

Independent art publishing in China

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China's publishing landscape today remains a harsh environment, dominated by the state industry and hostile to outside intruders. A few small independent art publishers, design studios and self-publishing artists have appeared in recent years in Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Guangzhou and other cities, a series of developments that signal new directions for the future of art publishing in this country.

On 12 April, 2012, the third and, as it turned out, final edition of the *Caochangdi PhotoSpring* festival¹ was held in Beijing. The month-long event was China's only independent photo festival and opened with a series of exhibitions, presentations and discussions loosely based at the Three Shadows Photography Art Centre at Caochandi, a former industrial neighbourhood in the north of the capital. In keeping with its non-official status the festival highlighted the work of a numerous practitioners, both professional and semi-professional. One of the more unassuming of these was a small display of independently published art books organized by the micro-publishing house Jia Zazhi Press (假杂志) from Beijing.

The one-day exhibition-cum-bookstore took place outside the Fodder Factory Café at the edge of Caochangdi and featured more than 50 titles, jumbled together on couple of old tables that had been loaned by the café's owner. Most of the books were naturally photo-based and ranged from highly designed limited editions and self-promotional portfolios to handmade zines of only a few dozen copies made using a photocopier and stapler. To most foreign eyes the display may have looked more like a car boot sale or stand at a village fair. Yet in a country where the printed page is closely policed, the more or less neatly stacked books possessed a novelty and edge that did not seem lost on the crowd of young students and artists that came to visit.

Today virtually no record of this event exists and like many of the guerilla-style books that were featured, it has left little or no trace. Nevertheless, the general spirit that it seemed to capture: transient, contrary, often non-commercial and determinedly non-conformist continues to ebb and weave through a publishing world that for the largest part remains

under tight official control.

According to a report in the *China Daily Online* in July last year,² in 2012 the combined revenue of China's publishing industry, including both digital and traditional publishing, totaled more than 1.5 trillion yuan (US\$ 247 billion). Precise figures are difficult to pin down yet in the same year a report in the *International Herald Tribune* ('Bookworms of China')³ estimated that in 2011 more than 7.7 billion books were published in the country, making it the world's largest publisher by volume. Today, the overwhelming majority of these are produced by state-run publishers, distributed by state-run companies and sold at state-run books shops.

On the one hand, the purpose of such bureaucratic ring-fencing is to control the flow information, yet at the same time, it also serves as an effective way to shield state profits from large foreign publishers hoping to enter the mainland market. Penguin China has been established since 2005 and Harper Collins set up its own office in Beijing the following year, but even such major international players have found it difficult to make serious inroads beyond building good will. In an online interview in 2011, Jo Lusby, who was responsible for setting up Penguin's operations in Beijing, admitted that the company's activities have so far been limited to publishing less than 10 titles per year, most of which are Chinese classics in translation.⁴

Yet if the barriers are high for large, well-resourced foreign publishers they are mountainous for small presses and independent publishers within China. Without the funds or connections to acquire a domestic book registration number, access to which is controlled by government-owned publishers, they are unable to gain distribution in state-run bookstores. And without access to a foreign International

Standard Book Number (ISBN), which requires a company to be registered overseas, they are also unable to distribute their books internationally. The result is that virtually all non-official publishing in China takes place on a micro level, often out of backrooms and bedrooms or small studios, and typically focuses on the activity of individuals or small common interest groups, normally in the local area. For the most part, this means the major cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, although the internet often plays an important role in spreading word-of-mouth buzz. Despite the formidable obstacles, however, for a new generation of artists, designers, writers and publishers, the indie book is a real-world assertion of potency and intent as well as being a heavily loaded symbol of creative independence.

3030Press

My own experience of small publishing in China roughly coincides with the emergence of this movement and is heavily slanted towards the sorts of projects that I have done with 3030Press, a micro publishing house that I set up in 2005 in Hong Kong. The first of 3030Press' books was *3030: New Photography in China* (2006)⁵, a survey of 30 young photographers from the mainland aged around 30, which I edited and compiled with the help of collaborators including the critic and curator Ou Ning (欧宁) and Professor Gu Zheng (顾铮) of the School of Journalism at Fudan University in Shanghai. This was followed in 2008 by a similar survey of work by 30 new and emerging graphic design practitioners from China entitled *3030: New Graphic Design in China*.⁶ The book was edited and compiled by the award-winning graphic designer Javin Mo (毛灼), founder of milkxhake design unit in Hong Kong.

These two groups of artists and designers represent a very wide range of activity, yet it was clear during the course of producing these books that numerous similarities existed between them, both in attitude and approach: in their attempts to blend local and foreign ideas, in their use of new technology and in the way that many seemed to move back and forth between the worlds of business and fine art. Above all, they were united by a similar enthusiasm to create work that was both unmistakably new and distinctly Chinese. Moreover, for a variety of different reasons many either already were or were later to become active in independent book publishing.

