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Mia Yinxing Liu

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# The Surrealist and the Documentary in Chang Chao- tang's Photography

**Mia Yinxing Liu**  
Bates College, USA

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## **Abstract**

This article examines Chang Chao-tang's photography in its social and cultural contexts and reads his photographic images with a special focus on the temporal-spatial syntax at work: "superimpositions" between "the sculptural" and/over the natural, the still life and/over the transient, and so on. Through this two-pronged analysis of both the social-historical and the formal, the article addresses questions regarding how Chang's photographs manage to be both "Surrealist" and "real," and how exactly Surrealist imagery and the social documentary work together in his art.

**KEYWORDS:** Chang Chao-tang, Taiwanese photography, Surrealist photography, documentary photography, superimposition, realism, native soil

Chang Chao-tang (Zhang Zhaotang, b. 1943 in Panchiao, Taipei County) is one of the most important photographers in Taiwan, and some of his iconic pictures since his earliest working years are regarded as landmarks in the history of Taiwanese photographic art. Chang's oeuvre encompasses photography, film, television, poetry, and theater. He also does remarkable work as a historian of photography, a curator, and an educator. Beginning in the 1960s, when he was a mere teenager, Chang was seen as a prodigy showing an extraordinary talent for Modernist photography. During this early decade of his career there was a passionate interest among the Taiwanese intelligentsia in introducing and studying Modernist art and literature from the West, and Chang's exposure to Surrealist art and existentialist literature, among other subjects, became formative for his approach to photography throughout his career. Despite the evolution in both his interests and his stylistic choices, Chang's preoccupation with the Surreal and the absurd carried on. Indeed, in the exhibition titled "Time: The Images of Chang Chao-Tang," the grand-scale retrospective of his art organized by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in 2013 that provides the most comprehensive review of his work to date, the recurring term used to describe his art is "Surrealism."<sup>1</sup> The watermark of Surrealism in Chang's photographs is manifest in headless silhouettes, masked men, massively proportioned bodies of animals and humans often shown only in parts, and scenes resembling tableaux out of the theater of the absurd. However, Chang is also lauded as a forerunner for the Nativist Realist movement in Taiwanese photography, a movement that reached its heyday in the late 1970s and 1980s, calling for a return to the native soil of Taiwan and documenting Taiwan's contemporary social reality.

The topographic outline of Chang's career, therefore, maps onto the monumental twin peaks in Taiwanese modern art since the 1950s: namely, the modernist avant-garde experiments with styles and forms recognizable from high Modernism in the West, and the Nativist Realist movement with its prescriptively defined parameters in terms of both style (realism) and subject (Taiwan's local common folk). How are we to understand this apparent pendulational swing? Can "Nativist Realist" photography also be Surrealist, and vice versa? If so, in what sense? How are we to understand Chang's photography in relation to the discussion of a Modernist photography in the local context of Taiwan? This article addresses these questions first through an examination of Chang's photography in its social and cultural contexts, then through a close reading of his photographic images with a special focus on the temporal-spatial syntax at work in his pictures, what I identify

here as “superimpositions.” The series of superimpositions that are operative in the images will be discussed in detail; for instance, “the sculptural” and/over the natural, the still life and/over the transient. In effect, through this two-pronged analysis of both the social–historical and the formal, I hope to answer the question of how Chang’s “surrealist” photographs managed also to be socially critical and documentarily real. While investigating this feat of duality in Chang’s work, I hope to shed light on the ongoing discussions regarding surrealist photography in general.

### **From Surrealism to Documentary: Chang’s Photographic Art in Context**

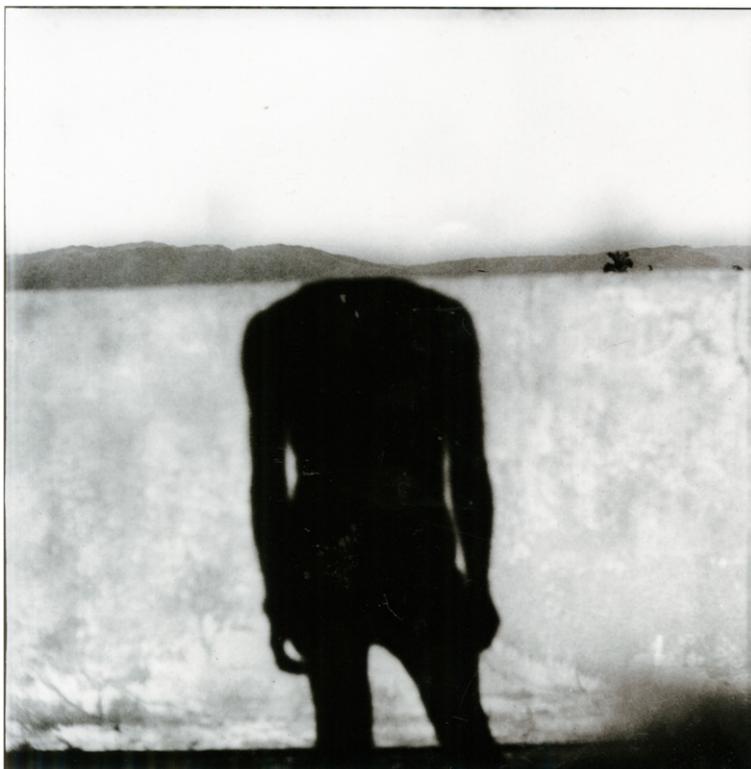
In 1959, during the summer break after junior high school, Chang made his first serious attempts in photography with an Aires Automat 120 borrowed from his brother. Before long, he joined a photographic group in Taipei, learning basic techniques from teachers such as Cheng Sun-chi. Although Chang officially majored in Civil Engineering in college, he pursued photography with great, if not all-consuming, passion. He later writes:

I must have been seriously victimized by Kierkegaard, Gide, Kafka, Camus, Dali, Magritte, Bacon, etc. as I made these pictures in the 1960s. At that time, I was utterly bewitched by their vague stories of metamorphosis, stories of how wanderers flee amidst plagues, how rebels wait outside of the castle for their trials, how human beings disintegrate, and how the world shifts its forms. I studied Engineering in college, but instead of my coursework I spent all my time studying Expressionism, Existentialism, Surrealism, and Futurism.<sup>2</sup>

