

# Conflicts through the lens of Chinese war photojournalists

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## Introduction

Contemporary Chinese war photography becomes an important research subject. Since the 1990s, China, as a new global power, plays an increasing role in international affairs. Chinese correspondents have travelled to war and conflict zones overseas to report and file news coverage back home (Zhang, 2013). By studying how the Chinese journalists and photographers depict the conflicts through the lens of cameras around the world, this research is meant to contribute to the existing knowledge about wartime photojournalism from Chinese perspective.

Journalism's images of war play an important role in people's understanding of the nature of war. They show 'what has been and offer glimpses of what might be' and more or less 'shape the public's encounter with war' (Zelizer, 2004: 114). The power, durability and memorability of photography make scholars such as Zelizer claim that 'it is to images that journalism turns in times of war. (Zelizer, 2004: 118).

War photographers have been heralded as heroes who bring the 'decisive moments' to the audiences. Roger Fenton is widely recognised to be the first person to systematically portray soldiers during the Crimean War (1853-1856). But 'he did not produce images which revealed the nature of war' (Price, 1997: 62). It was with the depiction of Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) that photographic images of war have been used to accentuate and lend authority to war reporting (Griffin, 2010). In the post-WWII period, 'starting with the Vietnam War, the immediacy of war photographs begins to have a significant effect. Since then, a stream of authentic images has overwhelmed us with cumulative power. The images from Korea, Cyprus, Israel, the Congo, Biafra and Vietnam have left their indelible mark on our imaginations.' (Lewinski 1978: 12, cited in Price, 1997:62)

War photography, as an integral part of wartime journalism, has been attracted to scholars not only as a profession and genre but for its political, historical and aesthetic functions and values. Firstly, press photographs of wars are intertwined with politics. Photographic depiction of war depended on what the military and political forces, and sometimes editors allowed the public to see (Zelizer, 2004: 119). War images reveal the government/press

relationships, actors that set the news agenda and influence the public opinion. They are used as tools of persuasion and tools to achieve political and military aims (Griffin, 2010; Zelizer, 2002). Sekula reminds us, 'the making of a human likeness on film is a political act' (Sekula 1984: 31, cited in Becker, 2003). Likewise, publishing that likeness in a newspaper compounds the political implications (Becker, 2003: 305). The widely cited example about the influences of war illustrations on politics is the myth of Vietnam War. Politicians from President Richard Nixon down attributed the US' loss of the Vietnam War to the power of the visual, as Asia correspondent Robert Elegant claimed in 1981, 'For the first time in modern history, the outcome of a war was determined not on the battlefield but on the printed page and, above all, on the television screen'' (Brothers, 1997: 205).

Secondly, photography has a long history of recording and documenting war and conflict. Within a decade or two of photography's invention in the mid-1800s, 'photography was used to chronicle wars, to survey remote regions of the world and to make scientific observations' (Price, 1997:57). Even when the broadband Internet and digital devices offered 'more intimate and multi-faceted view of the war than ...possible ever before' (Harmon 2003: C4, cited in Zelizer, 2004: 119), the still photograph still persisted as a viable mode of recording, though questions remain regarding its use (Zelizer, 2004: 119). However the photography's documentary nature has been an issue of the debate since the introduction of photography concerning the photography's status as 'art vs science' in the 19th century (Griffin, 1995). On one hand, Roland Barthes (1984: 88) argues that 'the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time...in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation.' On the other hand, John Tagg rejects the idea of photography as a record of reality and the notion of a documentary tradition. He claims, 'Photographs are never 'evidence' of history; they are themselves the historical.' (Tagg, 1988: 65). Similarly, Martha Rosler argues that 'manipulation is integral to photography' and 'photography as evidence of anything is dead'. Photographic truth is based upon a set of historically and culturally specific beliefs about photographs as documents (cited in Price, 1997: 119-120). Indeed, 'camera is never neutral' (Tagg, 1988:63).

Photographic evidences of the war are situated within the context and are invested with power relations. As Brothers (1997: xiii) notes, 'the complicity of photographs in creating 'a sort of abstract history' is determined by the context in which they function and the institutions which employ them.' Photography is never a 'recording technology' that is de-linked from the economic, social and political forces that shape the visual representation

(Griffin, 2010). Representational legitimacy remains inextricably tied to power (Hall, 1973, cited in Griffin, 2010). Published photographs have the historical and documentary value. They will remain a source of cultural-historical information, but images shall be read not for the information they contain but for the power relations they reflect and the cultural and communicative functions they fulfil (Brothers, 1997: 216). In other words, when we turn to the images in time of war, we shall ask the questions: who depict the war? under what circumstances? what are the denotative and connotative forces in the photograph? What are the selection, construction and filtering procedures? Most of all, whose history is remembered?

Thirdly, war is hell but the war photographs can be beautiful. War images have their aesthetic value embodied in colour, drama and size. The impulse toward aesthetic, dramatic, pleasing, or shocking images has long been part of photography's practice in journalism but the aesthetic patterns for war images have changed over time from early emphasis on distant battlefields in the Spanish American War, to the close-ups of individual soldiers in the Korean War, then to the pictures of wartime suffering, deaths of soldiers and civilians, and broad landscapes (Zelizer, 2004). Such 'aesthetic factor' in photography was not at odds with its documentary or realist purpose (Abbott, 1951; Tagg, 1988). However the issue with the pursuit of aesthetic appeal in wartime journalism is the compromise of news values and truth. As Zelizer (2004: 123) notes, 'at times, the aesthetic appeal of war images turns to explicitly non-journalistic modes of visual representation. ...the image's aestheticization works against its newsworthiness in wartime.' In the abstraction process, the photographers and photo editors may prioritize the aesthetic form over the news information and historical details.