Two of these are the photographers Ren Hang (任航) and Lin Zhipeng (林志鹏), also known by the



3030: *New Graphic Design in China* cover. Image courtesy of 3030Press.

online handle 223 (a reference to the lovelorn cop in Wong Kar-wai's classic indie movie *Chungking Express*). In many ways both of these photographers are typical of many new-generation self-publishers in mainland China. Both are in their late 20s and both have gained a strong underground following in China for their explicit photography inspired by China's gay scene, particularly the gay scene in Beijing (Lin Zhipeng is originally from Guangzhou but moved to Beijing in 2007). Many of their images first appeared online in personal blogs and websites and were only later edited for publication as limited editions of only a few hundred copies each for private sale between friends, online, and in the few independent bookshops that exist in Beijing.

In large part these projects are extensions of online practices and virtual identities created on Chinese social media websites such as Douban and Weibo. The rough-and-ready style of the photography underlines their original purpose. In many cases their subjects are friends and lovers, dressing up and hanging out or fooling around in the bedroom. The candid tone suggests a window through which the reader observes lives lived in a flux of hedonistic self-indulgence. Yet ultimately their work is as much about projecting an enhanced version of reality as it is about documenting true lived experience. In effect, these are the China's indie-book equivalents of punk:



Imagine Wong, *Marriage Notices* (2005). Back cover art from *3030: New Graphic Design in China*. Image courtesy of 3030Press and the artist.

confrontational, deliberately provocative and concerned with the intensity of the moment. For such ambitious young artists, a physical book, out in the real world, is an essential accessory and an appeal for validation of the kind that no number of online 'likes' can deliver. It proclaims arrival as a serious artist, yet consistent with many of Punk's pioneers, such publications are also acts of brand management and career advancement.

Both photographers have been prolific publishers in the past few years. Lin Zhipeng has self-published a series of three limited edition collections of his own works since 2007 under the title *My Private Broadway*. In 2012 he published two new photo collections entitled *Versatile* and *Satellite of Love* which are mostly re-edited collections of images previously published elsewhere. Ren Hang's debut book, *Ren Hang 2009–2011* (2011), is a sizable hardback volume filled with full-page images compiled from his website. Two additional compilations have followed entitled *Ren Hang: Nude* (2011) and *Ren Hang: Room* (2012), which have further burnished his image as China's bad boy photographer.

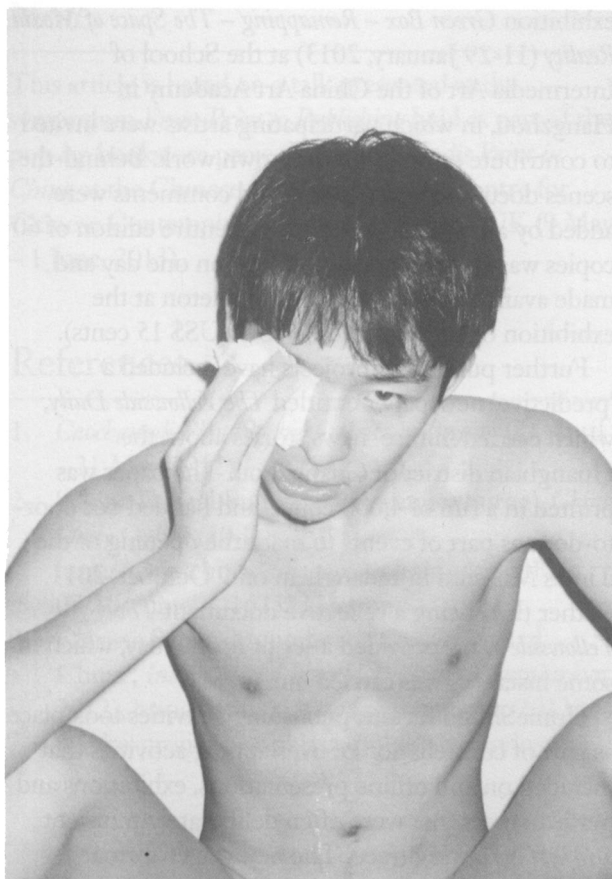
A more reflective attempt to describe personal experiences that do not fit easily within official

narratives can be found in the photography book *Bees* (2011), published by the Beijing artist Chen Zhe (陈哲). The project is based on a series of images that explore the practice of self-harm among small groups of mostly young girls, but also boys, in Beijing. The collection earned Chen the 2011 Inge Morath Award and grew out of a previous series that Chen made between 2007 and 2010 while studying at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, entitled *The Bearable*, which she did as a way to document and confront her own self-inflictions.

