

Chen Nong: History and Memory

Chinese photographer Chen Nong is known in the West for his grandiose staged and hand-colored photographs. Born in 1966 in Fuzhou of Fujian Province, Chen taught himself painting and photography from books and manuals. Chen's practice was chosen for this research because of the history-related subjects, cinematic narrative style, and labor-intensive photographic approach he employs, setting him apart in Chinese photography since the turn of the century. One of his works *Silk Road* (2015–present), was selected for description and analysis in order to reveal the perception of history in memory-related photographs and the artistic methods used to narrate events.

I first contacted Chen via one of the art galleries representing him in 2017. When he returned to Beijing from his photo shoots for his *Silk Road* project in January 2018, I interviewed him in his studio in order to understand his ideas and observe his photographic methods. In the following section, I describe Chen Nong's artistic practice based on interviews and collected documents (e.g., exhibition catalogues, artist's statements, online information, and reviews). This case study reveals that the performance of cultural memory in Chen's photographs is a combination of history and imagination, and the technique of hand-coloring is an effective method for reimagining the past.

The Projects

Regarding the embodiment of cultural memory in the artist's works, my interview data indicated that Chen Nong showed concern for history in all of his works, including *Silk Road*. Chen has said: "I'm interested in any period of history, but I don't like them at all. Because I think every period of history is bloody, and human history is a shame because of all the killing" (as cited in Sun, 2016). During our in-person interview, he added: "Our entire history is false. Our history does not show what the past looks like, which also becomes part of history" (Chen, personal communication, January 18, 2018). Chen's response expressed the artistic philosophy that underlines his works, helping me to understand the contents of his works. Though Chen never mentioned memory per se during our interview, his descriptions of projects and his answers to my questions seemed to imply the discussion of history in cultural memory.

Rather than following my interview protocol set for this study, in this case, I allowed Chen to explain his work *Silk Road*, freely. Then, I applied his thoughts to the research questions of this study

by describing his projects individually. Chen's responses provided a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of history in each project and illustrated his artistic process.

Chen Nong's latest work, *Silk Road*, started in 2015, comprises three parts, two of which are still ongoing.¹ In this study, I selected the finished first part, which consists of 16 images. These images show eight pairs of imaginary stories that are based on the history of Xinjiang,² such as business conduct, the disappearance of villages, marriages, and weddings. Chen found inspiration for the project from his insight of Xinjiang, the *Silk Road* and the famed trip of the Chinese Buddhist monk (Xuanzang) to India in the seventh century. When I asked Chen to describe the intention and theme of the project, his answer expressed that he was intrinsically motivated to create either from personal interest or from his imagination: "I decided to shoot in Xinjiang. But, then I need a carrier [to present my imagination/thoughts]. For me, the westward trip of Xuanzang represents the history of Xinjiang. Of course, such an inspiration was based on my imagination" (Chen, personal communication, January 18, 2018).

Chen's response seemed to address the role of imagination and its relationship with memory, which shed light on aspects in which cultural memory can be reconstructed.

In addition, my collected data indicated that Chen's artistic process revealed the methods he employed to explore the landscape and its embedded memory. To begin the project, Chen traveled to Xinjiang in the spring of 2012 and followed the route of Xuanzang west. Chen took a train from (xī ān; Xi'an) to (jiā yù guān; Jiayuguan), via (guā zhōu; Guazhou), (suǒ yáng chéng; Suoyangcheng), and all the way to (dūn huáng; Dunhuang). On the way, he was attracted by and stopped to see the frescoes at (mò gāo kū; Mogao Caves). There, he said: "My body entered another time and space. It was even possible to see the scene that the ancients were painting in the caves with oil lamps" (Chen, personal communication, January 18, 2018). Over the next two years, Chen went to Dunhuang twice and stayed there for half a year to copy the paintings of the Mogao Caves. While

¹ The ongoing parts are specifically the second and third, which aim to reveal people's lives and spirit in Xinjiang and are planned to show more concrete aspects of domestic family life in independent stories.