In sum, war photography has been researched and debated in terms of its political implications, historical evidence, aesthetic values as well as iconic and symbolic functions. War images are commonly used to elicit public emotions and shape public collective memory. There are rich literatures about war photography covering the Spanish Civil War, WWI and WWII, Vietnam War, the Iraq War, 'War on Terror' in Afghanistan, and September 11 in the US (e.g. Brothers, 1997; Griffin, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2010; Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Taylor, 1991, 1998; Zelizer, 2004). Nearly all of them are from Anglo-American perspectives. This paper intends to address the Chinese war photography thus to fill in the gap of existing knowledge from the non-Western perspective and to shed lights on the ideology, practices and performances of photographers in Chinese context.

This paper will start with giving a historic overview of Chinese war photography, outline the research questions and research methods, then discuss the contemporary Chinese war photography from multiple perspectives including photographers' perceptions of their roles, political and organizational factors that shape the war images, main themes of their photographs, denotative and connotative meanings of the selected war images, and their perceptions towards realism, truth, news values, aesthetic values and ethical issues.

### **A historic overview of Chinese war photography**

Chinese photographic practices started shortly after photography was introduced to China during the early 1840s, mostly in the port cities such as Shanghai. Since the early twentieth century, Chinese artists and intellectuals had known realism as an aesthetic and ideological doctrine (Wu & Yun, 2007). However, traditional Chinese visual art focused on expression rather than imitation, on representations of the “ideal” or “imaginary” rather than the “real.” Thus, recording history and representing reality (either scientific or social) were marginal concerns, and the diffusion of photography was limited to a small stratum of Chinese society due to its high cost of production and distribution (ibid).

The introduction of war photography and photojournalism to China was ‘associated with the expansion of Western power’ (Hung, 2011: 15). During the Second Opium War, European photographers such as Felice Beato (1832–1909) made war pictures about the reoccupation of Eight-Power Alliance in Beijing in 1900 and the burning down of the Summer Palace. Those pictures are ‘colonialist’ as ‘they reflect the mentality of a victorious conqueror’ (ibid). A few decades later, the European dominance in war photography was challenged by Chinese nationalist photographers who fought for national survival and sought to transform the country into a modern nation-state. The Russo-Japanese War in 1904 was the first political event thoroughly covered by an illustrated Shanghai biweekly (ibid). The public demand for war images increased when China experienced social chaos and foreign invasions: the Republican Revolution in 1911, the First World War (1914 -1919), the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Civil War (1945-1949).

The Japanese invasion in 1937 stimulated news coverage and war image making. Perceived as reality itself, war photography reshaped China's visual culture from visual expressionism to realism. One news photo during this time period entitled ‘A Chinese Baby amid the Wreckage’ was world famous. Taken by Wang Xiaoting (1900-1983), an American born

Chinese photojournalist, the picture depicted a crying and bruised baby sitting on the platform of South Train Station in Shanghai after the bombing. Published in the *Life* magazine (October 4, 1937), it became a symbol of China's suffering under Japanese atrocities and gained world-wide sympathy towards China's war efforts. 'The extreme situation of war and the need to expose war atrocities pushed the realism of photography to the forefront of modern communication in China' (Wu & Yun, 2007).

In time of war, photographs do not only record the events but serve as propaganda as well. Pictorial magazines associated with political parties emerged in China in the 1920s. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), founded in 1921, quickly recognized the great potential of photographs and print media in propagating its ideology and a socialist revolution (Ho, 2009). During the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), Chinese war photographer Sha Fei (1912-1950) and his colleagues launched the *Jin-Cha-Ji Pictorial* on July 7, 1942. He played a significant role in transforming the pictorial magazine into a tool of propaganda through depicting the Eighth Route Army's resistance against the Japanese and portraying the socialist revolution. 'Sha Fei left his mark not only as a Communist photographer but also an important propagandist...he helped propagate Communist values and the vision of socialist way of life.' (Ho, 2009: 53). Sha Fei created a huge body of wartime photographs and left a legacy of combining photography's potential for art, documentary and propaganda in China's photography history (Ho, 2009).

