The Development of Chinese Pictorialism and Its Implications for Contemporary Photography

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the rapid development of contemporary photography, pictorialism still holds a significant share in the Chinese photography market. This article reviews the development trajectory of pictorialism and conducts a textual analysis of classic pictorialism artworks to explore the new pictorialism ideas in China. At the same time, it uses the method of comparison, this study focuses on the development of pictorialism as the research subject, conducting a comparative survey of contemporary Chinese photography, particularly commercial photography. It identifies the issues in contemporary Chinese photography—namely, the mutual constraints between the aesthetic level of mass photography and commercial photography, as well as the singularity of commercial photography. Based on the exploratory process of pictorialism's development, it proposes suggestions for addressing the problems in contemporary Chinese photography.

Keywords: Chinese Pictorialism, New Pictorialism, Pictorialism, Contemporary Photography, Commercial Photography, Photography Aesthetics

1. Introduction

In the context of the rapid development of contemporary art, where contemporary photography has gradually integrated as a medium into the trend of contemporary art, studying the history of photography has become particularly important, especially pictorialism, which is considered the first artistic thought in photography. This study focuses on the development of pictorialism, particularly the development of Chinese pictorialism. Certain discrepancies were discovered through a review of the growth trajectories of pictorialism between the East, or China, and the West. As a result, it was found that during the development of Chinese photography, there was a dearth of research on the "ontology" of photography. Furthermore, there is a reduced degree of public awareness for the aesthetics of photography in China due to the country's somewhat outdated creative aesthetic education. Therefore, the problem of the Chinese commercial photography market stagnating and failing to make advances has

been caused by the mutual limitations between the aesthetic standards of mass photography and commercial photography. This study, through textual analysis of Chinese new pictorialism, derives methods for the transition from traditional pictorialism to new pictorialism in China. By comparison, this study proposes methods to address the stagnation of contemporary Chinese photography, particularly contemporary Chinese commercial photography.

2. Literature review

2.1 Definition of Pictorialism

In 1886, Peter Henry Emerson (1889) published " Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art," marking the birth of pictorialism. Pictorialism, in a narrow sense, refers to a form of photography that closely resembles classical painting in both form and content. It was the first photographic ideology after the invention of photography, exploring the possibilities of photography as an art form（Zhou & Song, 2020）.

In a broad sense, as an artistic expression form, the concept of pictorialism is applied to photographic works with painterly expressiveness, including fashion photography, commercial photography, advertising photography, etc. Any photographic work that imitates the content and formal characteristics of a painting can be called a pictorialism style (Zhao, 2021).

2.2 The Aesthetics and Techniques of Pictorialism

In terms of photographic techniques, pictorialism photographers typically use soft-focus lenses to mimic the light and shadow effects and creative forms of classical painting. Through extensive film post-processing techniques and multiple exposure techniques, the final photographic works present a visual effect that is infinitely close to the art of classical painting (Jin & Wang, 2021).

2.2.1 The complete imitation of high-art photography

In the latter half of the 19th century, when the question of whether photography could be considered art was hotly debated, photographers, in order to prove the artistic nature of photography to the whole art world, emulated classical painting theories, methods, structures, contents, etc. Photography theorists and practitioners proposed the first photographic concept—pictorialism (Zhao, 2018). During the High Art period, pictorialism works were created through manual intervention, such as using wet plates with lower light sensitivity, low-quality optical accessories, or even deliberately dirtying the lens and shaking the tripod to create a blurred image, which seems like a painterly visual effective artwork. In terms of content, the photography works of the high-art period fully imitated classical painting subjects, such as religious themes and still-life objects. Models dressed in theatrical costumes would mimic knights and literary works, while photographers arranged the shooting scene and the photography lighting to capture photos similar to the content of classical

paintings. In the later stages, photographers processed the negatives in the darkroom using techniques such as combination printing and carbon printing（Rosenblum, 2012; Zhao, 2018）, making the photographs present a completely painterly visual style, the only difference between photographs and classical painting was the production tools—camera or paintbrush. Pictorialism during the period of high art had certain innovations in terms of creative techniques, concepts, and aesthetic heights, such as combination printing, storytelling imagery, picturesque genre photography, etc. However, it completely overlooked the essential characteristics of photography and was criticized by the art community for its total imitation of classical painting.