² Located in the northwest of China and bordering several countries, such as Mongolia, Afghanistan, and India, Xinjiang is well known for its gorgeous landscapes (e.g., mountain systems, deserts, and lakes), art (e.g., the paintings at the Mogao and Kizil Caves), economy (mainly thanks to the Silk Road), and mystical stories and histories (e.g., the westward trip of Xuanzang).

immersing himself in copying the Dunhuang murals, Chen realized that the history of Xinjiang involves trade, survival, and spirit. He explained:

After drawing the frescoes, I found that the history of Xinjiang is connected to commerce and survival, as represented by the *Silk Road*. Ancient people walked over mountains for survival under such tough conditions, while Xuanzang went west out of spiritual beliefs, which encouraged me to add this content. The shining man in the photographs [of *Silk Road*] is a representation of a spirit. Every photo should have a shining subject that highlights the existence of spiritual beliefs in human beings' rationality, besides the materiality. (Chen, personal communication, January 18, 2018)

Chen's description expressed that his field trips in Xinjiang were crucial in the creation of the *Silk Road* project. When he walked in the landscapes, he was able to compare his imagination of Xuanzang's mythic trip with the reality of Xinjiang and the *Silk Road*. This enabled him to expose that the physical and spiritual nature of civilization is a "fusion and reincarnation." As Chen stated, "everything will return to its original state, and the light of spirit will eventually be retained" (Chen, personal communication, January 18, 2018). After arriving at a fundamental understanding of the materiality and spirituality of Xinjiang, Chen decided to visit other ancient cities, towns, villages, and frescoes along the route of the early merchants of the *Silk Road*, such as (*jiāo hé*; Jiaohe), (*tǎ chéng*; Tacheng), (*gāo chāng*; Gaochang), (*shí tóu chéng yí zhǐ*; the remains of Stone City), (*gē bì*; Gobi Desert), and (*mó gǔi chéng*; City of Evil). On this trip, his goal was to perceive the spirit of the *Silk Road*. Chen, for example, said that he dreamed an image of the City of Evil when he walked in the deserts of Xinjiang and even had a feeling that he lived and walked in a prehistoric age. This would support my collected data, which revealed that the artist aimed to express personal feelings and imaginations that the landscapes evoked during his trips, rather than representing the past of a region.

After three years of visiting and exploring Xinjiang, Chen finally decided to shoot at (*gāo chāng gù chéng*; Gaochang ruins, also called Karakhoja), and (*jiāo hé gù chéng*; Jiaohe ruins).³ I asked Chen the

³ 高昌故城, Gaochang ruins is the site of the remains of an ancient city on the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert in present-day Xinjiang, China. Built in the first century BCE, Gaochang was a key transportation hub in western China and an important site along the *Silk Road*. From the mid-fifth century until the mid-seventh century, four independent regalties existed here, chronologically controlled by the Kan clan, Zhang clan, Ma clan, and Qu clan. In 2014, the Gaochang ruins were named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Meanwhile, Jiaohe ruins are of a site founded in the (*yà ěr ʔ gōu*; Yarnaz Valley), located at present-day west of (*tǔ lǚ fān shì*; Turpan city), Xinjiang province. The Jiaohe ruins have been protected by the government since 1961 and became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2014.

reasons for choosing certain places and the conditions of the selected sites. His responses exposed two criteria. On the one hand, Chen selected places that match his personal interests and imagination: “My works start with finding places that I am particularly interested in. I find or imagine special stories about a place. When I see the place, I find a common point with my imagined stories” (Chen, personal communication, January 18, 2018). On the other hand, Chen was interested in those places because their original form was well protected. In noting that “the landscape and culture there are very different, some places have been well preserved, so it’s easier for people to see the history there” (Chen, personal communication, January 18, 2018), Chen seemed to disclose that landscape is the medium that holds history and memory.

Regarding the artistic method used for the interplay of past, present, and future, Chen Nong’s practice reveals a labor-intensive approach to put the realistic nature of photography in doubt. He explained:

Photography is too realistic. Reality in photography is the benefit as well as the drawback. If one uses photography as a form of representation, again, photographs are just the true record of the scene. Actually, what is recorded by photographs is a false and faint impression, because what you present is just an instantaneous scene and can only represent what you see at that instant.