In 1962, he made the famous headless “Self-portrait” (Fig. 1). Chang took this first picture by strapping the camera on his neck and standing on the balcony as the sun cast his shadow on the truncated low wall, thus creating the first “headless” picture in a series, marking the beginning of his career as an artist. In 1965, together with Cheng Sun-chi, he held an exhibition titled “Modern Photography by Two Photographers,” now widely acclaimed to herald the coming-of-age of Taiwanese Modernist photography and Taiwan’s first photographic exhibition to be labeled “Modern.” Chang printed his “headless self-portrait” on the invitation card. This exhibition was especially impactful at the time when the overall taste and critical culture in Taiwan was dominated by Salon photography. Represented by photographers such as Lang Jingshan, the mainstream and officially sanctified Salon taste championed archaic elegance and crafted pictorialism modeled after traditional Chinese painting, especially landscape painting.<sup>3</sup> Under these

**Figure 1**

Chang Chao-tang, *Panchiao*, 1962.  
Photographic print, size  
unknown, 1962.

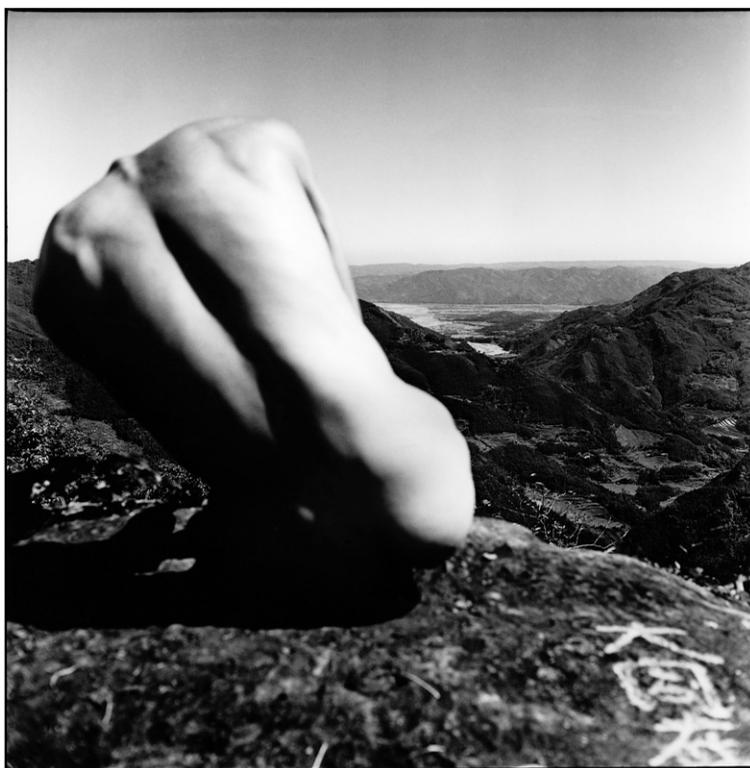


circumstances, Chang's powerful and stark images filled with existential angst and youthful accusation against the present were shocking and even horrifying to many viewers at the time. Some welcomed Chang's experiment. They contrasted works such as the nude body on top of a mountain (Fig. 2) with Lang Jingshan's work, and claimed Chang's images were so modern and fresh that next to them Lang's works would become dusty antiques from the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Others were taken aback by the unexpected elements in this photograph: for one thing, instead of portraying the nude body of a pretty female model, the usual practice among Salon photographers in Taiwan at the time, Chang took that of a male; for another, the man looked dead or even dismembered with only his torso remaining. In addition, the camera was positioned at such an unusually low angle that this torso seemed obscenely large.

With his motto "it is better to shock the audience than bore them to sleep," Chang continued his quest for the avant-garde, with encouragement from some supportive critics.<sup>5</sup> He took part in the Modern Poetry Exhibition with a photographic installation in 1966. However, a few years later, in 1974, almost a decade after his headless self-portrait, Chang decided to bid farewell to these experimental works of existential anxiety, as he proclaimed in a solo exhibition aptly titled "Photography Exhibition of Farewell." The reason, as Chang recalls now, was that

**Figure 2**

Chang Chao-tang, *Wuchihshan, Sin-chu*, 1962. Photographic print, size unknown, 1962.



this avant-garde experiment for him reached a creative dead end; to artificially extend its life would be repetitive and uninspired. In addition, his life circumstances changed. As he wrote, “after I finished my compulsory military service and entered the workforce, I no longer had the luxury or the cause to indulge in narcissistic self-agony and angst.”<sup>6</sup> Partly in order to pay the family bills, he joined television networks as a cinematographer making documentaries about Taiwan’s local society and culture. Meanwhile, he also participated in the New Wave cinema movement in both Taiwan and Hong Kong. He served as a cinematographer for filmmakers such as Tang Shu Shuen, in *China Behind* (1974), and took part in the group manifesto of the “Taiwanese New Wave” in the 1980s, arguing for “alternative” cinema, with his enchanting ciné-transe-like documentary films such as *The Boat-Burning Festival* (1980) and *Homage to Chen Ta* (started in the 1970s with production completed in 2014). Meanwhile, Chang continued to work as a photographer. In fact he found his new voice during these film trips. These voyages on the one hand enabled him to have a more in-depth encounter with common people in their natural environment; on the other, some of his best works were pictures of extras on sets between takes (Fig. 3, photograph taken in 1985 of an extra on Yangming Mountain,

**Figure 3**

Chang Chao-tang, *Yangmingshan, Chin-tian kang*, 1985. Photographic print, size unknown, 1985.



Chin-tian Summit, on the set of the film *The Gorgeous Boys in Tang Dynasty*, dir. Chiu Kang-chien).