2.2.2 The "realistic" of naturalistic photography period

In the late 19th century, the rapid development of photographic equipment and the simplification of photographic processes led more and more people to have a camera to take photos and self-proclaimed a photographer, which meant a decline in the overall quality of photographic works. During this time, Peter Henry Emerson (1889) proposed the theory of "Naturalism", which argued that photography should not be overly manipulated, on the contrary, it should reflect the truth of nature. Emerson (1889) believed, "Nature itself is full of surprises, and it is only when you depict (capture) it as it is that it becomes most perfect."

Photographic works from the Naturalism period primarily focused on rural landscapes and portraits, distinguishing themselves from classical paintings in terms of content. Additionally, they no longer employed manual interventions such as film reprocessing, showcasing the unique artistic characteristics of photography. However, in the presentation of photographic works, naturalist photos still endeavored to mimic the visual representative features of classical painting, achieving light and shadow effects akin to those in classical painting art（Rosenblum, 2012; Zhao, 2018）.

2.2.3 The Expression of post-Pictorialism Impressionist Photography Trends

From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, after undergoing the influences of "high-art photography" and "Naturalistic Photography," Pictorialism entered its third phase: Post-Pictorialism period. In 1892, representative photographers and theorists of high-art photography, such as Henry Peach Robinson and George Davison, established the photographic organization "The Linked Ring" based in the UK. Almost simultaneously, the Photo-Secession, represented by one of the most famous American photographers Alfred Stieglitz, was founded in the United States in 1902. During the post-pictorialism period, western photography organizations and photographers, especially the Linked Ring and the Photo-Secession, began to examine the issues of pictorialism, including its contents, techniques, and aesthetic concepts, which had previously neglected the essence of photography. Various artistic methods and new techniques were explored and applied, leading pictorialism into the post-pictorialism period. The representation of post-pictorialism

is impressionist photography. The characteristics of Impressionist photography are dark tones, rough textures, and decorative qualities, but it lacks a sense of space（Zhou & Song, 2020）. At that time, new optical lenses and film technologies could produce clearer and more detailed photos than ever before. However, the aesthetic paradigm of the post-Impressionist period was that, compared to the clarity of chiseled and carved images, a certain degree of blurriness in photos was more aesthetically pleasing. Blurriness allowed enough space for aesthetic interpretation. In terms of content, impressionist photography works are more inclined to capture tranquil landscapes, serene human figures or portraits, and still-life objects, using subjects in photography that align with traditional painting preferences to bring photography closer to art (Zhao, 2018; Nan, 2021）.

The exploration of photography in the post-pictorialism period, overall, has a promoting effect on the exploration of the essence of photography. Although issues such as staged shots, superficiality, and artificiality still exist, the collision of photographers' ideas and the flourishing of diverse photographic works gradually nurtured the emergence of a new photographic aesthetic, laying the foundation for the later advent of "straight photography."

2.3 The Evolution of Pictorialism in China
2.3.1 The ethereal beauty of Chinese traditional pictorialism

At the beginning of the 20th century, when photography was booming in the West, photography, as a controversial method of artistic creation, set off an artistic movement in China that used photography as a medium. This artistic movement consciously pursues the mood of classical Chinese paintings in terms of content in the midst of the decline of Chinese traditional paintings. A group of photographers and theorists, such as Liu Bannong, Chen Wanli, Lang Jingshan, and Chen Fuli, emerged in China who consciously combined photography with Chinese traditional painting.