Since these images portray imagined space, the imaginary space needs to be combined with our [my] imagination, including color, people’s faces, etc. The photographer [i.e., Chen Nong] needs to think about what kind of space it is, and it certainly should not be too real, especially in terms of color. You can give it a new color, such as day and night, and your emotions. The preparation of props reflects a general intention. If I made it like a real-world scene, or like a movie, the price would be too high. The last step of hand-coloring is to match and convey my imagination. (Chen, personal communication, January 18, 2018)

The goal of expressing personal imagination about history and space demanded that Chen take a cinematic narrative approach and painstakingly apply the technique of hand-coloring. Both of Chen’s projects took years to research, plan, sketch, shoot, and complete post-production. Starting with an original idea in mind, Chen searched the Internet for stories, histories, and relevant places. From there, he planned and drafted paintings for photo shoots based on his imagination. With these sketches, he visited places for investigation and inspiration, as well as to see how the draft images could be made and where to shoot. Upon returning to Beijing, he improved his sketches in

order to come closer to his thoughts, imagination, feelings, and experiences of the landscape. Afterward, he made props with the help of friends. *Silk Road* was planned in about three years, with draft paintings created over two years and three versions tried out. When the sketches and models were ready for the shooting stage, Chen went to the sites, hired local residents for a small fee, dressed them with the prepared clothing and props, and directed them in the landscape according to his preparatory sketches.

Because of the thorough preparation for the photo shoots, the actual photographing stage for both projects was completed in about two weeks each. Also for both projects, all the photographs were taken on 8 x 10 black-and-white film with a handmade large-format camera. Chen developed the film himself after his return to Beijing. In the darkroom, he coated light-sensitive emulsion onto watercolor paper, then enlarged the film on it. He said that he consciously made the hand-painted details visible and sometimes intended to make the images look old; thus, “each image is unique because the paper base and emulsion are different” (Chen, personal communication, January 18, 2018). Lastly, he manually added color to these black-and-white photographs.

Because of the complex nature of Chen’s practice, the studio visit and interview were valuable, impressive, and crucial in enabling me to discover and understand the artist’s photographic methods in detail. While Chen talked about his projects and answered my questions, I was free to look around the studio. The table at the entrance of the studio where Chen paints his photographs was covered in photographs, brushes, color plates, and photo dyes. His drawings that he had copied from the Mogao Caves were pasted on the walls and ceiling, aiming to cover the whole studio, and showed his respect and love for the culture of Xinjiang and the paintings of caves. The bookshelf was filled with books and magazines, including a collection of *National Geographic* magazines from roughly the 1980s to the 2010s; Xuanzang’s narrative, (*Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*); and chronicles of China. Aside from reading material that reflected Chen’s interests in history, geography, politics, and sociology were piles of negatives, black-and-white photographs, and newspapers. Next to the bookshelf was a sewing machine that had been used to make the clothes for the photo shoots. At the moment, it was covered in cameras, lenses, and other photographic accessories. A variety of the clothing, animal heads, and flowers that he had displayed in *Silk Road* were packed in bags under tables or placed randomly around the studio. The studio included a darkroom where Chen developed his films and photographs, as well as storing most of his finished hand-colored photographs, draft paintings, papers, and photographic liquids. In the darkroom, Chen explained how he developed and edited his images and showed me an image before enlargement and after.