Heroism was a major theme in the war photographs during the Sino-Japanese War and the Civil War. During the Chinese Resistance against Japan, the Chinese press established 'heroic resistance' and unity as the dominant narratives in the treatment of the war to maintain morale, even in the face of China's defeats and retreats (Coble, 2010). Another theme is the victimhood. Reporters covered Japanese brutality to arouse Chinese Salvationist sentiment and to gain sympathy for China's cause overseas. Ironically, only with the resurgence of Chinese nationalism in the reform era, particularly after 1989, did Chinese publications emphasize Japanese atrocities and victimhood as central to the memory of the war. 'Emphasis on victimhood is a key component of the nationalist mentality being constructed by the Beijing government' (ibid). Regarding the Civil War images, Gu Di, an 81-year-old Chinese war photographer and photography archivist, published a collection entitled *Recorded History of Photography in Red China* (Zhongguo Hongse Sheying Shilu) in 2009. More than 100 Chinese photographers' work, a total of 970 photos, are included in the

collection covering the time period from 1937 to 1949. The scene of three big battles during the Civil War – Liao-Shen, Ping-Jin and Huaihai, as well as PLA (People's Liberation Army) soldiers charging towards the Nationalist army were captured. The photos portrayed an image of heroism, bravery, self-sacrifice, persistence and glory of Chinese soldiers and masses under the leadership of CCP. Photographers emphasized the unity of politics, newsworthiness and aesthetics (or art). As Gu Di noted, 'Photography in the liberated areas lasted only a decade but it was the most glorious, the most magnificent, the most sacred, and the most inspiring time period in the history of Chinese photography. It was in a stage that integrates revolution, militancy and unity of thoughts.' (Li, 2010)

After the new China was founded in 1949, China experienced a few more wars and border conflicts such as the Korean War (1950–1953), the Sino-Indian War (also known as the Sino-Indian Border Conflict, 1962), and the Sino-Vietnam War (also known as Defensive Counterattack against Vietnam in China, 1979). The photographs about the border conflicts in the peacetime portrayed the bravery and selflessness of China's people's army in defense of the country's sovereignty integrity and the peace of people's life as well as the violence and atrocity of battles (Liu, 2006). 'Our photographs represent the state's just stance. We take the photos for the interests of nation and state. Chinese sovereignty and land shall not be invaded by other countries. This ideology inspired my war photography,' said Liu Tiesheng, a photographer who covered the two border conflicts in the 1960s and 1980s. (Liu, 2011)

I have charted a brief history of China's war photography evolution from the late 19th century to the 1980s. The main characteristics of Chinese war photography can be summarized as 1) Chinese photojournalists played a mixed role of war photographer, soldier and propagandist. 2) the main themes of the war images were nationalism, heroism, self-sacrifice, and atrocity/violence of war. 3) Politics, the national and state interests in particular, played an essential role in the ideology of Chinese war photographers. 4) Chinese war photographers pursued the photograph's propaganda, historical, aesthetic and news values.

From the 1990s to the present day, Chinese war correspondents were posted overseas to cover news from international hotspots such as Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya driven by media commercialization, professionalization, and the development of digital technology (Zhang, 2013). There are few English literatures that look into this new phenomenon.

Chinese journalists and photographers, like their western counterparts, wrote their war experiences and published autobiographies, e.g. Tang Shizeng (nick named Donald Duck) of Xinhua News Agency, Lvqiu Luwei of Phoenix TV, Qiu Yongzheng of Global Times. They also gave speeches at universities and wrote articles to reflect and address the issues with contemporary war photography such as the roles of photographers, how to be a professional war correspondent, the use of advanced technology in the contemporary warfare, risks in the war fields, comparison of Western and Chinese war photographers. But nearly all the writings are personal, sporadic and scattered that lack a systematic analysis.

The existing limited Chinese literatures on war photography indicate that contemporary Chinese war photojournalists tend to associate their roles to the state interests in the global context. China's media policy is to break the western monopoly in the media discourses that shape and influence the world's public opinion and make China's voices heard on the international stage. Such policy is echoed and implemented by Chinese photographers. Zhao Jianwei, a war photographer of Xinhua, covered Iraq in 2003. His photograph titled 'American troops ambushed by grenades' won internal awards at Xinhua. 'It is an exclusive news photo. AP, AFP and Reuters do not release any photos on this news. My photo has been published by more than 90 Chinese newspapers and relayed by international news agencies.' (Zhao, 2006) 'What made me proud of is that it breaks the monopoly of the Western media in war photography,' Zhao states, 'I believe Chinese news media shall be present in all international affairs. Excellent war coverage serves the country and enhances the media organization's influence.' (ibid) Chinese war photographers also compare themselves to their western counterparts. In 2012, Tan Weishan of Southern Metropolis Daily who volunteered to go to Libya in 2011 posted an article titled 'why are there no war photographers in China' on Sina Weibo (equivalent to Twitter), which caused a debate. Apart from the fact that China is not a participant country in the conflicts, Tan attributes the lack of war photographers in China to risks, policy constraints and journalists' beliefs and values. He states, since the founding of new China in 1949, none of China's war photographs has any important impact on photography or has promoted the civilization (Chen & Chen, 2012).

Against this backdrop, this paper will study Chinese contemporary war photography with a focus on photojournalists' perceptions, ideologies and practices. Research questions posed in this study are:

RQ 1: What roles do the Chinese war photojournalists think they play?

RQ 2: How do the Chinese photojournalists depict wars and conflicts overseas?

RQ 3: What do they think of the essential issues such as realism, truth, aesthetic values and ethical issues?

## **Research methods**

This research employs two methods to collect data and conduct analysis: semi-structured interviews and semiotic analysis. The researcher conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with four photojournalists from a state news agency in China from April to May 2014. All these four are in their 20s or 30s and have covered conflict spots such as Israel-Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, Libya and Syria. Two are professional photographers and the other two are press journalists who also take photos in the conflicts. Of these four, one had a BA degree in photography from a Chinese university. The other three are self-trained photographers who obtained a BA degree in Arabic or English Studies. The purpose of the in-depth interview is to find out the journalists' perceptions and ideas on the roles of Chinese war photographers, political, organisational and personal constraints in their practices, representation of conflicts, and fundamental issues about war photography. On average, each interview lasted one hour. Pseudonyms are given to each interviewee.