Liu Banong (2000) mentioned the basic visual style of Chinese traditional pictorialism, namely " vivid expression and bold outline," in "Bannong Talks About Photography." " vivid expression and bold outline is to express the author's artistic conception through photography. Artistic conception varies from person to person and changes at all times and places, but to express it, it must be anchored. The things that are anchored are originally lifeless, but once the author anchors the artistic conception onto them, they become alive (Liu, 2000, p.13)." Represented by Liu Bannong, Chinese pictorialism theorists integrated the concept of "artistic conception" from traditional Chinese painting into the "blurry" visual style of photography. They demonstrated the rationality of this visual form and its alignment with the "directness" characteristic of the photographic medium, forming the basic visual style of "artistic blur" in Chinese pictorialism (Pan, 2019; Fan & Zheng, 2022). At the same time, they

both advocate for traditional Chinese painting composition principles, such as the interplay of emptiness and fullness and the use of contrast and support.

As one of the most renowned iconic photographers in pictorialism in China, Lang Jingshan combined photographic techniques with traditional Chinese painting theories—"vitality and spirit, brushwork and structure, depicting objects as they are, coloring according to type, composing and arranging, and transferring and copying"—to create montage photography, which imbued pictorialism with a sense of national identity in China (Ai, 2021; Ma, 2023). Lang Jingshan (1958, p.30) once said, "When I create montage photographs, I hope to use the most realistic and authentic photographic tools to integrate the inherent principles of Chinese painting. with a concept of 'goodness' and practical value, I think I can create "beautiful artworks." In the production process of montage photography, sketches are drafted during the creative process, and materials are added based on the sketches when developing photos. Through production techniques like collage and editing, the montage photography artwork is completed finished, fully borrowing from the creative process of traditional Chinese painting in terms of tone, composition, perspective, and meaning. Essentially, it uses the camera as a medium, which seems like using brushes as the medium to create a traditional Chinese painting. In summary, Montage photography breaks the fundamental attribute of "directness" in photographic media (Ai, 2021; Ma, 2023). Compared to the photography of Liu Bannong and other members of the "Guang Society," which is based on direct observation by the human eyes, montage photography completely relies on the impressions obtained after viewing with the human eyes as its material. Therefore, it breaks through the principles of perspective in photographic optics. Contemporary critics believe that Lang Jingshan's montage photography "strictly speaking, only employs the techniques of photography, without the fundamental characteristics of photography, namely the sense of immediacy and the recording of details... Essentially, it should belong to the category of painting-like artworks rather than photography in the strict sense."(Bao, 2004)

Figure 1. The slanting wind and fine rain do not require a return.
(Source: Lang Jingshan, 1960)

In addition, Chinese photographers such as Wu Zhongxing, Zhang Yinquan, Chen Wanli, and Chen Fuli, who are known for their pictorialism artworks, have also created pictorialism artworks with a conscious national identity by using different photographic techniques. For example, Chen Fuli created the photographic art technique "shadow and painting combined" through the combination of photography and traditional Chinese painting. "Shadow and painting combined" refers to Chen Fuli's collaboration with other artists to jointly create artworks, specifically inviting other artists to inscribe poetry or add traditional Chinese paintings to the photographic works (Hu, 2016). This technique combines the realistic style of photography with the profound artistic conception of traditional Chinese painting, expressing the artistic conception that photography alone cannot convey, thereby playing a crucial role in enhancing the overall effect.
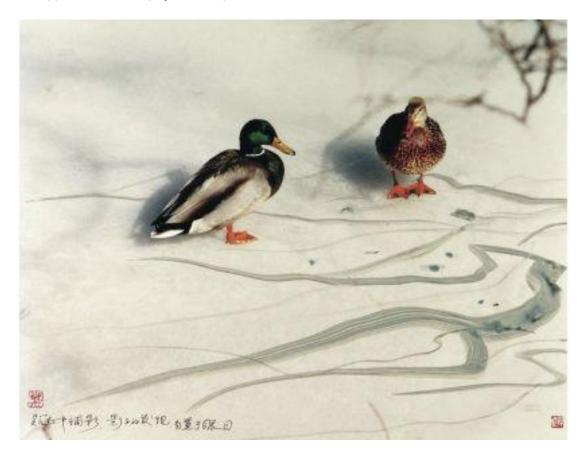
Figure 2. Shadow

 (Source: Chen Fuli, 1980)

In summary, whether it is Chinese photography theorists like Liu Bannong who proposed the basic visual style of "artistic blur" in Chinese pictorialism, or Chinese photographers like Lang Jingshan, who created the unique technique of montage photography, and Chen Fuli, who developed the photographic art technique of "shadow and painting combined", all of them were imitating and paying homage to traditional Chinese painting. They pursued an aesthetic photography style with a sense of artistic beauty conception, making photography in China distinctly nationalistic.