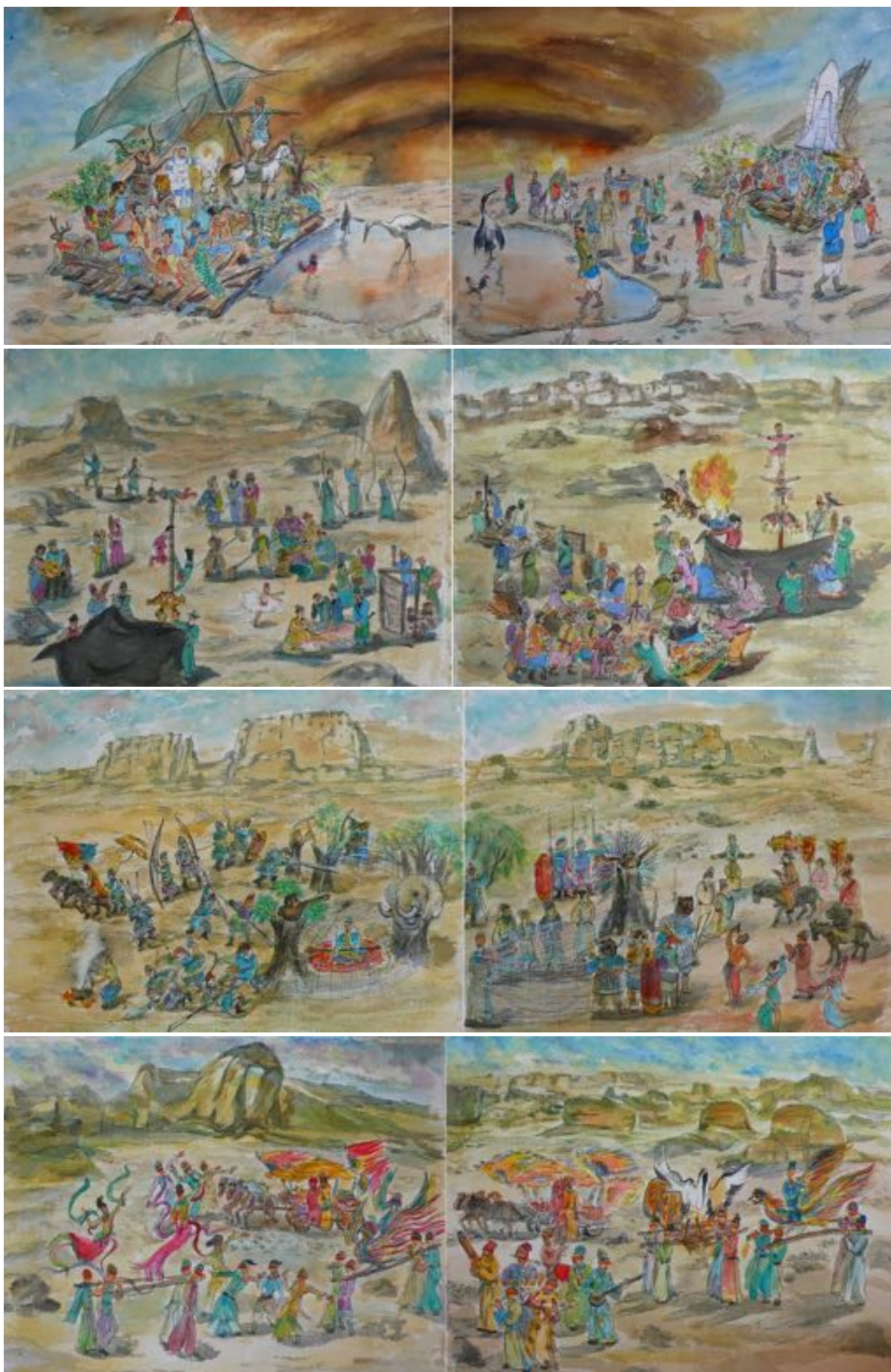


Figure 1. Chen Nong. (2015). A set of drawings by Chen Nong for Silk Road I (divided into frames whose order is from left to right, row by row). Retrieved from the artist.

History as Cultural Memory

As described above, in the discovery of the aspects of cultural memory, Chen Nong's *Silk Road* projects address his concerns with history and imply the role of imagination. When Chen said "my works are related to history," it reminded me of the problematic and complex relationship between history and memory in the study of cultural memory, a debate that one cannot overlook. In the 20th century, Maurice Halbwachs (1992) and Pierre Nora (1989) both asserted that history and memory are in opposition. For them, there are many different memories because memory is "collective, plural, and yet individual," while history is authoritative because it "belongs to everyone and to no one" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 9; Nora, 1989). However, Peter Burke (1997) and Marek Tamm (2008) have challenged the opposing relationship between history and memory, stating instead that history equates with memory. For the latter two scholars and others, such as Aleida Assmann, Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, history should be regarded "as a mode of remembering," "as a mnemonic practice," and "as a particular form of cultural memory" (Tamm, 2008, p. 500; Olick & Robbins, 1998, p. 134). Following the above scholars, but relying on the artistic practice of Chen Nong, I would argue that history is a form of cultural memory in art.