The unit of analysis in the semiotic analysis is photograph. The researcher requested interviewees to select two or three photographs they deem the best and to tell the stories behind the selected images. Four photos' genre, form, structure and actors in the photos are analysed in combination with the interviewees' discourse with a purpose of contextualizing the photos and revealing the photos' denotative and connotative meanings.

## **The roles of Chinese war photojournalists**

Chinese war photojournalists perceive their roles as 'transmitting news with pictures', 'representing truth objectively', and 'providing the first-hand visual documentations' from the war fields. War photographs are 'eyes of the news' that 'truthfully represent the brutality of the war and the greatness of humanity.' Differing from the text-based news coverage, photo coverage in the Internet-based visual age is more direct and it 'reflects the war impact on the civilians and their lives. Visual images are powerful. They arouse people's feelings and generate readers' abstract imaginations and different interpretations.' (Personal



communication with Scot, 2014) Although China is not a participant country in the regional conflicts and wars overseas, Chinese photographers shall go to cover international affairs because they act as ‘an additional pair of eyes’ on the scene and cover the conflicts from a Chinese angle.

Interviewees believe Chinese and Western war photographers play the same roles but their journalistic practices in the field are different. The particular political, organisational and individual constraints Chinese photojournalists encounter have obstructed them from doing their jobs fully and well in the same way as their western counterparts.

Politically, war photography is related to state interests. As employees of China’s state news agency, photojournalists are government employees who ‘represent China’s state interests and the government’s standpoint’. Their work is influenced by the government. Since China does not directly involve in the regional conflicts, such political impact is minimal. But some photos may be censored for political reasons.

‘What impressed me most is that I took a photo of an Egyptian national flag. There were two blood-tainted hand prints on the flag. It was meant to oppose the shooting of militaries towards civilians. I felt this photo was really good. But after I sent the photo to the newsroom, I was told that this photo cannot be disseminated. I had no idea if there were any documents in writing to ban this kind of photos. I called the newsroom and the editor said they are particularly cautious about the use of national flags. This photo might be used at other news or photo agencies. They consider different things,’ said Tom. (Personal communication, 2014)

Organisational constraints such as organisational policy, organisational resources and conflicts between photo editors in the newsroom and photojournalists in the field are the biggest barriers to the Chinese photojournalists. They do not come to the front lines as close as the Western photographers due to safety concerns. The policy of the news organisation the interviewees work for is to put personal safety at the top priority, which imposes constraints on photographers’ access to highly risky locations and hinders them from producing competitive photos. Such policy is applicable to nearly all the Chinese news organisations. As Robert Capa said, ‘If your pictures aren’t good enough, you are not close enough.’ The distance from the front line determines the different representations of wars and conflicts through the camera lens. While the Western photographers may depict cross-fires, battlefields and soldiers at the frontline, Chinese photographers focus on the aftermath of the wars and

conflicts. Scot thinks there are no war photographers in China because Chinese correspondents are state designated personnel and they have to prioritize personal safety over the photos.

‘China has no war photographers. It depends on how you define war photographer. I know some photographers who work at the front lines and they risk their lives every day. As far as I know, none of Chinese journalists has been working on the front line all the time or facing the dangers of being killed day by day. We shall not be taken as war correspondents. We are journalists who have been to the war fields.

Photographers come closer to the frontline than the print journalists but we do not stay at the front lines all the time. The organisation won’t allow us. We are state designated personnel. Our personal safety is the most important.’ (Personal communication with Scot, 2014)

Tom shares similar opinions with Scot and further suggests that the Western photographers are more committed and professional than the Chinese photographers. ‘Many organisations deliver a message, i.e. no photo is worth your life. We understand it. This is your choice. When you choose the personal safety, you can’t get something special,’ said Tom.

‘In terms of roles, Chinese and Western photographers do not make many differences. But our work attitude and work approach as well as the industrial status-quo are lagging behind. Compared to the Western war photographers, we keep a certain distance from the war scenes and concerns more about journalists’ safety...In Libya, two excellent western photographers were killed in March 2011 when they conducted interviews in Misurata. We usually stay in the city that has been completely controlled by one of the warring sides, which is comparatively safe. They (Western photographers) usually go to the scenes where the two sides have the most cross-fires. It is closely related to their commitment and professionalism. They think that is what a war photographer shall do rather than taking photos of aftermath. They transmit what is actually happening. However we usually cover the aftermath impact. There is a gap due to many constraints and factors. Sometimes it is our news organisations’ demands and sometimes it is our inexperience,’ said Tom. (Personal communication, 2014)

A war photojournalist does not work single-handedly but needs institutional support and organisational resources. The limited length of the news organisation’s presence in the

conflict areas and their limited resources and network prevent journalists from obtaining access to certain information and images. According to interviewees, the state news agency started to post war photographers to Israel in 2002. During the Israel's Pillar of Defence Operation in 2012, 'AFP got approval to shoot pictures of war planes taking off. When Israeli war planes were bombing Gaza, AFP was able to obtain the information. However, our news agency has been in Israel for only more than 10 years. We were unable obtain such information; hence the photos we shot were definitely different,' said Sam.