Like the works by Ren Hang and 223 the images contained in *Bees* are often explicit and the book gains much of its urgency from the harrowing nature of its subject and the subculture that surrounds it. The power of *Bees* lies in its sense of authenticity and Chen's unblinking documentation of punctured flesh and raw wounds can sometimes recall images from a medical textbook. In its pages the viewer is confronted by a world where conventional codes of behaviour have broken down with tragic consequences.

All of these books, in different ways, broach the idea of the private self: the exploration – or creation – of alternate identities and personal narratives that sharply deviate from the norm. In so doing each of these books address ideas of what is accepted, and acceptable. For while economic reform and the accumulation of personal wealth have done much to break down traditional communal patterns of living, Chinese society remains highly conservative and exploration of individual identity is often viewed with suspicion. To flip the pages of these books, therefore, is to flirt with transgression. As a result of this, however, either out of necessity or by design, these books represent spaces that are largely cut off from the broader society they inhabit – distinct, self-contained and inward looking.

Conversely, the photo books published by micro-publishing house JiaZaZhi Press are based upon the transformation of the wider landscape of China over the past couple of decades. Jia Zazhi was founded in 2010 by Yuan Di (言由), who graduated from Beijing International Studies University in 2005 and began his career in publishing as a journalist at Modern Media Group, China's largest privately-owned periodicals publisher. In 2010 he set up Jia Zazhi Press as a way to promote the work of his friends, many of who were press or magazine photographers. His first title was a compilation of work by the photographer Sun Yanchu (孙彦初) entitled *Obsessed* (2011), which documents life in the industrial towns of Henan province in China's central plains. The region is one of the country's most populous and poorest, where many people depend on jobs in mining and heavy industry. Sun's work focuses on the



Ren Hang, *Untitled* (2011). Cover art from *Ren Hang 2009-2011*. Image courtesy of the 3030Press and the artist.

appalling human cost of the race for industrialisation. Similarly, books such as *They* (2012), in which the press photographer Zhang Xiao (张晓) records the effects of overpopulation in his adopted home of Chongqing, and *Going Home* (2013), a compilation of images by the photographer Mu Ge (木格) that documents the experience of communities displaced by construction of the Three Gorges Dam, underline Jia Zazhi Press' commitment to headline social issues.

Such a specific focus may be accidental rather than the result of any planned publishing agenda and is perhaps more a reflection of Di's own circle of friends and colleagues. Nevertheless, the books by Jia Zazhi Press plug into an established tradition of social documentary photography in China that reaches back to the late 1970s and early 1980s and the creation of unofficial photo groups such as the April Photo Society and the New Wave Movement, which sought to stimulate social awareness and change through their documentation of the rural poor. That the material published by Jia Zazhi Press should remain outside the mainstream today gives a clue to its sensitivity and tacitly points to official reluctance, or inability, to deal with the losers in China's race to superpower status.

Experimental graphic design studios

While challenging in their subject matter, these publishing projects make little serious attempt to challenge the conventions of the book as an object. For young graphic designers, however, books and magazines offer a different set of opportunities and their approach issues from a different set of priorities, where stewardship of content, normally illustration, photography or typography, can sometimes seem to be of secondary importance to the formal issues of design and production.

One of the studios most active in self-publishing is the Beijing-based joyn:viscom, which was founded in 2005 in Beijing by the graphic designer Jiang Jian (姜剑) and a group of design school friends. Today, the studio has a team of 16 in-house designers and editors and includes clients such as Condé Nast and Nike. Joyn:viscom's success is based on an a hybrid of Chinese creative identity in which local tastes and palettes are blended with an eclectic range of international motifs and styles, from New York hip-hop and Japanese Manga to Scandinavian typography and Korean horror. This aesthetic is best seen in a series of design compilations entitled *Plugzine*. The first of these, *Plugzine #1 – Where to Start?*, was published in 2005 and was elaborately packaged in a stitched-and-printed envelope accompanied by badges, stickers, cards and cut-outs, and quickly achieved iconic status among China's indie design community.

The studio has published a further three editions of *Plugzine* and has remained remarkably consistent in its attempts to re-imagine the idea of the art book while also keeping one eye on the commercial and promotional advantages to be gained from such publishing activity. In 2011 Joyn:viscom set up a subsidiary studio called JV Lab as a way to separate its art and design book publishing from its commercial projects.