2.3.2 The Contemporary Artistic Attitude of New Chinese Pictorialism

In 1937, during the full-scale war of resistance by the Chinese nation, pictorialism, which pursued aestheticism, disappeared from the public eye. Instead, direct photography, which matched the brutal battlefield, took center stage in Chinese photography. It wasn't until the reform and opening-up period of China that salon photography from Hong Kong entered the public eye. At that time, pictorialism with a distinctly Chinese style was once again in high demand, flourishing in local Chinese practice.

Following the 1990s' practice and contemplation, the term "Chinese New Pictorialism" was first precisely defined by Chinese photography community scholars at the "Lang Jingshan Cup" Chinese New Pictorialism Biennale in 2016. This led to a

number of scholarly discussions and the formation of a system of Chinese New Pictorialism with a distinctively Chinese style of image expression (Zhang & Tian, 2022). Contemporary Chinese photographers such as Yao Lu, Yang Yongliang, and Hong Lei abandoned the traditional Chinese pictorialism form that pursued aestheticism and distanced itself from social reality. They used the inherent attribute of photography's medium, "directness," as the basis for their creation, consciously integrating pictorialism into the contemporary art context, parodying and deconstructing it, and presenting a new pictorialism style that reflects the contemporary Chinese cultural landscape and social reality (Nie, 2018; Ai, 2021).

Chinese new pictorialism is guided by traditional Chinese aesthetics and centered on contemporary Chinese cultural landscapes and social realities. It abandons the value orientation of aestheticism, conceptualizes the vivid expression and bold outline of traditional Chinese painting, and forms a "new pictorialism" style with contemporary Chinese national characteristics, bringing deeper social significance to new pictorialism artworks (Nie, 2018). Yao Lu's "Chinese Landscape" series(Figure 3) is a highly representative artwork series of new Chinese pictorialism. From a distance, this artwork series resembles the distant and ethereal landscapes of Song Dynasty landscape paintings, but up close, it reveals construction debris covered with greenish-blue dust cloths. Through contemporary digital imaging techniques, Yao Lu inherits the vivid expression and bold outline of traditional Chinese pictorialism, conceptualizing the idea of green mountains and clear waters to reflect on the construction of modern Chinese society. This is contrary to the value orientation of traditional Chinese pictorialism, which advocates the pursuit of beauty as the highest goal. At this point, photographers no longer evade reality through the vivid expression and bold outline of aestheticism. Instead, they confront reality, raise social issues, and provoke deep thought through the expression of new pictorialism photography artwork.

Figure 3. Chinese landscape.
 (Source: Yao Lu, 2008)

Yang Yongliang's "Landscape of Mirage" series(Figure 4) is another highly representative work of new Chinese pictorialism. Viewed as a whole, this series work resembles a traditional Chinese ink painting, but upon closer inspection, one finds that the forests are not forests but rows of electric poles; the towering mountains are not mountains but highly urbanized skyscrapers, and the mist lingering in the mountains is not mist, but the smog produced by urban construction... In this way, Yang Yongliang merges modern urban elements with traditional Chinese ink painting to depict the rapid expansion of cities and the infinite compression of ecological spaces with green mountains, trees, grasses, and clear waters. Thereby this series work provokes contemporary critical reflections on ecology protection and the balance between the space of cities and ecology.

