

Artist Statement: My Anguish-Laden Photographic Record of Tibet

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My love for taking photographs is related to my father. At a young age, I became very familiar with his camera, a Zeiss Ikon, which was the kind where you use your right eye to look through the tiny viewfinder. He used this camera to take hundreds of photos of the Cultural Revolution in Lhasa—the smashing of Buddhist statues, struggle sessions, and temples and monasteries reduced to horrific scenes of violence by foreign barbaric forces. I actually used my father's camera early on, but only to take photos of my classmates having fun. But traditional cameras require a lot of skills, such as setting the focal length, figuring out the exposure time, developing negatives, and so forth. I didn't have the patience to learn these skills and so I gradually gave up on the idea of becoming a photographer.

Then, when I was in my twenties, just as my father had saved money to buy a camera from a store on Barkhor Street, I also saved my money to buy a single lens reflex camera and a few long and short lenses, as well as some color or black and white film. After that, I took countless photos during my travels in Tibet. For instance, I once had an idea to make a book of photographs titled *In the Land of Kham*. Kham is one of the three main regions of Tibet. I hung a camera around my neck, filled my backpack with 150 rolls of film, and traveled for over four months from northern Kham to southern Kham. Although I was ultimately unable to complete this non-fiction book, I had the opportunity to photograph Tenzin Delek Rinpoché and the school he ran for orphans and poor children. I also took a group photo of all the teachers and students. Later, after he was persecuted by the Chinese Communist authorities and died in prison, these photos became precious records.

Over the years, whether I was using film cameras, digital cameras, mobile phones, or even GoPros, I have never stopped taking photographs. Nor have I ever stopped writing with a pen or computer. In fact, the meanings of both of these processes for me are intertwined, as they are both a means of recording, and I use them to bear witness, to expose the hidden truth. Ultimately, I want to tell the story of Tibet through the Tibet I photographed. I have no interest in other places. Although I have spent a lot of my life living in Chinese cities, I have neither feelings of delight nor threads of sadness for them.

I read the book *Another Way of Telling*, co-authored by the writer John Berger and the

photographer Jean Mohr. Berger writes about photography as a form of memory, and I found this sentence by Berger particularly relevant, as it accords with what I feel in my heart: “Photographs, like human memory, are equally dependent on and against the passage of time.” However, Mohr noted that “One cannot take photographs with a dictionary,” so I probably don’t need to explain more about my photography. After all, a good photo speaks for itself.

Some of my favorite subjects are ruins and post-apocalyptic landscapes similar to ruins. I have always been deeply interested in the ruins found all over Tibet and the ruins scattered throughout Lhasa. Almost all of them, with few exceptions, are the result of political violence during Tibet’s contemporary history. So how does my interest in ruins manifest? Besides writing, it’s with photography. In addition to writing, I want to use my “ruin photography” to reveal the occupied, obscured, and invisible history and geography of Tibet.

Within the ruins, one finds every kind of minutia: lonely flowers blooming in a dilapidated courtyard, the dried husk of a spider hanging in the collapsed section of a building, Chinese newspapers and quotations by Mao Zedong peeling away from walls to reveal murals underneath, shards of mirrors still hanging from pillars of a Buddhist hall, and so on. A montage of these photos creates an iconography of the ruins, which to a certain degree has the value of a historical document. One of the photos I took recently shows a red-billed chough standing like the last guardian on the top-most part of a broken wall of the Chokhorgyal Monastery. The Chokhorgyal Monastery was originally built by the Second Dalai Lama, and was later expanded by the Fifth Dalai Lama. It’s located in a remote area of U-Tsang near the holy lake Lhamo Lhatso and was one of the summer palaces of the Dalai Lamas. It’s dedicated to Palden Lhamo, who is the deity that protects the Ganden Phodrang, Lhasa, and the Dalai Lama. At its peak, the monastery was home to more than 500 monks. However, it was destroyed in the 1959 massacre and during the Cultural Revolution in 1966. To this day, much of its shocking ruins remain. Fortunately, those ruins have not been completely removed, thus providing a record of this tragic history. In fact, it stands as a memorial hall, bearing witness to existence during the so-called “liberation” of Tibet.

As long as you look closely at photos that are not superficial, you will find that every detail of those photos are like Tibetan ciphers, filled with unspeakable pain. The photographer Graham Clarke set out to preserve the work of early photographers of Paris. In his book *The Photograph*, Clarke writes these two restrained comments regarding Eugène Atget. “Atget saw Paris as a museum—the photograph preserved the past, and became a talismanic signal of something special, almost magical, as part of the city’s meaning.” “He seeks to carry away the evidence and insists on the power of the image to preserve the atmosphere and integrity of a lost urban scene.” How I wish my photographs of Tibet can do the same.