Given his fame in documentary filmmaking and his interest in photographing the “little” people in grassroots Taiwan (in fact he would declare that these anonymous film extras he captures in his photographs were ten thousand times more photogenic than the famous faces of the movie stars who were probably sitting next to them), it is not surprising he is credited as an important figure in documentary or even Nativist Realist photography.<sup>7</sup> Besides, as a historian Chang has been a trail-blazer in chronicling Taiwanese documentary photographers and their works. His important book *In Search of Photos Past*, first published in 1988 right after the end of martial law, is a historical account of thirty-three of Taiwan’s native documentary photographers from the 1940s to the 1960s. At the time, the official history of Taiwanese photography was largely written as merely an extension of Salon photography carried over from China after 1949, which itself was already an extension of traditional Chinese painting.<sup>8</sup> Chang wrote that the photographers he chronicles:

witnessed the difficult yet rich life and vitality among Taiwan’s grassroots people, therefore filling the long-silent and enormous gap in the history of Taiwanese photography. With each photo, we have a chance to begin to collage together Taiwan’s past, present, and future.<sup>9</sup>

Grouping these photographers together under the labels “nativist” and “documentary,” Chang was aware that he was not only writing an alternative history of Taiwanese photography against the dominant

institutions and against oblivion, but also compiling the alternative history of modern Taiwan through photographic images, a native, and therefore independent, visual heritage around which Taiwan's future could rally.

It is necessary to explain here what is considered "Nativist" in the Taiwanese context. In Taiwan in the 1970s, in spite of strict ideological control from the Kuomintang (KMT) government, which regarded itself as the last bastion of traditional Chinese culture in the wake of Mao's Cultural Revolution on the mainland, a desire to acknowledge Taiwan's local social reality and learn about Taiwan's local culture was on the rise. Meanwhile, Taiwan's industry experienced a boost through its participation in global capitalism while local agrarian communities suffered as a consequence. On the international stage, Taiwan in the form of the KMT's Republic of China had to face the imminent threat of illegitimacy as a member of the international political community, following the loss of its seat in the United Nations in 1971 and Nixon's visit to Mao's People's Republic of China in 1972. This identity crisis at the time was manifest in literature and art as a gravity shift toward rural and regional reality: in literature there appeared a "*xiangtu wenxue*," or Native Soil literature. The open debate over Taiwan's *xiangtu wenxue* in 1977 was nothing short of a seismic cultural event in Taiwan's modern cultural history. At its core, the debate provided an overview of Taiwan's multi-source colonial cultural hegemonies: not just that of the KMT, which, fixated on art and culture's servility to its own anti-Communist propaganda, advocated an imagined traditional Chinese culture to function as ideological expediency, but also the long and complicated colonial history of Taiwan, including other episodes such as the Japanese occupation, sporadic Chinese dynastic rules, and the avaricious attempts at control by the Dutch, Portuguese, and French. More pertinent to the discussion of Chang's photography here, the Nativist debate raised important issues about the cultural hegemony of Modernism, seen by some as both a symptom and a cultural accomplice in the economic invasion of the West that displaced Taiwan's regional agricultural community. Therefore, one of the most important merits of this debate, I argue, is the revelation and review of the ideological agencies in "style," be it traditional Chinese literati in the form of Salon photography, or realism, or Modernism. Chang in fact worked with some of the main participants in this debate, such as writers Chen Ying-chen and Huang Chunming who were vocal about such concerns and criticisms. Chang's ostentatious "farewell" to Modernism in 1974, even if really an innocuous creative exhaustion, needs to be understood in this context also.

Interestingly, even though Chang made this abrupt, if not bipolar, ideologically charged switch, the shift is not reflected in dramatically different critical receptions of his work. Instead, various efforts have been made to project unity onto his oeuvre. One of the consistent hallmarks of his works, we are told, is "Surrealism." Chang's surrealist tropes are

faceless or headless animals and human figures, often taken from behind. Chang himself describes it as follows:

Ever since in 1962 I photographed myself as a headless silhouette, the disintegration between body and face and transfiguration became an obsession for me. In my pictures I have faces powdered, masked, sometimes wrapped in plastic bags, and stiff, distorted, and “maimed” bodies. They look like they are falling, standing, or climbing, as if rehearsing a play in the theater of the absurd.<sup>10</sup>

The oversized and obliquely cropped bodies in Chang’s pictures call attention to the camera’s “frame,” which Rosalind Krauss famously noted as the Surrealists’ announcement of the camera’s ability “to find and isolate what we call the world’s constant production of erotic symbols, its ceaseless automatic writing.”<sup>11</sup> Mieke Bal remarks that it is the “eerie landscapes, strange rock formations, and groups of people, obliquely lit” and also the fact that “many of Chang’s subjects lack a visible head or face” that place Chang’s work squarely in the camp of Surrealist photography. Bal especially notes that “headless is a common trope in surrealist photographic portraiture” as it is “a way for artists to reject a focus on individual personality.”<sup>12</sup> In this light, Chang’s headless figures can be understood as a kind of “anti-portraiture.” Wang Ya-lun calls these headless figures in Chang’s photographs a kind of “no-body” (*sans corps*): as images they are erased, concealed, or unformed; and as subjects they are insignificant “nobodies.” Wang notes that “the anxiety from gazing at no-body precisely evokes in us a sense of alienation and the uncanny.”<sup>13</sup>

Apart from stylistic traces or iconographic references to Surrealism in Chang’s work, his convictions appear also to be in accord with Surrealist tenets. Photographic historian and critic Gu Zheng writes that Chang’s photography presents a surrealist vision, which is a supra-vision or even a supra-clairvoyance. Instead of altering reality in the darkroom or printing process to create a sur-real picture, Chang sees how the world reveals its own secrets in its own surrealist images and presents that vision straight on.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Chang shares with the Surrealists a deep suspicion about positivist views on representation. He constantly distances himself from discourses, but savors the innocence, the absence of concepts, plans, skills, doubts, or even intentions in the practice of photography, especially in an automatism that involves “purely just pressing the shutter.”<sup>15</sup>

The headless man from his pictures in the 1960s can be interpreted as a gesture—as if, with a cleaver, Chang performed a double severance: he cut his images clean away from the traditional images of Chinese tradition seen in Salon photography at the time, as well as from the possibility of identifying definite significations, be they individual or social.