In addition, photojournalists at the frontline and the photo editors in the newsroom sometimes have clashes over the use of photos. At the news agency, some young photo editors who have a university degree in the study of a foreign language are not professional photographers and they may never have been to the war zones. They are likely to follow the suit of international news agencies in the time of breaking news events. Their selection or rejection of some photos are not convincing to the photojournalists.

'He (photo editor) has no idea which photos are valuable in wartime. In many cases, he does not know the significance and background of the story. In 2010, the Turkish international rescue team went from Istanbul to Gaza when Gaza was besieged. We knew in advance that they were going to come to Gaza on 31 May. Israel said they were going to stop them. We went into Gaza two days before their arrival, waiting for them on the coast. Something happened on the sea at night. Israelis boarded on the ship and shot a few people dead. In the early morning, Hamas sent ships to receive the rescue team and had a cross fire with the Israelis interceptor boat. We took photos right away. At that time, even Reuters and AP staff did not arrive at the scene yet. We submitted photos to the editor but he did not use them. He must think the event was not important because AP and Reuters did not disseminate any photos. AP and Reuters started to post photos after lunchtime. Only then did our editor start to use our photos. Why can't we disseminate photos before AP or Reuters? This is the conflict between the frontline journalists and the editors in the newsroom,' said Taylor.

(Personal communication, 2014)

Individually, the lack of experiences and training hinder Chinese war photographers from taking great photos. Chinese resident correspondents usually stay in a foreign country or region for about three to five years. Those from domestic commercialised media stay in a place for a much shorter time period ranging from a few days to a few months. 'They take

some photos and produce some shallow coverage,’ said Tom. Such come-and-go in the conflict zones makes Chinese photojournalists inexperienced in shooting war images.

According to interviewees, there are not many professional war photographers in China. Young photojournalists complain that they have not received sufficient training, mentoring and guidance from the seasoned photographers. They often read photos from international news agency and international photo agency, learn and imitate the styles of Western photographers. As a result, their work tends to be ‘Westernized’.

‘I am under heavy influence from the west. I don’t consider much from the Chinese angles. For my photos, the more they look similar to the west, the better. I attended a workshop in China. A Chinese photographer suggested that I shall read more Chinese stuff. He said I shall be more balanced. But I like it...We may have our own ways of expression but we learn a lot from the West. Experience is also important. When I was an international news photo editor, I saw many on-the-scene photos about conflicts from around the world. I thought that was easy. If I were there, I would take the same or even better photos. However after I arrived in Egypt, I find I can’t. I have no idea where and when to take photos.’ (Personal communication with Tom)

Sam thinks the Chinese photojournalists who cover international news shall apply Chinese traditional aesthetic values in their work to gain international recognition and influence. He shared his experience of taking a photo of Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem in early 2013 that incorporates Chinese cultural elements.

‘Chinese journalists who have their own unique aesthetic tastes can win the recognition from the peers. One of my shots was unrelated to the war. In the early morning of 10 January 2013, I was excited to see that Jerusalem was covered by heavy snow. It had not been snowed for four years in Jerusalem. Even if it snowed, it melted quickly under the mild Mediterranean climate. I drove to the city wall hundreds meters away from Dome of the Rock. I used the snow as the foreground and tried to capture the dreamlike touch of the Dome similar to the grand palace in heaven in the Chinese mythology of The Monkey King. At that moment, a bird was flying by. (I snapped the camera). On the next day, the Reuters chief photographer thumbed up to me. This picture was later widely circulated on the Arabic Facebook pages. The Dome is holy to the Muslims. They think the photo has the holy touch. Nobody had

ever thought of shooting the Dome that way. I am proud of Chinese traditional aesthetics,' said Sam. (Personal communication, 2014)

In sum, Chinese war photojournalists take their roles as bearing witness to the brutality and atrocity in the wartime, exposing truth, engaging with the public with photographic images, and helping the public understand and interpret the wars and conflicts. They focus on the realist approach and documentary value of the photograph. The differences between Chinese and Western photojournalists lie in the photographic practices. Chinese journalists see the institutional barriers, the news organisation's policy on protecting photographers' safety, as primary factor that limits their access to events and freedom to photograph. This is understandable because 'the picture is no good if you can't bring it back' (Roberts, 2012, p.8) and all news media are state-owned in China. Chinese journalists, those who work for national media in particular, are state employees. The loss of a journalist is not only personal but associated with the diplomacy, national image and politics. Other factors that determine how conflicts are photographed include China's non-participation in the conflict, institutional support infrastructure, organisational resources, and individual journalists' lack of experiences, expertise and training.

### **Depicting wars and conflicts**

Chinese photojournalists tend to depict wars and conflicts through portraits, i.e. featuring soldiers, prisoners, casualties, old people and children, and the impact of wars on people's lives rather than the battlefields, military actions, breaking events or landscape. They have their own photographic styles, angles and personal preferences. For instance, Tom said, 'I like taking photos of the quietness amongst the chaos. For instance, in the crowds of demonstrators, I'll select someone who stands out and focus on his particular features. In this way, he can be differentiated and isolated from the crowd.' 'What interests me most is how the long-term conflict impact the ordinary people's lives in the war-ridden areas. They are my targeted subjects...I like taking portraits. News with people is touching,' said Scot. For Sam, he likes to witness the war from the angle of ordinary people because all the wars are disasters to the ordinary people. (Personal communication, 2014)

Readers' acceptance and responses are also considerations in war photography. Taylor said he tried to avoid the fighting and horrific scenes and to focus on small potatoes and their stories.