The criticism of history is evident in the *Silk Road* project. Although Chen has stated that he intended to photograph Xinjiang and its history, the final result of *Silk Road* is a reflection on the development of human civilization. For Chen, the *Silk Road* represents the history of Xinjiang and Xuanzang's pilgrimage route, all of which demonstrates the cycle of the physical and spiritual world of humankind. The *Silk Road* was the most important trade route linking Asia, Europe, and Africa via land and sea and can be traced back as early as the Han dynasty.⁴ Although silk was the major trade item at the time, the *Silk Road* also transmitted and exchanged art, culture, religion, and philosophy between the East and West along its network. Therefore, the *Silk Road* is a representation of commodity but has also been regarded as a symbol of spirituality. By searching information online, reading books, and traveling along the *Silk Road*, Chen shaped his own understanding of civilization based on the past of Xinjiang, which helped him arrive at the following

⁴ For a comprehensive art survey and history of the Silk Road, see, for example, Valerie Hansen's *The Silk Road: A New History* (2012) and *Cave Temples of Dunhuang: Buddhist Art on China's Silk Road* (2016), edited by Neville Agnew, Marcia Reed, and Tevvy Ball.

conclusion: “Conflicts such as the massacre between humankind and the destruction of civilization will decline as time goes on. Everything will return to its original state, and the spirit’s light will eventually be retained” (Chen, personal communication, January 18, 2018). Such a cycle of materiality and spirituality is portrayed in the *Silk Road* images. The first part of the series, and the only completed study of the three, consists of 16 images that form eight pairs of stories depicting, in order, the death of civilization, the origin of life, the birth of the state, the emergence of power and war, the development of culture, the growth of the economy, the flourishing of society, and closing with death.



Figure 2. Chen Nong. (2015). I, *Silk Road I* (divided into frames whose order is from left to right, row by row). Retrieved from the artist.

Based in Chen's reimagination of Xuanzang's seventh-century trip and the Xinjiang region, the *Silk Road* photographs are images of "imagined space," according to the artist. In the first pair of photos, ordinary and spiritualized people and animals are sitting in Noah's Ark waiting to leave Earth. The second and third duos show images of prehistoric culture in which life begins to appear on Earth and a nation is about to be born. Such an illusion occurred to Chen while he walked through the desert and the ancient cities of Xinjiang. The fourth pair of photographs depicts scenes of wars, criticizing the violence that occurred with the development of civilization. Historical events based in fact appear in the fifth, sixth, and seventh pairs of photos, including (fén shū kēng rú; the burning of books and burying of scholars alive) in 210 BCE, the marriage of Princess Wencheng in the Tang dynasty, Qin's campaign against the Yue tribes in 113 BCE, and Zhang Qian's trip to the world beyond China during the time of the Han dynasty. Some of these events did not occur in Xinjiang; for example, Qin's campaign against the Yue tribes was conducted in modern-day Guangdong and Guangxi in southern China and in what is now northern Vietnam. These events, nonetheless, are regarded as milestones in the development of Chinese civilization and in the improvement of both the overland and maritime *Silk Road* routes. Chen Nong dislocated the historical events by combining history with his imagination to represent the growth of the economy and culture of a nation. Thus, the events referenced in *Silk Road* cannot be easily identified by viewers. In the last pair of *Silk Road* images, people gather under a pagoda to sacrifice animals, giving form to Chen's belief in the reincarnation of materiality and spirituality.

Silk Road represents the origin, development, and destruction of a civilization. Chen fictionalized a history of Xinjiang by organizing recorded historical events through the workings of a "constructive imagination," rather than from a remembered experience (Cubitt, 2007, p. 34; Collingwood, 1999, p. 136). Imagination has the ability to "make the reader [or viewer] sees the historian [or artist] sees, the real characters of men ...which, allowing for human weaknesses and for the pressure of adverse circumstances ... opened wide the gates for thought [and] liberated souls" (Hart, 1910, p. 250). Thus, through his artistic imagination, Chen Nong was able to construct an ideal past, drawn from written historical records. Such a past is a combination of reality, the artist's historical thought, and his concerns about society's issues.