However, it was also a kind of self-portrait, albeit headless, of a photographer searching for the self-loss that is key to a street photographer/flâneur's saunter. Meanwhile, Chang reminds us that all of these interpretations shall not ignore his Surrealist rejection of consciousness or subjectivity and of any attempt to be placed into a discourse. He is ready to dissolve away as soon as that attempt is detected. He prefers to answer the question about headless men as follows: "Why do I leave so many bodies without limbs? Because a normal body is just too boring and too ordinary."<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, there are efforts to understand Chang as a consummate documentary photographer through and through. In this light, Chang's avant-garde works are interpreted as actual social documentaries and his Surrealism as, in fact, essentially Nativist Realist. For instance, the Taipei Biennial in 2012, curated by Anselm Franke, introduces Chang as "one of the chief chroniclers of Taiwanese society since the 1950s," therefore collapsing his entire career into that of a "chronicler." More specifically, Chang's earlier works in the 1960s, of headless phantoms and masks, even as Chang admitted these to be products of a youth under the spell of the Modernism of the West, are given political meanings and sociohistorical references to specific contemporary issues. Phantoms are assigned, literally, signification as souls trying to escape oppression during the KMT's White Terror, and Chang's headless bodies become symbols of subjects who have lost their subjectivity, a cry against a ruling regime that "decapitates" its citizens, and a reminder to Taiwanese people who were forced into a state of mindlessness under that tyranny.<sup>17</sup> In reading Chang's headless self-portrait from 1962, the curatorial team of the 2012 Taipei Biennial wrote: "The work alludes to a loss of control, to histories of de-culturalization, to a sense of absurdism under totalist power ... What they capture is a scenography of an historical experience."<sup>18</sup>

A somewhat more sophisticated way of looking at Chang's photography involves the translation of style into a local context. Kuo Li-hsin, who is partial to interpreting Chang's work as consistently documentary, argues that Taiwan's social reality was never comparable to the conditions of modernity that the Modernists in the West operated on and responded to. To Kuo, urbanization and industrialization are the requisite sources and grounds for any true Modernist art (as style) to take form, and Taiwan in the 1960s (or the present for that matter) even in the big cities was mostly agricultural and premodern in nature. Elements such as utilitarian rationality, capitalism, the public sphere, progressive politics, and social contracts that constituted modernity in the West had not emerged in Taiwan at all, "not even as a shadow."<sup>19</sup> The writer and activist Chen Ying-chen (Chen Yingzhen, 1937–2016), using Hsu Nantsun as a pseudonym, wrote a scathing review in the 1960s against the direct translation of Modernist style into a Taiwanese context. He deemed the style itself and the Taiwanese approximation of the style

“impotent, weak, pallid, incapable, masochistic, maudlin, and abandoning the public.”<sup>20</sup> However, to Kuo, even though Chang also used the Modernist style, Chang’s success lies in the fact that he did not merely imitate or translate on the visual level, but that he was able to forge a commonality between modernity in the West (absent in Taiwan) and Taiwan’s different reality, which Kuo identified as a psychosis of suppression and anxiety. In other words, instead of a wholesale transplanting without discrimination, by finding a piece of soil in Taiwan that somehow resembled that in the West, Chang managed to graft Modernism onto Taiwanese photography and bear great fruit. The wide gap between the social contexts of Modernism in the West and the decided “un-modernity” in Taiwan was abridged with reference to a similar sense of alienation and anxiety, even if the anxiety originates from distinctively different sources. Chang’s ingenuity was his ability to not only translate the style of Modernism, but also transfer the psychosis between two widely different social contexts without sacrificing the local specificity of Taiwan in the 1960s. Kuo would also argue that since Chang used the Modernist style effectively to express angst under real suppression and countered reality with surreality, Chang documented the real absurdities of the time. In that sense, Chang’s Surrealism is actually realism.

### **Between Surrealism and Documentary: Temporal-Spatial Superimposition in Chang’s Photography**

But how exactly do Chang’s photographs manage to solicit and validate distinctively different readings at the same time? I argue that Chang’s photography creates a temporal and spatial possibility for both a surreality and an indexical presence of the “real” through a series of superimpositions: superimpositions between the sculptural and the photographic, the made object and the natural landscape, embalmed time and the transient, animate and inanimate, nature and representation, and of course also between the surreal/supernatural and the indexical or historical. By calling his visual syntax “superimposition,” I mean that it is not one of fusion, synthesis, or collage, nor is it juxtaposition. Superimposition implies a syntax between at least two separate planes of images, and it highlights the fissure, “blocking,” and manipulation of depth and distance in between. Because of a spatial hierarchy implicit in superimposition—that one image is imposed over the rest—it also suggests a hierarchical and transformative dynamic among the images within the picture. It is also important to note that Chang’s superimposition is not done as postproduction but composed and captured with his camera at the moment when the pictures are taken.

Sculptures and sculptural objects proliferate in Chang’s photographs. Some are direct “citations” featuring a made sculpture, often in the foreground. In Chang’s typical manner, these sculptures are seen from the

**Figure 4**

Chang Chao-tang, *Panchiao, Taiwan*, 1961. Photographic print, 20 × 24 in. (50.8 × 60.96 cm), 1961.