Figure 4. Landscape of Mirage.
(Source: Yang Yongliang, 2007)

Chinese pictorialism photographers of the new generation, such as the ones seen above, after being baptized by the anti-traditional and anti-aesthetic artistic attitudes of the 20th century, have taken the essence and discarded the dross of Chinese pictorialism. With a humorous attitude, they consciously continue the Chinese national tradition. They point to contemporary Chinese issues, such as the ecological environment, the relationship between humans and nature, and the aesthetics of the void... (Ai, 2021; Zhang & Tian, 2022)

Chinese new pictorialism has evolved from traditional Chinese pictorialism, showcasing the essence of traditional culture and the spirit of the new era in a more mature visual form in contemporary times. The subject matter of many works is landscapes, and the development of works with a landscape theme frequently reflects actual ecological challenges. The idea of "harmony between humanity and nature," which maintains that "only by placing the individual within the boundless universe can one appreciate the grandeur of all things becoming one (Zhang & Tian, 2022)," lies at the heart of the traditional Chinese ecological civilization. Chinese new pictorial photographers, represented by Yao Lu and Yang Yongliang, produce landscape photographs in the vein of the ancient world using contemporary digital processing technology, offering insights into the ecological society of today. It is impossible to separate their conceptual roots from the traditional Chinese notion of "unity of heaven and humanity." The total relationship between the person and society, as well as between the nation and the country, is shown in Chinese new pictorialism works, which also express traditional Chinese moral and ethical ideas through critical thought. In Chinese new pictorialism, ecological protection is a major area of critique because it is a global and significant concern. In terms of artistic conception, Chinese new pictorialism works follow the "freehand" production approach of traditional Chinese painting; nevertheless, they transcend the documentary tactics of traditional images by embracing modern creative creation methods like collage and appropriation. They challenge landscape-themed works, encourage public contemplation of contemporary ecological civilization, raise public awareness of environmental

responsibility, and urge public involvement in environmental conservation through these works.

In conclusion, Chinese new pictorialism, which draws from traditional Chinese culture, visually carries on the tradition of Chinese classical painting, reconstructs visual experiences through its creative techniques, and completes the paradigm of artistic expression that aims to create a new kind of Chinese culture through the revival of Chinese culture. It is an example of how to use photography as a medium to spread images of modern Chinese culture.

3. **Research Methodology**

Initially, the literature review approach was employed to systematically organize the historical background of pictorialism, elucidating the connections among pictorialism, Chinese pictorialism, and modern Chinese pictorialism. Secondly, the text analysis method was employed to examine classic representative artworks from both the Chinese pictorialism and new Chinese pictorialism periods. Through text analysis, the nature and characteristics of Chinese pictorialism and new Chinese pictorialism were verified. Finally, using comparative analysis, a comparative study of the development of Western pictorialism and Chinese pictorialism was conducted, revealing the differences in the development processes of pictorialism in the East and West, and analyzing how these differences have influenced the development of contemporary photography. Additionally, the comparative analysis method was similarly applied to compare Western contemporary photography and Chinese contemporary photography, identifying the problems in Chinese contemporary photography, particularly in commercial photography, and the insights gained from them.

4. **Results**

Despite more than a century of ups and downs, pictorialism—the original photographic ideology—has managed to hold its position in the field of photographic art. Whether it is the homage of traditional Chinese pictorialism to Chinese classical painting or the parody and deconstruction of Chinese national traditions by new Chinese pictorialism, there have been improvements in the content of photographic works, shifting from the pursuit of an elusive aestheticism to addressing the dilemmas of contemporary life and civilization. However, essentially, the intrinsic attributes of photography, "temporality" and "directness," have been erased (Ai, 2021). For example, in Hong Lei's work "Autumn in the Forbidden City," the term "autumn" no longer refers to the conventional autumn or a specific moment of autumn. Similar to this, the temporal element of photography is ignored in the works of Yang Yongliang and Yao Lu, who instead focus on the present now, which is a universal contemporary.

For example, in Yao Lu's work, "Chinese Landscape," although it also points to landscapes, the signifier of the image does not refer to the objectively documentary Chinese landscapes but rather to the "landscapes" that carry a strong subjective meaning after being arranged and reorganized by the artist.

