urban past is also achieved by means of conceptual strategies that recontextualize derelict, obsolete, and ruinous architecture within catalogues, repositories, and typologies.

Another vector permeating many of the photographic series is the configuration of the demolition site as a stage of personal alienation. Performance becomes a way to dramatize and express complex and often-contradictory sentiments aroused by demolition. In Chen Qiulin and Rong Rong's works, demolition is a site of death, erasure, disappearance, but at the same time, it foregrounds continuity, love, and endurance. Zhan Wang's casts are a symbol of change, growth and hope, and simultaneously, vestiges and traces, abandoned carcasses. By trying to accommodate the body to architecture, Jiao Jian testifies the aspiration, difficulty and ultimate futility of the endeavor. The body of artists or actors is identified with the ruin: both are torn, fragmented, dislocated, and out of place, embodiments of desire, as Liu Jin's angels, in a temporary no-man's land. The Gao Brothers photomontages combat the alienation caused by precocious ruins with human embraces.

In the process of artistic engagement with demolition and dereliction, and as an extension of this performances of alienation, different temporalities seem to collapse, revealing former architectural and human realities that impregnate rubble and resists erasure. Exploring the limits of the photographic medium, artists like Geng Jianyi achieve to record absences, former daily rituals, and obsolete itineraries, or bring to light the element of perseverance, as in Rong Rong's posters and fragmented negatives, which stubbornly resist demolition and emerge from the rubble as resilient vegetation. Blurred, ethereal female figures personify history and personal memories in Qin Wen and Chen Jiagang's photographs, while submerging his hometown *ante hoc,* Yang Yi digitally projects the process of impregnation and the resilience of memory towards the flooded future.

Starting in the 1990s, artworks on demolition appeared in a moment when the idealistic rekindling of New Culture ambitions to enlighten China by means of science, culture and democracy, which characterized the 1980s, waned after the denouement of the Tiananmen movement of 1989, the withering of the spirit of collective *yundong* (movements), and a commercialization of artistic and intellectual activity in accord with a growingly liberalized economy. A "domestic turn" (Wu 2002) affected

contemporary artists, turning their attention towards their immediate reality while learning to negotiate ways to diffuse and commercialize their works. The topic of demolition allowed to articulate these different aims with works that were well attuned to the contemporary context while, at the same time, engaged with the international artistic languages of postmodernity. In this context, the works analyzed in this dissertation do not come out as activist in the political sense. On occasions, they even betry a conservative appeal in their somewhat nostalgic revisiting of the past. In terms of the evolution along the temporal vector that runs across Part II, and that extending from the 1990s to the present, necessarily partakes of the changes in the intellectual and artistic fields in China just mentioned, this work reveals a fading sense of rebelliousness in the artistic experimentalism of the artists, expressed in a moderation of the unconventional and exploratory spirit of early projects, a phasing out of the figure of the independent artist, and a growing familiarity of contemporary art with commercialized spheres of visual culture, such as journalism, digital culture or fashion and life-style.

One of the aims of this dissertation has been to participate in the de-provincializing and de-exoticizing of contemporary art produced in China that still characterizes much of the critical and academic response. This work has tried to bypass a definition of "Chinese photography" on grounds of ethnicity by foregrounding the importance of the the socio-economic context of demolition on artists from, and most importantly, based in the P.R.C. At the same time, the recurrent reference to 'Chinese' as a critical category along this dissertation testifies the need of further research that is capable to find ways to acknowledge while overcoming national, ethnic, cultural or social identities, if only to answer to the reality of many contemporary artists, who live and create their works in a context of growing personal and artistic transnational mobility. In so doing, it would achieve to incorporate to the reflections prompted by this dissertation important works on demolition and dereliction created in China by foreign nationals, like Sze Tsung Leong, Edward Burtynsky, Nadav Kander, Horst and Daniel Zielske, or the French artist JR, author of the photographic installation *Wrinkles*

of the City (2010) in Shanghai, all of which have not been included in the corpus of the present work.