**Figure 5**

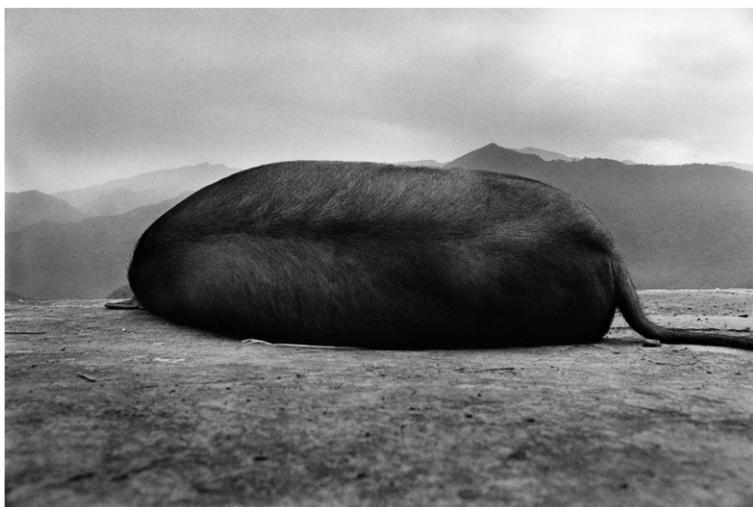
Chang Chao-tang, *Kyoto Japan*, 2004. Photographic print, size unknown, 2004.



back (Figs. 4 and 5). In one of his very early works titled “Panchiao, Taiwan, 1961,” a naked plastic baby doll is seen hanging on a horizontal bar at a playground (Fig. 4). As if seen through a child’s eyes from a very low angle, the doll’s strenuous aspiration to reach up and peer over

**Figure 6**

Chang Chao-tang, *Sinchu, Wufeng*, 1986. Photographic print, size unknown, 1986.



the bar, sculpted in light and in sharp focus on the foreground, appears as if stamped upon the background, the dense foliage of a large, old tree that is flat, almost decorative, both inviting and prohibiting at the same time. In other works there are objects that, through Chang's framing, become "involuntary" sculptural bodies: parts of humans and animals transformed into an uncanny ambivalence between living and made objects, between subject and representation, and between animate and inanimate (Figs. 2 and 6).

Chang admits on many occasions his fondness for including sculptural objects in his photography. As he himself explains it, one of the desired effects is that they enable both the photographer and the viewer to imagine and identify with a sculptural subjectivity, by which Chang sometimes means, in a quite literal sense, "I will metamorphose myself into the sculpture to think, to look at its surroundings, to emulate its feelings. Imagine you yourself stand there for a whole life, exposed to all weathers, what do you feel? Would you be lonely? Sad?"<sup>21</sup> In animating the sculpture, and more importantly giving sculptures a vision, Chang destabilizes our comfort with the familiar epistemic power structure between viewer and object, and he meanwhile projects a vision of surreality through the mediation of sculpture framed in photography. As he comments on his intentions when making his baby doll picture: "I needed a pure and unreadable perspective, so I made the doll naked and had him face the trees and sky. ... It's as if the baby doll is seeking his dreams and freedom."<sup>22</sup> The tree and the sky beyond are visions mediated by the sculptural object (the doll), and through superimposing the sculpted object between the vision and the viewers, such a mediation itself also becomes the focus and thesis of the picture. Therefore, the image that is on the "top" of the others becomes the subject and subjectivity at the same time, commanding yet also blocking what is behind.

**Figure 7**

Chang Chao-tang, *Jiangxi, Tonglin Temple, 1989*. Photographic print, size unknown, 1989.



It also exerts transformative power over the rest of the picture as well as on the viewers. Chang notes: “Sculpture, to most people, looks ordinary—they are just plain old sculpture, but to me, the sculptures are alive, while the people surrounding them are actually sculptures. Sculpture has the power to subjugate the people (around it).”<sup>23</sup> This power is partly due to the medium of sculpture itself: it is known to be intentionally made, finished, and self-contained, hence bringing to a photograph a self-contained presence apart from the rest of the photographic image in especially straight photography.

Another source of its dominating power also comes from the way Chang arranges the spatial relations: sculptures in his photographs are sharply “sculpted” with light and shadow to the fore; the angles are often either low or oblique to highlight the dominance of the sculptural objects on the pictorial surface. On the other hand, in terms of temporality, sculpture and photography as image-making apparatus are surely both embalmments of time (borrowing a term by Bazin). This embalment in both mediums makes it possible for Chang to propose an interchangeability between what is sculptural and what is living in his photographs. However, sculptural time is scheduled to be eternal, while modern shutter time remains forever instantaneous. Chang’s photography then stages the tension through the superimposition of two different temporal orders. Sculpture is also still, in its perpetual tension between resistance and propensity to movement. Like the stone lion in the Forbidden City and the sculpture in a temple in Jiangxi who have been silent witnesses to history, a sculpture demarcates a silent and homogeneous temporality within, in stark contrast (or even fissure) to the clamoring, fluid, and transient in the human world, emphasized in the diffused heterogeneity in both the movements and the gazes of the bystanders (Fig. 7).

Similar syntax with a sculpture in the front against “history” in the back is also operative in Chang’s works featuring sculpturized human bodies. Often just a back with the head hidden or blocked, these human bodies are presented as “bodies” and bodies alone with a heightened sense of corporeality (Fig. 2). In Chang’s works they are almost always superimposed upon the natural settings—be they rural or urban—in the background. By placing such an image, impregnated with interchangeability between living flesh and the sculptural, as the supreme image and the reigning agency of mediational subjectivity, Chang also introduces a sense of theatricality. A ritualistic performance seems to take place in his pictures, induced and presided over by the anthropomorphic body/object (sometimes in a mask) as a spiritual medium. On this point, Kong Jow-juin’s illuminating article on Chang’s photographic art brought forth the useful term “*wuji*” (the spiritual medium), with which Kong advances an interpretation of Chang’s pictures as an invocation of the power of shamanism.<sup>24</sup> A spiritual medium sees the worlds of ghosts and gods and communicates among the worlds with codes. Kong advocates reading Chang’s works precisely as such codes, as they are keys to the secrets of these other worlds, while at the same time they channel the otherworldly and supranatural power in their criticism against this world. In Taiwan’s popular religious and spiritual culture, a figure called *khi-tang* stands out. During the ceremonies, a person is chosen to be the *khi-tang*, the spiritual medium, possessed by supranatural power to act out the will of the deities, be it prophecy or healing, through intelligible speech, wild body movements, or even self-flagellation upon their own half-naked body. A *khi-tang* is unaware of their own body or mind during the time of the trance. In other words, they are a headless and faceless figure, nothing but their body in its pure corporeality. Chang acknowledges his affinity to *khi-tang*: “There always has been a voice in me that tries to defy the civilized world; therefore I want to look for things that are grassroots and wild, just like the *khi-tang*.”<sup>25</sup> *Khi-tang*, for Chang, therefore embodies a twofold symbolic power in its defiance against the modern civilization of intellectualism, positivism, and rationality, and in its embodiment of Taiwanese local identity (*khi-tang* achieves its ends in bodies of flesh and blood). In *khi-tang* there erupts the plebeian, grassroots, wild energy that stems from the soil and shows no traceable lineage to Confucian China, nor to Japan, and certainly not to the West. The naked torso of the *khi-tang* has always been the site on which to perform defiance against the cultural hegemony of colonial China or Japan. (Both governments in Taiwan suppressed *khi-tang* activities during their rules.) Meanwhile, it is also an uncouth force that tussles with rationality and logic in all their cultural and institutional forms, including the propriety of Confucianism and reason in the Enlightenment tradition in the West (and its metamorphosis in modern East Asia). Under the auspices of “possession” and trance, they have the liberty to act out and speak out the words of the divine, therefore