In conclusion, Chinese pictorialism faces challenges related to its own evolution and transformation. Despite the fact that it has created new ideas for pictorialism as a result of attitudes toward contemporary art, photography has continuously failed to recognize the key quality that sets it apart from other forms of art: "directness." It has ignored the temporality of photography and abandoned its objectivity, becoming an art with a vague definition.

5. Insights into Contemporary Chinese Photography

5.1 The current state of contemporary photography aesthetics in China

Looking around the contemporary photography market in China, although there are contemporary photography masters like Huang Qingjun and Ruan Yizhong with highly individual artistic styles and avant-garde photographers like Feng Li and Ren Hang with distinct artistic perspectives, the aesthetic level of photography among the general public in China is still uneven. The commercial photography market is chaotic, and the aesthetic standards in various photography fields, such as commercial advertising photography, commercial portrait photography, and even fashion photography, are largely still at the early levels of pictorialism. For instance, professional portrait photography, which is currently highly popular, has traditionally transformed photographs into "pictorialism" images, whether it is used for weddings, portraits, or children's photography. Through extensive pre-shoot setups, makeup, and lighting techniques, these commercial professional photographers imitate Western oil paintings and traditional Chinese paintings in both content and form. They then alter the subjects and even make things out of nothing using contemporary post-processing techniques like Photoshop, producing "fake, grand, and empty" images in the end. These commercial professional photography businesses use the aforementioned techniques to produce an unrealistically attractive image for their clientele. One could say that the contemporary Chinese photography market, especially the commercial photography sector, to cater to popular aesthetics, has ignored the essence of photography's "temporality" and "documentary nature," effectively treating photography as a tool similar to a paintbrush. This has caused contemporary Chinese photography to stagnate or even regress to the era of pictorialism in this flourishing age of global photography.

In fact, a major contributing factor to the chaotic and even regressive situation of the contemporary Chinese photography market is the uneven, aesthetic standards of popular photography. Nonetheless, public aesthetics and the photography market are

intrinsically linked and have an impact on one another. The contemporary Chinese photography market, especially the commercial photography sector, is always blindly pursuing material value, neglecting the educational significance of photography as an art form for the public. In many facets of life (including WeChat public accounts, Xiaohongshu, and other new media), the public is exposed to "photos" that disregard the essence of photographic art and consider photography as a tool. The public cannot find the threshold to enter the aesthetic realm of photographic art. Because of this cycle, public photography aesthetics cannot be improved, which results in continuous chaos in the modern Chinese photography market. Artists and their works are not given the attention they deserve, which causes Chinese photography to stagnate.

5.2 The Medium Attributes of Contemporary Photography and Its Aesthetic Reform in China

5.2.1 The medium attributes of contemporary photography

Photography has undergone over a century of development, roughly experiencing four stages in terms of photography aesthetics: pictorialism during the post-classical aesthetic period; modern photography during the modern formalist aesthetic period; conceptual photography and conceptual art characterized by ideas during the postmodern aesthetic period; and contemporary photography corresponding to the aesthetics of globalized pluralism（Zhao, 2023）. In just over a century of development, photography has evolved from being an independent art form distinct from other arts (the pictorialism period) to pursuing the ontology of photography (the modern photography period), to gradually integrating into contemporary art, merging with other art forms through pastiche, appropriation, and irony in postmodernism, becoming a medium of artistic expression (the conceptual photography period and the contemporary photography period). The medium attributes of photography are greatly manifested in contemporary photography (Zu, 2021). Photography has gradually shifted from pursuing the representation of the real world to the "representation of representation." (Crimp, 2008)

Beaumont Newhall (1982), the founding figure of the Museum of Modern Art Photography Department, a pioneering curator, and an American photography historian, articulated the aesthetic stance of photography itself in his seminal work "The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present Day." As a proponent of the medium, he asserted that photography holds an artistic status on par with painting, is not limited to being merely an object for general appreciation, and incorporates various aesthetic philosophies into the judgment of its value based on the cognitive experience of the photographs themselves. Contemporary photography has long since transcended the realm of photography as a standalone art form, integrating into contemporary art and becoming a medium of expression within it.