Another aspect related to the importance and complexity of properly situating cultural difference as a critical category is the discussion, addressed in chapter 2, on vernacular conventions of visual representation of ruin sentiment, and the possibility of an organic, incarnated dimension of ruination which, coming from ancient intellectual and visual conventions, might have infused modern and contemporary representations of architectural ruins in China. While this dissertation has merely touched upon the issue, future research would need to delve more meticulously into the history and evolution of images of decay, destruction, and death in Chinese art. Such endeavor would need to negotiate the traps of culturalism, a challenge that chapter 2 (and in general this whole work) has, in its limited scope, acknowledged, confronted, and hopefully circumvented, while illuminating some of the cultural and geographical determinants affecting ruin representation.

As for the lines opened by this dissertation, one of the aims has been to break new ground in the academic engagement with some of the most up-to-date photo-artist from China, providing sources and reflections useful for future research on artists currently developing their careers. As attested in chapter 9, the relationship of contemporary photography with ruins continues be a significant and highly dynamic artistic sphere in China, and the international recognition of artists like Zhang Kechun and Yang Yongliang foretells a continued interest in images of ruination arriving from that country. In particular, one of the most interesting lines of inquiry opened by the newest visual projects on ruins and demolition has to do with the impact and influence of new digital technologies in the representation of ruins. Digital technologies and virtual worlds will necessary alter the connection between ruins and photography, established on the basis of the notion of trace (of architecture and of the refraction of light, respectively), and the influence of digital software in the visualization and (re)construction of ruins will most probably affect many of the social implications of ruins, and their representation in the photographic medium.

Annex

"Ruins", (*Feixu* 废墟), by Yu Qiuyu
From *A Bitter Journey Through Culture* (文化苦旅). Taipei: Erya Chubanshe 爾雅出版社, 1992, pp. 361-368

Translation by Xavier Ortells-Nicolau
Revision by Manuel Pavón Belizón

Ruins. I curse ruins, and yet I find solace in them.

Ruins engulfed my hopes, my memories. Scattered debris among wild weeds, a broken stone pillar standing under the setting sun, records from books and dreams of childhood, all have perished in the ruins. The glory of former times has turned into a joke, the path-breaking efforts of our ancestors roar in the cold wind. When night arrives, the moon, which has not seen anything, forces a smile, and hiding among the clouds, throws a shadow on the ruins.

And yet, accumulating generations do not amount to history. Ruins are destruction, a wreck, a farewell, and a choice. The strength of time necessarily leaves traces over the earth; the wheel of the years must crash all irregularities under its path. Without ruins, there is nothing to care about yesterday; without yesterday, there is nothing to care about today or tomorrow. Ruins are a textbook that allows us to read geography as history; ruins are a process, as human life stems from ancient ruins and moves towards new ones. Upon beginning to construct, we immediately think about the hereafter decay, and in that sense, a ruin is a home to return to. When we renovate on the base of ruins, they become a starting point. Ruins are a long chain of evolution.

A friend told me he had once walked into a famous ruin site, and when he raised his head his eyes became filled with tears. The composition of these tears is very complex. They are made of hatred, of loss, but this is not all. Ruins show persistence, they look

exactly like a crippled tragic hero. Ruins reveal changes, allowing people to see the nation dragging its feet. Ruins are the last will of a moribund old man, you cannot help to be moved.

Ruins have a kind of formal beauty; they transform the beauty of moving away from earthliness into a beauty that approaches earthliness. In a few years they can revert to mud and merge completely with the earth. Dissolving or not, ruins they are. A smiling mother incites the creations of her sons, and with another smile, she accepts their works. She fears her sons are too weary, that the world is too congested. Have you seen autumn's falling yellow leaves? A mother fears her sons would be cold and receives them in her arms. Without yellow leaves there is no autumn, and ruins are the yellow leaves of architecture.