**Figure 8**

Chang Chao-tang, *Sinchuang, Taipei*, 1964. Photographic print, 25 × 40 in. (53.5 × 101.6 cm), 1964.

**Figure 9**

Chang Chao-tang, *Wanli, Taiwan*, 1996. Photographic print, size unknown, 1996.



abjuring the responsibility for or complicity in conscious rebellion while exercising the wild energy and power to dissent, or at least to vent. In this sense, the headless torsos and men without individual specificity in Chang's photographs are lightning rods translating the invisible pulse of time into corporeal and sculptural form. At the same time they bypass rationality, channeling the direct and original energy of the worlds and attracting that uncanny power into the photographic picture. In the form of talisman sculptures they are mediums between worlds and officiants over the worlds, poised for and ready to initiate the interrogations and convulsions.

But while Surrealist photography such as Brassai's involuntary sculptures untie the image of object from their mundane references through

isolation and close-up, and sever them from their familiar signification praxis, I want to return to the point that Chang superimposes these sculpturized bodies and objects onto natural landscapes and environments. Take, for instance, his celebrated picture of the Man Ray-like nude back: the picture is certainly dominated by the sculptural male body, but it is also set in the out-of-doors, in nature, on top of a mountain, at a vantage point with a spectacular vista of mountains and seas extending to the horizon. In addition, the photograph is titled/noted by Chang as “Wuchihshan, Sinchu, Taiwan, 1962,” stressing the indexical specificity. Chang’s own description of the process of making this photograph is worth a careful reading here:

At the time, we climbed up to the top of the mountain and sat quietly facing the boundless vista. Since I had brought a camera, I thought I might as well take some pictures. But how do I encounter this vast and silent nature? I could think of no way of doing so except via a nude body. Huang Yong-song, at my urging, stripped himself naked without complaint. But what do I do with a nude body? I do not want a stiff nude like in a generic sketch or a generic sculpture, and I found the head and the limbs all excessive and boring. I wanted a simple yet strange back like an urn. When he sat there I also found the picture too balanced, so I decided he must lean sideways in order to create a rhythmic interchange with Nature. Therefore, Yong-song arched his back and leaned to the side; I lowered my Aires Automat one hundred and twenty camera as much as I could. ... As I pressed the shutter, both of us knew at that moment that we had finished a satisfactory work, at least it was something we had never seen before.<sup>26</sup>

The atmospheric summer mountains in the background, even though largely blocked, are in fact luminous and picturesque, with a magnificent depth not unlike the Salon photography’s favorite literati-style landscapes. The critic’s remark that this picture sent the Salon pictures into an antiquated dustbin is correct in the sense that Chang literally superimposed on a pictorialist landscape an eerie sculptural nude, quite the bold statement of contention and a strong proclamation of his own arrival. However, by spelling out the specific location and time in the “title” (or at least the “index” card style of keeping record of his pictures), Chang’s landscape is not an ahistorical fantasy of spiritual refuge, but a real place, in Taiwan, and in the 1960s, with a strong sense of *ça a été*. In fact, the rock that Huang Yongsong/the sculptural subject was sitting on has some carvings of Chinese characters that can just be made out to read “Datong was here.” The landscape in the background shimmers with the eternal allure of beauty while the unsettling presence of an uncanny giant “body” commands the vista and transforms it into

a surreality. Still, the landscape, since it is temporally and spatially real and noted as such, defines the possibility of reading itself as well as the surreal sculpture on the rock as documentary or even “voluntary” commentary and critique against specific social and local history in 1962.

Many of Chang's pictures work with a similar superimposition between a sculptural subject over real natural scenes. The setting always seems to be specifically tagged with clear emphasis on the “real” time and space, sometimes even with texts and signs in the picture itself. A man's face, already superimposed with a sort of a “mask” shot from the shoulders up, out of focus, is shown sticking out in front of a courtyard strewn with broken bicycles, discarded furniture, and old junk (Fig. 8). But there are two vertical signs among this rubble in sharp focus in the background. One is in black with white characters and the other in white with black characters, like a couplet, telling us that among these shambles somehow there is an “Everyday-Happy Billiard” as well as an “Always-Full Pub.” Without the man in the foreground, it is in itself an evocative scene of the sprawling reality of urbanizing Taiwan in the 1960s. In another picture we see a sculpture of an ape, again from its back side, looking over an ocean view on a seashore (Fig. 9). But this is not just a picture of an ape by any sea; Chang includes the English sign “BALIBEACH” in the background to usher into the picture information about the exact location and time, thus giving it the potential function as documentary evidence of this area before its massive refurbishment in the past decades.