‘In Basra, I saw many collapsed buildings and separated limbs. Our readers range from kids who can read to the old in their 60s or 70s. If I only represent the heroism of soldiers and the broken pieces of limbs, it is difficult to represent the whole process of war. It also arouses readers’ inappropriate responses. So I try to use small potato’s little stories to reflect the situation and the background of the event,’ said Taylor. (Personal communication, 2014)

Taylor took a photo in Iraq in which a little girl stood on the ruins, looking at the photographers pitifully and begging for water. Many kids had no shoes in Iraq and wore the shoes made from the mineral water bottles. Whenever they saw journalists, they reached out their little hands. ‘I like this kind of stories. Both children and old people can accept it. The photo does not put you off with blood or make you feel disgusted at the first sight,’ said Taylor. ‘(I want to) capture the most natural and truest moments.’

Apart from the personal preference and readers’ acceptance, Chinese photojournalists’ focus on portraits is caused by the changing nature of contemporary wars and conflicts. Unlike the conventional wars in the past, weapons such as precision missiles, invisible fighter planes, ground-to-air guided missiles are widely used in the contemporary wars. The warring sides do not see each other. Under this circumstance, photojournalists find it difficult to capture the bombing or fighting scenes. Hence they concern about the panic, shock, fear of civilians after the bombing. Sam describes his experiences in covering Israel-Palestine conflict below.

‘When the two sides were in conflict, I take photos of the injured and the place that had been attacked. For instance, during the Pillar of Defence Operation, I was driving while listening to the radio programme in Hebrew. Somebody else’s voice would come in and alerted audience where the siren was ringing. The red warning meant the rocket was heading to that place. If you wanted to be at the scene immediately, you had to keep listening to the radio. Whenever you know the siren was ringing nearby, you got to drive over there immediately. There were many sirens. Sometimes I was unable to hear the host’s voices. After I arrived at the scene, the situation turned out to be different. I searched the entire town but I was unable to find the exact place that was attacked. The rockets fired from Gaza were home-made. The militarists in Gaza took down the street lamps, filled in with gun powder and fired it out. It was uncertain where the rockets would fall... It’s like drawing lottery. You never know. In most cases, the (Gaza) rockets would not land in the city. The siren would ring whenever

the rockets were coming in the direction of the city. They often landed on the wilderness. You could not find the exact place. It is like taking photos of lightning in summer. What I concern most are people's panic and civilians casualties after the bombing,' said Sam. (Personal communication, 2014)

Chinese photojournalists' tendency to depict conflicts through portraits of civilians is reflected in their actual work. In this study, each interviewee was asked to supply two or three photos they deem the best shots. Of all the nine single photos that have been collected for this study, eight photos are portraits about civilians, soldiers and prisoners. The remaining one was landscape. Seven depict the Israel-Palestine conflict and the other two about the Libyan conflict.

Scot is a print journalist and a self-trained photographer. He was based in Gaza from 2011 to 2013. He takes many portraits of children since Children are most innocent who are likely to touch people's heart and make valuable photos. In Gaza, Israelis bombings and Hamas' inhuman and religion-based rule have caused chaos and children's death. Religion and the lack of education have influenced the growth of children.

On 20 November 2012, two-year-old Suhaib Hijazi and his four-year-old brother Muhammad were killed in Gaza when their house was destroyed by an Israeli missile strike. Scot went to the same funeral as the Swedish photographer Paul Hansen did whose picture won the World Press Photo of the Year 2012.



Figure 1

Figure 1 shows an old Arab man's back silhouette against the blue sky. In the lower part of the picture, the man turns his head to the left and slightly downwards. His eye socket and mouth are dark under the shadows. His hair and moustache are black and grey. He wears a light coloured grid shirt. The background is clear blue sky with light white clouds. Two white tail gases of F-16 Fighters are crossing right above the man's head. This photo was taken near the end of the funeral. The group of men who carried the bodies of the two dead children reached the cemetery and they were about to put the bodies in the tombs. At this moment, Israelis fighter jets appeared above the crowds' heads. Many people were terrified. They looked upwards and they were afraid the fighter jets may drop bombs. Meanwhile, they did not stop work at hand and continued burying the children. 'I saw an old man who attended the funeral. He lowered his head. I squatted, pulled in the tail gas of the fighter jet and the old man's head, and placed the focus on the tail gas. I want to create a vignette effect of the old man and make him symbolic. The image is vague. It represents all the Palestinians,' said Scot. This picture demonstrates how photographer sees the Israel-Palestine conflict: The Palestinians live in fears every day and worry about the Israelis missiles falling from the sky anytime and getting them killed. Using vignette and the light control, the photographer makes the old man's eye socket look dark. People can't see his face clearly. The Arab man symbolises Palestinians. The black eye and the sad look on his face represent the Palestinians'



feelings. The image also demonstrates the imbalanced power with a grey-haired unarmed man wearing ordinary clothes on the ground and the world's most advanced fighter jets hovering over his head. The iron and steel above is in sharp contrast with the blood and flesh below. 'These two subjects in contrast are worth my use of wide angle. The death of the two children is a sad thing. On top of it, the fighter jets fly over. This picture is most impressive to me. It is symbolic. It has the effect I want to achieve,' said Scot.