People say that the meaning of yellow leaves resides in that they foster spring. For me, yellow leaves in themselves are pretty.

Two friends argue in front of me. For one, the highest pleasure is to walk alone among the ruins in a night of sparse stars and waning moon, reciting poetry or singing aloud until the east is flooded with the morning light; for the other, the expectation of the light of dawn makes this night excursion end up in affection. He would use the dim moonlight to find a path to quietly return home.

As for myself, quite older than my friends, I do not have such elevated feelings or energy. I am only afraid that mankind would completely renovate, refurbish and rebuild all ruins. I cannot figure why Rome's Coliseum, the old city of Pompeii, Angkor Wat in Cambodia or the relics of Mayan civilization need to be rebuilt. It just seems unthinkable to polish ancient bronzes, that unearthed broken *ji*-style halberds would have to get a new nickel coating, that Song records would be covered in plastic, or that

Lady Dai from the Han tombs in Mawangdui would need skin grafting on her ample bosom, or new make-up.[123]

As long as history is not obstructed and time is not reversed, then everything can age. If something is old, just let it be old, it will serenely embellish the world's countenance with benevolence. The most brutal insult to oneself is a false display of innocence. A grandmother without wrinkles is scary; an elderly without white hair causes regret. A human life without ruins is too weary; a world without ruins, too crowded: to conceal ruins is a dishonest trick.

And yet, history is authentic, and life, a process.
This is a great wisdom of Humankind.

Surely, not all ruins deserve preservation; otherwise the whole planet would end up covered with scars and stains. Ruins are the envoys of past times to the present; they have been through the whims and preferences of the kings of history. Ruins are the feats of our ancestors, and thus they gather in one place the strength and essence of that time and that place. Historical relics that have disintegrated into dust are not ruins either, for among the ruins we must find history's most enduring ligaments. Ruins have a potentiality for double reading; they emit a magnetism that makes people reluctant to leave. Indeed, ruins are the magnetic field created between two poles, antiquity and modernity, where the compass of the heart reacts with intensity. Once this magnetism is lost, a ruin is dead, and people very rapidly discard them.

Not all renovations are absurd. Carefully planned, cleaned with the care and consolidated without leaving visible marks, renovation can preserve the original appearance of a ruin while enhancing its contemplation. This kind of work is a grace bestowed upon the ruin, as it aims at authenticity, to create a ruin in which everybody

[123] The exceptionally well-preserved mummy of Xin Zhui 辛追, wife of Li Cang 利蒼, Marquis of Dai during the Han Dynasty, was found in the early 1970s during the excavations in the hill of Mawangdui in Changsha.

will be willing to evoke ancient times. Renovation always supposes a certain degree of loss. The ambition of all true preservationists is to minimize the damage caused to a ruin. In a similar vein, rebuilding must not always be opposed. When there are no ruins, why cannot we reconstruct a grand mark that realizes the engulfing of the past and the appropriation of the present by the modern man? But it is preposterous to call these modern constructions in classical style with their ancient name. The rebuilt Yellow Crane Tower[124] includes an elevator; the Efang Palace[125] would be able to host a hotel, and the Pavilion of Prince Teng,[126] a shopping mall. The relationship of these projects with history is minimal. My proposal is that when you have ruins but still want to rebuild them, ruins must be preserved at any cost and rebuilding can take place next to them. The view of bulldozers entering a ruin site is really sorrowful.

Regardless of our preference towards restoration or rebuilding, the most important aspect in relation to ruins is their preservation. The historical significance of the Yuanming Yuan ruins, the most important among the vestiges of Beijing, would be lost if they were razed to the ground to erect a brand new Yuanming Yuan. The Qing court and the roaring flames are long gone, the indignation of the nation and historical consciousness have passed. The tales that erased yesterday's night can mend the broken dreams of the night before yesterday. But what is mended is not those broken dreams, but merely the game of today.

China has always lacked a culture of ruins. The two characters that compose the word 'ruins'[127] make people shake with fear.