The Approach

In regards to the artist's method for expressing a sense of memory through photography, Chen's works presented three artistic techniques in the use of symbol, form, and hand-coloring.

Historical and cultural symbols. When Chen Nong introduced me to the projects during our interview, he explained the symbolic meanings of objects displayed in the images, which helped me to better understand his practice and photographs. For instance, he pointed out that the “lights and bright things in the photographs are a representation of a spirit,” Chen’s descriptions express that iconography was one of the approaches that he used to reactivate the past. By uncovering the meaning of the objects shown in the photographs, viewers are able to establish a historical consciousness, comprehend the subjects of Chen Nong’s works, and criticize history in light of their own experience and understanding.

The iconography in Chen’s works contains both historical and cultural symbols. The historical symbols are those objects that appeared in past events and emerged from a particular period. As Chen noted, “revolutions in different regimes and dynasties are represented by one or two signs in the photographs” (Chen, personal communication, January 18, 2018). As mentioned earlier, Chen searched the written record about the circumstances and the development of specific past events from books and sources on the Internet and then selected historical objects connected to the events to signify the uprisings and their social background.



Figure 3. Chen Nong. (2015). — , *The Silk Road—the Last Day*. Retrieved from the artist.

In *Silk Road*, cultural symbols refer to objects that signify the traditions of Xinjiang and the ideology of Chinese society, such as people’s costumes, hairstyles, and animals. Cultural symbols disclose the beliefs, spirits, and traditions of Chinese history and society, which prompt the viewers to understand and construct meanings of Chen’s imagery using their experience. In *Silk Road*, Chen narrated stories with cultural symbols instead of directly depicting historical figures. As exemplified in the first image of *Silk Road*, people and animals are sitting on the boat and trying to leave Earth

in a white space rocket (see Figure 34). The monk featured with a halo above his head represents Xuanzang, who is well known in China for his trip to India via Xinjiang during the Tang dynasty. The animals shown in the image are those with spiritual implications in Chinese culture. For example, the cranes and the deer represent good luck, wealth, and longevity in Chinese literature and art. They are also used to imply respect and blessings for death, as people say when someone passes away that they are “驾鹤西去” (jià hè xī qù; riding a crane and gone to the west). These animals are displayed with the monk and ordinary people, reminding viewers of the existence of spiritual beliefs in human beings’ rationality, besides materiality.

Time and space. Like a storybook, Chen presents stories in an extended horizontal configuration that resembles the form of a long scroll in Chinese painting. Chinese long scroll painting is an art of time and space, “an articulate representation of spatial continuity and temporal progression” (Chen, 1995, p. 265). Traditionally, the spatial and temporal representation of long scroll painting is reflected in the composition principle and narrative content.⁵ In terms of spatial representation, long scroll paintings apply (cavalier perspective) and follow such principles as (portraying the small through the big) and (three perspectives of distance, namely high distance, level distance, and deep distance).⁶ Horizontal long scroll paintings, which can extend to meters, are used to depict grand landscapes and rich stories, such as , A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains by Wang Ximeng and, Along the River during the Qingming Festival by Zhang Zeduan, both created during the Song dynasty.

The representation of time and space in Chinese long scroll paintings has been examined from different aspects and has influenced other art forms, such as film and photography. For example, contemporary Chinese scholars such as Wang Anzhong (2007) have examined the format itself and suggested that long scroll painting is similar to the artistic expression of film. Wang collected the aspect ratios of the commonly used size of Chinese paintings and of the well-known Chinese long scroll paintings and then compared them with film’s screen ratio. Wang claimed that “the long format and the narrow ratio improves the linear structure, which makes the format of the long scroll easier to express the linear mobility of time” (2007, p. 40).

⁵ See for example, Jiang Xun’s A Contemplation on Chinese Art (2014) and Chun-chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher’s Time & Space in Chinese Culture (1995).