5.2.2   The Aesthetic Reform of Contemporary Chinese Photography

Although the transformation of contemporary photography has led the field of contemporary photography art in China to complete the revolution of photographic art, the lag in aesthetic education in the Chinese commercial photography market has caused the Chinese commercial market to stagnate. Fields such as portrait photography and wedding photography are still stuck in the era of pictorialism and have not yet entered the exploration of the essence of photography. The absence of modern photography and conceptual photography stages has led Chinese commercial photographers to be unable to grasp the essence of contemporary photography's understanding of globalized pluralistic aesthetics. Despite adopting the compositional strategies, shooting techniques, and artistic expressions of contemporary photography, photographers appear to be merely copying without a basic understanding of the aesthetics of contemporary photography, producing hybrid and unidentifiable photographic works. Despite their lack of artistic training, consumers in the Chinese commercial photography market embrace and promote the "neither fish nor fowl" photography pieces put forth by Chinese commercial photographers because they seek out contemporary artistic expressions in the age of globalization and excessive consumerism.

In conclusion, the field of commercial photography in China has directly eschewed the intermediate stages and moved straight from pictorialism to contemporary photography, whereas the field of contemporary Chinese photography has embraced the full transformation of photography in the history of art aesthetics. As a result, the Chinese photography market is now divided into two distinct segments. Thus, it can be concluded that while the commercial photography industry has become more well-known among photography consumers, Chinese consumers of photography are unable to find an aesthetic connection with current Chinese photography art and photographers are not acknowledged. As a result, even though the aesthetics of contemporary Chinese photography have changed, it is unable to advance.

5.3 Revelation

Tracing the development of pictorialism in China, it is not difficult to find that it has been in the same predicament as contemporary Chinese photography, from the traditional Chinese pictorialism's relentless pursuit of the ethereal "aesthetic of the void" in both content and form to contemporary avant-garde photographers proposing the "new pictorialism concept" that continues the traditional Chinese aesthetics while embodying the contemporary human landscape and social reality of China. Chinese pictorialism has gone through a difficult and long journey and is still in the process of exploration and development. Similarly, contemporary Chinese photography is in a difficult period of development, with the aesthetic level of popular photography at a

stage of "empty beauty," akin to traditional Chinese pictorialism. At this time, a group of Chinese photography practitioners should emerge, breaking the shackles of contemporary Chinese photography, especially commercial photography, continuing the aesthetic ideas of contemporary Chinese photography, introducing new photographic methods with the essential characteristics of photography art, such as "temporality" and "documentary nature," and constructing a "new market" for photography that guides the continuous improvement of public photography aesthetics and collective progress. Such a virtuous cycle allows contemporary Chinese photography to be in a state of continuous development, from practitioners to artists to the general public.

Of course, pictorialism, as the first photographic ideology, still holds a place in contemporary photography, where the art of photography is flourishing. This is enough to demonstrate that pictorialism has a certain survival advantage. As traditional masters of pictorialism gradually age, new contemporary photographers are injecting fresh vitality into pictorialism, making it increasingly diverse. By extracting its essence and discarding its dross, this has endowed pictorialism with resilient vitality. Similarly, contemporary Chinese photography also needs diversification. Pictorialism, as a form of photographic art, should certainly be preserved. Contemporary pictorialism photographers, using pictorialism techniques, infuse their reflections on contemporary Chinese reality, thereby constructing "new pictorialism." At the same time, contemporary commercial photography needs to enhance public aesthetics, establish a new order for commercial photography, and create a virtuous cycle of mutual progress to strengthen the aesthetic education role of photography. This will foster a good environment for the diverse development of contemporary photography... Only then can contemporary Chinese photography have a long-lasting and continuous progress.