With these superimpositions, a single perspectival point is refuted and blocked, literally, by the excessive presence of the sculpturalized body. Yet the landscape behind, the vast horizon of the sea and sky that seems to extend to the eternal void, still pulls and recedes. The streets and mountains still exude their signifying message and power in spite of the massive blockage and superimposition of the objects in the front. Oftentimes, Chang rendered the foreground figure out of focus while the background settings remain sharply in focus. Looking back at Chang's early headless self-portrait (Fig. 1), the notion of superimposition was at its most literal as Chang imprints his own silhouette onto a landscape in Taipei's 1960s. Beyond the black shadow, we see stretches and layers of northern Taiwan's gentle mountains and even what appears to be the tip of a tree. One might be tempted to tiptoe over the wall to have a better look at the tantalizing landscape. The same can be said with the pig picture (Fig. 6) and many more. Chang thereby creates a repulsive–seductive axis that Briony Fer notes in Surrealist photography, which is “less concerned with picturing disturbing objects than with disturbing the visual field inhabited by the object and puncturing its protective shield.”<sup>27</sup> Chang's photographs do not just create the tension between pictorial image and sculptural object, the habits of viewing, and the amount of time associated with each, but they also overlay different temporal and spatial registers, which leads to anomalous or uneasy effects. If anxiety,

as many have noted, is what Chang's pictures always produce, anxiety is not pictured as a property of an ape, a horse, a rock, or a pig; rather, it is the spatial syntax, especially the foreshortened or the blocked syntax of superimposition that becomes the condition and site of the representation as anxiety. In this vein, one can delineate the mechanism of critical power in Chang's work as such: while there are critical potentialities in Surrealist photography as a visual form and as an epistemological dismantling process between object and image, as Rosalind Krauss famously demonstrated, it can be endowed in and well consummated in the sculptural objects alone. (Brassai comes to mind.) But Chang's superimposition suggests another layer: by laying the sculptural over the clearly tagged settings, these photographs suggest the application of that critical power inherent in the surreality of the object onto a clear target field that is the social and historical context. One can rehearse a litany of these tags: 1962, Wuchihshan, Sinchu; 1964, Hsin-Chuang, Taipei; 1986 Wufeng Township; or 1989, Penghu, the marginal islands of Taiwan; and so forth. Therefore, such a superimposition of the sculptural objects, the hallmark of surrealist photographic language, over onto the natural setting also creates a critical syntax of power, as both its reference and its field, and, therefore, a polity.

## Conclusion

Fields, wastelands, ruins, secret chambers, or quiet paths are my main subjects. They emerge in the scene like a ghost during high noon or twilight ... while reminding me of the living ambience of the time, the light and the taste of those instances.<sup>28</sup>

These words from Chang invoke Walter Benjamin's writings on Atget's Paris.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, while Atget was viewed as the precursor of Surrealism by Benjamin, he was also later regarded as an important forerunner of documentary photography. André Breton says that a surrealist image is to bring together the two realities in juxtaposition and into uncanny union.<sup>30</sup> Susan Sontag sees photography as essentially surrealist in that it exercises the gaze that the Surrealists hoped for in an image and superimposes one reality over another, while Rosalind Krauss sees Surrealism as inherently photographic, that photography seems to be the optimal medium that makes Surrealism work.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps it is the two realities concurrent in the photographic medium that alone can explain why Atget's photographs of Paris and Chang's photographs of Taiwan, although appearing very different, can hold the honored dual citizenship in the two realms. However, Chang's works offer an intriguing perspective on the ambiguity of a photographic image between reality and surreality by virtue of superimposition on the level of image and within image, providing dual portals to enter the two realities. The convulsive beauty in Surrealist photography finds its medium in a headless

body in a *khi-tang*-like performance yet situated outdoors and in natural environments with specific locations. We do not have two separate portals. The ingenious use of superimposition is to presume the supremacy of one and give it power to consume the other and officiate the dual functions, and in this sense Chang clearly favors the sculptural and the surreal. Chang proclaims that he never has any interest in making "landscape photography": "I categorically do not do landscape photography, but that is not to say you cannot possibly find what you are looking for in a landscape."<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the landscape for Chang is "objectif" and "transfer" of reality. It is at the same time the world that stirs in its wild energy to be poured onto the medium body in the foreground and the world that is the silent spectator and the still theater bearing both the echoes of the convulsions and the aftermaths.

Lest we think Chang's pictures are only sites of inquisitions against the age and doors opening onto the threshold of documentary, he blocks those doors and keeps them barely ajar:

If there are absurd or cruel elements (in my photography), they stem, rather than from the anxiety about the martial law at the time, from a reflection on life itself. Now that martial law is over, doesn't life remain absurd and cruel? Perhaps it is even worse. ... Average viewers might think these photos, empty and cold as if life has no meaning, are socially and politically dissident. But the pictures do not necessarily have anything to do with specific politics; instead maybe they bear more relevance to general reflections in psychology, aesthetics, or philosophy.<sup>33</sup>

True to the dual spirit of this article, I would like to close in two ways, one superimposing over another.

As a *khi-tang* without a mind, a flaneur without a face, Chang projects the ghostly shadow of himself onto the real world, giving us a visual rebus with a dual signification field. But he is already ready to forget and move away as soon as the rebus is seen. In one of his verses he writes: "A good-for-nothing person sees all these, then he forgets all these."<sup>34</sup> Chang also says at the moment when he took that famous picture of the nude back on Wuchihshan in Sinchu, he "thought of Dali, thought of Henry Moore, the biblical Genesis, and vaguely also of Rodin."<sup>35</sup>

But fifty years later, he describes the picture as "a nude torso, like an ancient 'incorrigible/obstinate stone' (*wanshi*), obliquely placed on the top of a mountain, without head or limbs, like an old stele leaning into its own silent ruins. ... Rocks are eternal, while human bodies are transient."<sup>36</sup> Chang compares the sculptural body to a monument in the ruins of time, but, more interestingly, he refers to it as the "obstinate stone" (*wanshi*) on the mountaintop in the eighteenth-century classic Chinese novel *The Story of the Stone*, the masterpiece that is known for its realism while it is also structured upon two worlds and two realities.

That stone in the novel dates from the genesis of the worlds. It is a magical object that witnesses all histories. Discarded by gods and sitting atop Greensickness Peak, it is, however, eager to metamorphose into human form to enter a particular episode of history and experience all of humanity's manifestations.