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[124] The Huanghe lou 黄鹤楼, build in 223 AD, was rebuilt in 1981 one kilometer away from its original site, in Wuhan.

[125] The Afang Gong 阿房宫 (sometimes transliterated as Efang or Epang Palace), was originally built in 212 B.C. during the Qin dynasty. After being burned, it attained a mythical status, and it has been celebrated in poems and paintings across the centuries. A reconstruction was built in the early 2000s in Xi'an.

[126]The Tengwang ge 滕王阁 in Nanchang (Jiangxi), built in 653 AD, was rebuilt in 1987 following plans by architecture historian Liang Sicheng.

[127] *Feixu* 废墟 in the original.

One the one hand, a pedantic, uncompromising commemoration of the past; on the other, a fashionable pragmatism. While nostalgics only want to recover the past, trendy people only want to eliminate it. So they fight each other, with neither part winning, since attaching history is to shatter the past. Dripping blood and accumulating scars, this great nation does not recognize its ancestors or its future in the past. Dripping blood, many scars, it does not see the ancients nor the ones to come. Thinking about the vast, everlasting world, tears fell in lonely sorrow.

There is a hole in the heart of Chinese people! Allow the past to leave a few footprints in our modern times, let our today look calmly into the past. Ruins do not deserve to be scorned nor covered: we are just too good at covering. Chinese history is full of tragedy, and yet Chinese people fear witnessing true tragedy. At the end, there is always a happy ending to comfort us, to let us satisfied. Qu Yuan, Du Fu, Cao Xueqin, Kong Shangren, Lu Xun, Pai Hsien-yung,[128] they did not want happy endings. They preserved the ruins and purified tragedy, as so a genuine and rich literature emerged.

Without tragedy there is no solemnity, without solemnity there is not sublimity. Snow peaks are mighty, because the remains of mountaineers lie buried in their slopes; oceans are mighty, because near and far float the wreckage of sunken boats; the Challenger's accident turns the ascent to the moon into a mighty enterprise; humanity is mighty, because it has white hair, farewells, unavoidable losses. The Greeks settled down by the sea. Countless warriors from ancient Greece found death among the fierce waves in their search for other shores, for which they were glorified for generations in Greek tragedies.

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[128] Qu Yuan 屈原 (343–278 BC), official and poet, author or inspiration of the collection *Songs of Chu* (*Chu ci* 楚辭,2nd century BC); Du Fu 杜甫 (712 – 770), famous poet of the Tang dynasty; Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (18th century), author of classical novel *The Dream of the Red Mansion* (*Honglou meng* 红楼梦); Kong Shangren 孔尚任 (1648 – 1718), dramatist and poet, author of the play *The Peach Blossom Fan (Taohua shan* 桃花扇, 1699); Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936), writer and reformist, autor of *A Madman's Diary (Kongren ji* 狂人日记,1918) and *The True History of Ah Q (Ah Q Zhenchuan* 阿 Q 正传, 1921); Pai Hsien-yung 白先勇 (1937), writer, author of *Taipei People (Taibei ren* 臺北人,1971) and *Crystal* Boys (*Niezi* 孽子, 1983).

Sincerely and calmly acknowledge defeat after struggle, loss after success, we will become more unperturbed. To become more magnanimous, the Chinese cannot get rid of all its ruins.

Ruins stand as a symbol of the civilization of modern people.
Ruins reflect the self-confidence of our times.
Ruins cannot obstruct the laying of commercial streets, they cannot hinder progress. Modern man is insightful and knows where he stands along historical continuity. He does not hold the vain illusion that he steps on untrodden ground, and he gladly regards all the steps, before and after him.

The modern philosophy of history has enlightened the ruins, and it also needs to find its materials. Amidst the noise of modern times, the quietness of ruins has a particular strength; ruins can only become an allegory in the meditations of modern people. Thus, ancient ruins are, truly, a modern construction.