5.4 **Conclusion**

Pictorialism, as a movement in photographic art, has sparked discussions about whether photography is an independent art form distinct from other artistic mediums. Through the exploration of different photographic theories and photographers during the "high art photography" phase, the "naturalistic photography" phase, and the "post-pictorial photography" phase, the first photographic ideology was summarized, suggesting the potential for photography to become an independent art form. Western photography later underwent the development of modern photography, conceptual photography, and other stages, ultimately forming contemporary photography with diverse aesthetic forms. Comparatively speaking, China adopted the idea of pictorialism later than Western nations. In order to create an artistic genre with distinctly Chinese national qualities, Chinese artists localized pictorialism and turned it into Chinese pictorialism. As a result, many well-known Chinese pictorialism

photographers, including Chen Fuli and Lang Jingshan, came into being. Chinese pictorialism was introduced to the globe by these pioneering painters and theorists. However, Chinese photography, particularly the commercial photography sector that arose in the market economy environment of the twenty-first century, did not go through the stage of investigating the essence of photography and diving into photography aesthetics because of the lag in the early Chinese photography environment. A chaotic photography market, disparities in the aesthetics of public photography, and the division between art and commercial photography are only a few of the problems that have resulted from this in contemporary Chinese photography. This study, through the examination of pictorialism and the context of Chinese pictorialism, and the comparative analysis of the development status of photography in the East and West, draws insights into contemporary Chinese photography, especially Chinese commercial photography. It suggests that Chinese photography practitioners should bravely step forward, breaking the shackles of contemporary Chinese photography, particularly commercial photography. They should explore the diverse aesthetic thoughts of contemporary photography, introduce new photographic methods that embody the essential characteristics of photographic art, namely "temporality" and "documentary nature," and construct a "new market" for photography that guides the continuous enhancement of public photography aesthetics and collective progress.

From its inception, pictorialism has gone through ups and downs, from its introduction to China, where it evolved into traditional Chinese pictorialism, to the emergence of the concept of "New Pictorialism" in China. It has persisted and thrived, ultimately forming a unique genre of photographic art. Although it somewhat lacks in reflecting the essence of photographic art, it has still become nationalized under the influence of traditional Chinese culture and has shone brightly. Similarly, contemporary Chinese photography, especially commercial photography, despite many existing issues, will move towards a more diverse and brilliant future through the exploration, innovation, and reform of successive generations of emerging Chinese photographers, artists, and photography practitioners.

6. **New knowledge contribution**

This study provides significant insights into the evolution of Chinese pictorialism photography and its implications for contemporary practices. By systematically examining its development, the research identifies key characteristics and transformations, from the early adoption of traditional Chinese aesthetics to the emergence of new pictorialism in a contemporary context. This comprehensive analysis highlights the interplay between cultural heritage and modern artistic expressions, offering new perspectives on how photography can serve as a medium for reflecting social realities and fostering cultural identity.

The study contributes to the literature by elucidating how traditional Chinese pictorialism, with its emphasis on "artistic blur" and the integration of classical painting principles, evolved into new Chinese pictorialism. This transformation is marked by a departure from aestheticism toward a critical engagement with contemporary social and ecological issues. Furthermore, the analysis underscores the innovative application of digital technologies in reinterpreting traditional aesthetics, as seen in the works of Yao Lu and Yang Yongliang. These contributions redefine the boundaries of pictorialism, positioning it as a dynamic and socially relevant art form. Additionally, the research addresses the challenges facing contemporary Chinese photography, particularly the stagnation in commercial photography aesthetics. It advocates for the reintegration of photography's intrinsic attributes, such as "temporality" and "directness," to elevate public aesthetics and bridge the gap between art and commerce. By proposing a framework that combines traditional artistic values with modern techniques, the study provides practical guidelines for enhancing the educational and cultural role of photography in China.

Overall, this research enriches the theoretical discourse on pictorialism and contemporary photography while offering actionable insights for practitioners, educators, and policyma

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Interest Declaration

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During the preparation of this work, Rui Yan used ChatGPT in order to polish English. After using this tool/service, Rui Yan reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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