Graphic design studios such as these, which include SH TYPE from Shanghai, Xiao Mage Chengzi (小马哥 橙子) in Beijing, and Imagine Wong (黄立光) in Shenzhen understand the value of the art book as a tool to maintain and enhance their profile in a crowded and increasingly competitive marketplace. In one sense their highly inventive publishing projects also act as billboards that are intended as much to gain credibility with opinion-leaders in China's design community as to attract business from the growing pool of commercial clients that are keen to assert their own version of "China cool". In this way private entrepreneurship, coupled with a measure of deregulation, has proved to be a powerful stimulant to

publishing, both mainstream and underground.

The magazines and periodicals market in particular has boomed in the past decade and its effect has been that of a giant incubator for young creatives (editors, writers, designers and photographers), who are able to find jobs after graduation and polish their professional skills while working on personal projects in their spare time. Yet as much as the media industry enables, it can also impoverish, and while the past few years have seen the emergence of a new generation of highly trained and technically gifted creatives, it has also seen increasing priority given to the needs of the market above all else. The results can sometimes feel like a fascination with the superficial and a dampening of serious attempts to challenge or critique the status quo.

HomeShop

An unusual exploration of publishing as an opportunity for social critique was undertaken by HomeShop, a loose alliance of artists, critics and designers in Beijing whose publishing projects overlap with various other activities that explore ideas about community and the boundaries between public and private. HomeShop operated from 2010 until December 2013, and was initiated by American-Chinese artist Elaine Ho (何穎雅) and the Beijing artist Xiao Ou Yang (欧阳潇), originally based in a shop-front residence in one of the city's traditional *hutongs* in the centre of the city. The space, self-described as an 'indie culture transmission studio',⁷ acted as both an ideas exchange for a shifting group of creative collaborators and a springboard for site-specific events that reflected – and reflected upon – the micro politics of the immediate community and wider city.

An occasional newspaper published by the group entitled *Biertiao Leaks* neatly captured their focus by reporting quotidian events from the surrounding alleyways of the *hutong*. Each issue carried items by several dozen HomeShop and guest contributors that were gathered, edited and laboriously screen-printed in-house on a single day before being handed out around the neighbourhood. Congruent with the group's other performance-based activities the entire process, from production to distribution, assumed the character of a 'happening' based upon, and taking place within the local community. Three editions of *Biertiao Leaks* were published between December 2010 and December 2012 in print runs of approximately 50 copies each.

A similar newspaper project entitled *GreenBox Leaks* was published as a one-off project as part of the group

exhibition *Green Box – Remapping – The Space of Media Reality* (11–29 January, 2013) at the School of Intermedia Art of the China Art Academy in Hangzhou, in which participating artists were invited to contribute critiques of their own work. Behind-the-scenes documentation, gossip and comments were added by a HomeShop team. The entire edition of 60 copies was screen-printed by hand on one day and made available in the style of a feuilleton at the exhibition opening priced RMB 1 (US\$ 15 cents).

Further publishing projects have included a 'predictive' newspaper entitled *The Yellowside Daily*, which carried 'future' news stories about the Huangbian district of Guangzhou. The paper was printed in a run of 4,000 copies and handed out door-to-door as part of events to mark the opening of the Times Museum in Huangbian on 9 October, 2011. Rather than being a reflective document *The Yellowside Daily* provided a script for the day, which in some instances was carried out.

HomeShop's various publishing activities took place as part of constellation of overlapping activities that included on and offline presentations, exhibitions and performances that were often deliberately transient and left no lasting trace. The newspaper format therefore provided convenient documentation while also coinciding with the group's interest in temporal, collaborative activity. At the same time such projects also offered playful criticism of the conventional mainstream news media in China and broad official narratives.

Today the twin forces of the state and the market appear unassailable. It is true that rising economic opportunities have opened a few small windows of opportunity yet huge obstacles prevent most independent publishers from maintaining a coherent and ongoing programme. Rather, indie publishing is highly fragmented and practised on an ad hoc basis, as chance and funding allows, often in conjunction with other activities, and seldom with the object of making a profit. The fact that it does continue, however, and in such a variety of forms underlines its powerful appeal and potential as a means of education, a device for self promotion, a strategy for criticism and even as a mode of social organization and mobilization.

As China's publishing world continues to develop, new opportunities will inevitably present themselves. The danger is that either through the actions of authority or the cacophony of the market place, these voice will be drowned out. Yet each new publication increases the store of possibilities. In describing spaces outside prescribed convention, indie books offer alternate value systems that can reveal new ways of thinking and being, and in so doing increase the potential for change.

Note

This article is based on a talk presented at the symposium *From Print to Publishing* held as part of the pop-up bookstore project *Tumbler – Indie Print in China* at the Chinese Arts Centre (now Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art), Manchester, UK (9 May – 1 June, 2013).

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