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### Notes

1. See the publication accompanying this exhibition: *Time: The Images of Chang Chao-Tang 1959–2013* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2013).
2. Chang Chao-tang, *Beyond the Frame: Punctum & Perspective in Taiwanese Contemporary Photography* (Taipei: Uni-Books, 2017), 100.
3. For a discussion of Lang's photography, see Mia Yinxiang Liu, "The Allegorical Landscape: Lang Jingshan's Photography in Context," *Archives of Asian Art* 65 (Spring 2016): 1–24. Interestingly, Lang and Chang are the only two photographers who received the Taiwan government's honorary Award for Cultural Achievement. Lang received it in 1987 while Chang received the award in 2011.
4. Chang remembers this remark in his article: Chang Chao-tang, "1962, A Summer's Day," in *T. photo* (Taipei: Pei-wu wenhua, 1996), 5.
5. Ibid.
6. Chang Chao-tang, "Regarding Time," in *Time*, 11.
7. Chang Chao-tang, "Beyond Scenes," in *Beyond the Frame*, 45.
8. See Chen Pao-Chen, "Wenrenhua de yanshen-Lang Jingshan de sheying yishu" [The Extension of Literati Painting-Lang Jingshan's Photographic Art], *Gugong wenwu yuekan* [The National Palace Museum Monthly of Chinese Art] 20, no. 10 (2003): 42–57.
9. Chang Chao-tang, *In Search of Photos Past: The Development of Photographic Realism in Taiwan* (Taipei: Walkers Cultural Enterprise, 2015), 7.

10. Chang Chao-tang, *Beyond the Frame*, 45.
11. Rosalind Krauss, *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, Abbeville Press, 1985), 40.
12. Mieke Bal, review of the exhibition "Time: Chang Chao-Tang's Images" at Taipei Fine Arts Museum, "Chang Chao-Tang," *Art in America* 102 (April 24, 2014), <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/chang-chao-tang/> (accessed March 10, 2018).
13. Wang Ya-lun, "The Statue as an Observer: Reflections on the Visibility and Mystery of Chang Chao-tang's Photography," *Journal of Taipei Fine Arts Museum* 27 (2014): 151.
14. Gu Zheng, "From Manipulating Reality to Questioning Reality: Loose Thoughts on the Photography of Chang Chao-tang," in *Time*, 25–33.
15. Chang Chao-tang, *Beyond the Frame*, 13.
16. Chang Chao-tang, "1962, A Summer's Day," 5.
17. Wang Sheng-hung, "From Direct Photography to 'Non-Image' Writing: In Light of Chang Chao-tang's Image Aesthetics and 'Notes on Non-Image,'" *Journal of Taipei Fine Arts Museum* 27 (2014): 105.
18. Taipei Biennial 2012, [https://www.taipeibiennial.org/2012/en/participants/chao\\_tang\\_chang.html](https://www.taipeibiennial.org/2012/en/participants/chao_tang_chang.html) (accessed March 10, 2018).
19. Kuo Li-hsin, "The Greatest Music Has No Sound and the Greatest Image Has No Form: On Chang Chao-tang's Photographic Art and Life," in *Time*, 15–25.
20. Ch'en Ying-chen, "Re-developing Modernism: My Thoughts on the Production of Waiting for Godot," originally published in *Juchang*, December 1965, collected in *Anthology of Ch'en Ying-chen* (Shanghai: Sanlian, 2009), 269.
21. Wang Ya-lun, "Statue as an Observer," 153.
22. Ibid.
23. Chang Chao-tang, "1962, A Summer's Day," 5.
24. Kong Jow-juin, "Chang Chao-tang, Modern Spiritual Medium Image," *Modern Art* (October 2013): 60–6.
25. Wang Ya-lun, "Statue as an Observer," 146.
26. Chang Chao-tang, "1962, A Summer's Day."
27. Briony Fer, "The Space of Anxiety: Sculpture and Photography in the Work of Jeff Wall," in *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning the Third Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 244.
28. Chang Chao-tang, *Beyond the Frame*, 100.
29. Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" (1931) in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol. 2. Part 2, 1931–1934*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: First Harvard University Press, 2005), 507-530.

30. André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924) in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, edited by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 13–48.
31. Susan Sontag, "Melancholy Object," in *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 13–48; and Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," *October* 19 (1981): 3–34.
32. See interview with Chang Chao-tang: "Chang Chao-tang: Great Works are Mostly Sad," <http://ww.xitek.com/interview/201104/01-62461.html> (accessed March 10, 2018).
33. Chang Chao-tang, "Regarding Time," in *Time*, 118.
34. Chang Chao-tang, cited in Wang Sheng-hung, "From Direct Photography," 105.
35. Chang Chao-tang, "1962, A Summer's Day," 5.
36. *Ibid.*

### Names and Key Terms

- Chang Chao-tang (Zhang Zhaotang) 張照堂  
 Chen Pao-Chen (Chen Baozhen) 陳葆真  
 Chen Ying-chen (Chen Yingzhen) 陳映真  
 Cheng Sun-chi (Zheng Sangxi) 鄭桑溪  
 Chiu Kang-chien (Qiu Gangjian) 邱剛健  
 Greensickness Peak 青埂峰  
 Gu Zheng 顧絳  
 Hsu Nan-tsun (Xu Nancun) 許南村  
 Huang Yong-song (Huang Yongsong) 黃永松  
*khi-tang* 起乩 (a person as spiritual medium performing and delivering the oracle)  
 Kong Jow-juin (Gong Zhuojun) 龔卓軍  
 Kuo Li-hsin (Guo Lixi) 郭力昕  
 Lang jing-shan (Lang Jingshan) 郎靜山  
 Sinchu 新竹  
 Tang shu shuen (Tang Shuxuan) 唐書璇  
 Wang Sheng-hung (Wang Shenghong) 王聖閔  
 Wang Ya-lun (Wang Yalun) 王雅倫  
*wanshi* 頑石 (obstinate stone)  
 Wuchihshan 五指山  
*xiangtu wenxue* 鄉土文學 (Native Soil literature)