Figure 2

Figure 2 was a blind shot Scot took at the same funeral. A crowd was walking through the street. In front of the crowd, an old man was holding up a boy's dead body wrapped up in white and green cloth. The boy's face looked serene and he seemed to be sleeping. The old man with beard was frowning with his eyes closed behind glasses and his mouth half open. It seems he was shouting or chanting something. Right behind him, a young man in his 20s reached out his right hand to touch the boy's body. The crowd, trees and buildings are in the background. The whole picture is tilted slightly to the right side. 'I am satisfied with this photo because it was a blind-shot. I did not see through the finder frame. Although the two figures in the front are evenly levelled, things in the back and the ground are uneven. People

are tilted. At that moment, the left side of my camera was higher than the right side. I took the shot from upside down,' said Scot. While taking photos of funerals, photographers usually walk backwards at the foremost front, facing the crowds, so that the pictures can be visually powerful. 'This picture presents a decisive moment. The old man did not shout. He was very sad and weeping. I am satisfied with this photo because the light was excellent and I like its style. People are in action but I tried to make the photo look quiet. You can look at the photo in peace. It recorded what actually happened at the moment. Hundreds of people were there. The atmosphere was sad indeed,' said Scot.

Taylor is a print journalist and he also takes many photos of children to express people's hope for peace. He likes children and fathers a two-year old. One night in April 2010, there was a power blackout in Gaza after Israelis air raid ended. In Figure 3, an unnamed Palestinian woman and her granddaughter held candles for vigil. The seven or eight-year-old girl held the portrait of her father who had been detained by Israel for a long time. Against the dark sky, two white candles flickered and left shadows on the faces of the old woman and the little girl. Both of them look sad and stern, pleading for help to free the father. The guttering of the candle left traces on their fingers and the two ignored the pain. 'The little girl held her father's portraits high so that we can take photos of her father's face clearly. Israel said they were negotiating with Hamas. The little girl wanted her father to be freed and come back home. (The picture) demonstrates people's hope for peace. The look on the little girl's face is most memorable to me,' said Taylor.



Figure 3

Tom works as photo editor in the newsroom and a photographer when he is on overseas assignment. On 22 October 2011, he entered Misurata in Libya and took photos of Gaddafi's corpse in a cold storage. Figure 4 shows the close-up of Gaddafi's face. In the photo, Gaddafi's head lays on a tainted cushion. His dirt-covered face is tilted to the right. He looks old, tired but peaceful. A blanket covers his body up to his head. On the right corner of the photo is a blurred arm. On the left corner, somebody's shadow can be seen. It suggests that many people were surrounding the body of the dictator. '(Chinese people) must be sympathetic towards Gaddafi. But I try to present (the fact) objectively. The thing has happened and we record the history,' said Tom. 'Some things are valuable to capture, for instance, the corpse of Gaddafi...I took many shots from different angles.' Scot's shots of Gaddafi were distributed for both domestic and overseas customers via the news agency but different photos were used. For the Chinese customers, the photo that depicts a few people surrounding and looking at the corpse was used. In that photo, Gaddafi's face was vague in distance. Meanwhile, the close-up of Gaddafi's face was used for overseas distribution in English. 'We have more room to distribute photos overseas. People within China are unable to see them,' said Tom.



Figure 4

The four photos discussed above show that the main themes of Chinese photojournalists' war photography are the sufferings of civilians and hope for peace. They tend to use portraits to depict the casualties, death and funerals and to demonstrate the impact of wars and conflicts on the life of ordinary people, children in particular. By recording this aspect of realities in the conflict areas, the photos arouse the Chinese people's collective feelings of sympathy towards civilians who are caught up in the wars and conflicts. The Chinese wartime images follow the current world's aesthetic patterns for war images that focus on the pictures of wartime suffering, deaths of soldiers and civilians (Zelizer, 2004). The images also correspond with China's pursuit of peaceful diplomatic policy. China's Middle-East policy is to mediate rather than directly getting involved in the conflict. One of the basic objectives of this policy is to safeguarding world peace and to promote common development. (Liu, 2008)

### **Realism, aesthetic values and ethical issues**

Regarding the concepts of realism, objectivity, truth and balance, interviewees believe that they only exist in a large number of photos. Realism is possible because photographers are able to capture the moments of reality and record what they witness. But it is impossible to achieve absolute objectivity, truth and balance because of the conflicts complexity and photographers' access constraints and limited angles. For instance, China exercised its veto against UN resolutions on Syria based on its non-intervention principles during the Syrian crisis. Chinese photojournalists are confined in the government controlled areas and unable to go to the other side of opposition forces for the concern of personal dangers. What photographers capture and present through the lens of camera is superficial truth.