Modernity does not only mean a portion of time. Modernity means tolerance, magnanimity, vastness, and limitlessness. Along with ruins, we move forward to modernity.

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In alphabetical order

Bawang bieji《霸王别姬》
Bashang qiuju《灞上秋居》
Bei Dao 北岛
Beifang de he《北方的河》
Beijing Guangshe 北京光社
Beihemeng 北河盟
Beiluo huohuo《北流活活》
*Bei yiwang de ren: zhongguo jingshengbing ren
Shengcun zhuangkuang*《被遗忘的人：中国京生病
人生存状况》
Bengkui 崩溃
Bengta 崩塌
Biefu《别赋》
Boyun 薄雲
Bu beizhucede chengshi《不被注册的城市》
Bu ke yidong wenwu 不可移动文物
Bu Wangcang 卜万苍
Cai Hongshuo 蔡鸿硕
Caizheng baogan zhi 财政包干制
Cao Fei 曹斐
Cao Zhi 曹植
Chai 拆
Chaiqian 强拆
Chaiqianhu 强拆户
Chao zhenshi Zhongguo《超真实中国》
Chang Yung Ho 张永和
Che xian jian qu 撤县建区
Chen mi《沉迷》
Chen Ran 陈染
Chen Qiucao 陈秋草
Cheng Conglin 程丛林
Chengshi kuozhang《城市扩张》
Chengzhenhua 城镇化
Chongqing Chenbao 重庆晨报
Chuanqi 传奇
Cun 皱
Da chuanlian 大串连
Da Hong Denglong Gaogao Gua《大红灯笼高高挂》
Daluan 大乱
Dazayuan 大杂院
*Dangdai shying xinrui. 17 weiying xiang xin
shengdai*《当代摄影新锐-17 位影象新生代》
Deng Liqun 邓力群
Ding Fang 丁方
Dingzihu 钉子户
Dougong 斗拱
Donghekou Dizhen Yishi Gongyuan 东河口地震遗址
公园
Dong zhanchang lieyan tu《东战场的烈焰图》
Dong Zhuo 董卓

Du bei'an shi tu《读碑案石图》
Dushihua 都市花
Fang 仿
Fang Dazeng 方大曾
Fang Ke 方可
Fenghua xueyue jinbai nian《风花雪月近百年》
Feng Jicai 冯骥才
Feng Zhengjie 俸正杰
Fujian Wugeyi 福建五个一
Fupi cun 斧劈皴
Gaige kaifang 改革开放
Gao Jianfu 高劍父
Gao Minglu 高名潞
Gao Qifeng 高奇峰
Gu cheng《故城》
Gu Zheng 顾铮
Guanxi 关系
Guofang sheying 國防攝影
Guojia wenwu ju 国家文物局
Guotu Ziyuanbu 国土资源部
Han Jinsheng 韩景生
Henji《痕迹》
Hong Lei 洪磊
Hou Dengke 侯登科
Hsieh Tehching 謝德慶
Hu Wugong 胡武功
Hukou 户口
Hutong 胡同
Hua Xinmin 花新民
Huaigu 怀古
Huang Rui 黄锐
Huang tudi 黄土地
Huang Xinbo 黄新波
Huiwang zhongguo diyi jianxingweiyishu《回望中国
第一件行为艺》
Huiyin bi《回音壁》
Huoshao Afang gong《火烧阿房宫》
Jishi sheying 纪实摄影
Jishi wei zhu, huayi wei fu 纪实为主，画意为辅
Jia Pingwa 贾平凹
Jiating lianchan chengbao zeren zhi 家庭联产承包责
任制
Jianzheng 见证
Jiang He 江河
Jin Baihong 金伯宏
Jin Jiangbo 金江波
Ji Weiyu 季炜煜
Jie wo yi sheng《借我一生》
Jingju 京剧
Jiuqu gaizao 旧区改造

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Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA)	http://www.macba.cat/ca/expo-matta-clark
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