'In the breaking event, photojournalist as a third party has no way to know the truth. When we covered the Pillar of Defense Operation, we received criticism. People who are based in Israel criticized my colleague based in Palestine. They said he is pro-Palestine and he always covers news from the Gaza people's stand points. He did not see that the rockets fired by Hamas also injured Israeli people. They had to fight back. Some people think I take photos from the Israeli standpoint and I am justifying Israeli's initiation of conflicts. We do not mean to involve in the conflict and stand on one side. We have our own constraints. At our news agency, we have explicit territory principles. Some cover news from this side and others cover news from the other side. All we can see is the superficial truth. We cannot bypass the constraints. You need to

look through all the photos to get close to the truth, objectivity and balance,’ said Sam. (Personal communication, 2014)

The binary of news value and aesthetic value in photography was debated in China as early as in the 1980s. Some interviewees believe news value prioritizes over the aesthetic value. The most important thing is to make photos understandable to audiences. Others believe the news value and aesthetic value are equally important like the two sides of a coin. Photographers use different approaches and styles to express themselves or deliver a message.

‘For photojournalists who work for the news agency, news value always goes first. Today some journalists may feel that traditional news reporting causes visual fatigue and they start to use artistic approaches in news photography. I feel the most important thing is that the audience shall be able to understand a photo. The best photo does not need the caption to tell a story. Many photographers focus on the use of light and shadow and pursue the surreal effect. News photography shall place news value in the first place. Aesthetic values shall come after the news value,’ said Tom. (Personal communication, 2014)

Unlike most of interviewees who stress news value, Taylor believes news value and aesthetic value are equally important in wartime journalism. It depends on individual photojournalists’ personal preference and interests.

‘The news value and aesthetic is like a person’s left and right hands. It is about individuals’ personal preference and personal interests. For instance, someone take photos in order to win an award or for some other purposes. Someone likes to take artistic photos. No matter what kind of scenes, he wants to make the photo look artistic. I am not a professional photographer. I try out everything and then reflect on the photos I take. The news value and aesthetic values are equally important,’ said Taylor. (Personal communication, 2014)

Regarding ethical issues in war photography, interviewees unanimously oppose the staged photos, addition and/or removal of objects from the picture. The staged photos may look more powerful and prominent but what they present is not real. For instance, in Palestine, a child was dead and lay on the ruins. A photojournalist may put some rocks on his body and expose his hand from the rocks in order to achieve certain effects. ‘Personally I don’t agree with it. What we present shall be real instead of faking in order to attract eyeballs,’ said



Taylor. In 2014, AP banished freelancer Narciso Contreras for altering a photo (removing a video camera from the bottom-left corner of the photo) taken in Syria on 29 September 2013. Such behavior, in the interviewees' words, has 'altered the facts' and it is unacceptable.

The Chinese news agency the interviewees work for does not have explicit ethical codes on the 'grey areas' such as shooting of corpses and nakedness. Photojournalists handle those subjects with care and avoid excessive blood or violence. They shoot corpses within the limit that the readers can accept.

'The deceased is the most respectable in my mind. We can't shoot corpses. During the Pillar of Defense Operation in 2012, there were many photos about dead children. Some were held by their parents in arms. The camera lens was posed right in front of them. The photo that won the 2013 World Press Photo (WPP) award is acceptable. The focus was not on the dead children. It mainly represents the sorrow of the relatives. Although the corpses appear in the picture, the corpses are not very striking. At that time, a great many of photos were taken directly about the dead bodies. It is a grey area whether the corpses shall appear in the photos. It is difficult to regulate explicitly. Although some photos contain dead bodies, the readers may feel they are acceptable because you are not propagating violence and atrocity. It is a grey area. It is up to the photojournalist in their practice. Personally I don't accept it,' said Sam. (Personal communication, 2014)

In sum, Chinese photojournalists believe in realism because photographers are able to capture the moments of reality and record what they witness. But it is difficult to achieve absolute objectivity, truth and balance because the conflicts are complicated and photographers encounter access constraints and limited angles. There are no explicit ethical codes in the newsroom. Photojournalists follow the implicit ethical codes and moral standards in the post-production editing and photographing corpses.

## **Conclusion**

This article has surveyed the historical development of Chinese war photography and studied the ideology and practices of four young Chinese photojournalists who work at a Chinese state news agency. Four single photos have been analyzed to reveal the subject-matter of the Chinese war images and their denotative and connotative meanings. In conclusion, contemporary Chinese war photojournalists take realism as their main aesthetic and

ideological doctrine ‘in the sense of capturing the moment without authorial manipulation and deep emotion, in the sense of projecting individual observation and feeling onto the images.’ (Wu & Yun, 2007) They have sought to witness, record and interpret the conflicts, to provide visual evidences and to stress the naturalism and symbolic power of war images. They depict the wars and conflicts mainly through portraits of soldiers, civilians, the old and the young. The visual representations of civilians’ sufferings and hope for peace correspond with China’s peaceful diplomatic policy and non-intervention principles. The war images also elicit sympathetic public emotions and collective memory in China. In the visual age, Chinese photojournalists have the tendency of westernization in terms of photographic techniques. Meanwhile their depiction of wars and conflicts as observers are influenced by internal political, organizational and individual constraints as well as the changing nature of contemporary wars. They reject the myth of journalistic objectivity, truth and balance, prioritize the news worthiness over the aesthetic appeals, and apply inexplicit ethical codes in their photographic practices.

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