⁶ Extensive scholarly research has explored perspective in Chinese painting, forms, techniques, and principles. See, for example, Luo Shumin’s Focusing on Chinese Painting: Six Ways of Understanding Chinese Painting (2010).

Taking Chen Nong's work as an example, photographs created and/or displayed in the long format help break the limitations of space and time to construct an immersive and interpretive narrative, which can be seen in two manners. Firstly, through the settings of characters and landscape in a single frame as well as through multiple frames, long-format photographs offer different narrative structures to expand a storyline, such as the chronological narration in a lateral layout as shown in *Silk Road*. While each long-format photograph and painting is made up of multiple images, each image tells a single story, yet the continuous lateral layout depicts a much more extensive tale.

Secondly, the long format changes the audience's way of appreciating images. The modern form of display is in opposition to the traditional, in which only a small group of people (normally friends, scholars, or literati) enjoyed a painting at the same time in privacy and close physical contact with a painting.⁷ When a scroll painting is unfolded entirely, the audience loses the close, contained view while gaining distance from the image, which allows selection of the parts to be viewed first, the eye perhaps attracted by visual features such as physical format and color, all of which break with the traditional reading order by sections (Zhang, 2016; Feng, 2017). The format of Chen Nong's photographs embodies the sense of time and space that promotes narration of a complete story.

Each of Chen's projects shows historical events and stories in a long horizontal layout. Unlike a single image showing actions in a frozen moment, the meters-long series of images are chronologically arranged from left to right, showing the origin, development, climax, and end of peasant revolts in *Silk Road*. When viewing Chen's photographs, audiences travel between the plots and settings in an immersive experience of moving through time and space.

Post-production: hand-coloring. Besides reflecting his interest in history, Chen Nong has stated that his works are based on his imagination. By drawing sketches, preparing costumes and settings, and directing residents on location, Chen did his best to represent his imagination of a past. When some of the scenes in his sketches proved impossible to shoot on-site, he finished these images in the darkroom. For example, *Last Day of Silk Road* shows a mushroom cloud in the sky. This mushroom cloud was painted on paper, photographed with a film camera, and then added to the image during the enlargement phase. The boat and the huge waves in the image *Beach* were created in the same way.

⁷ Traditionally, to properly appreciate a long scroll painting, the viewer had to slowly unroll the scroll shoulder-width from right to left and then reroll a section before moving on to the next. In the process of opening the scroll, the stories of the painting gradually appeared frame by frame, and the viewer's focus moved with the scenes of the painting.



Figure 4. Three of Chen Nong's black-and-white photographs printed on watercolor paper, as displayed in the artist's studio. The clouds, boat, and spaceship were added to the photographs in the darkroom. Photographed by Liu Yajing.

After producing the monochromatic photographs with all the needed objects, Chen added bold and unrealistic colors by hand using photo ink. The hand-coloring of photographs, a technique invented in the 19th century, involves applying colors to black-and-white photographs. Chen regarded such a technique as a method to create an imaginary space because it breaks the reality of a photograph and expresses the artist's inherent emotions and personal imagination.

For Chen, the mechanical nature of photography produces realistic images, which can be a disadvantage in the reconstruction of the past, especially a past that is constructed by the artist's understanding of history and his or her imagination. So, rather than taking photographs, Chen Nong *makes* photographs to express his understanding of culture, history, society, and spirit. Some of the photographs make obvious references to recorded events in China's history that are already part of the historical and cultural consciousness; others are based on Chen's imagination, feelings, and understanding of history. Chen's practice can be referred to as the "staged" approach, the "fabricated-to-be-photographed approach," or the "directorial mode" (Marien, 2014), which highlights the photographer's investigation into visual and verbal signs, medium, and self-perception. His time-consuming process also seems to return to 19th-century Pictorialism photography, when photographers rejected the mechanical form of recording reality and emphasized the beauty of the subject and its inherent emotion to produce images that resembled paintings (Warren, 2006; Wells, 2009). Like Pictorialism photographers, Chen embraces labor-intensive processes to explore

emotional intent: “I must follow my heart; that’s a priority for art” (Chen as cited in Sun, 2016). All in all, Chen’s practice, as examined here, shows how photographs can be choreographed for the viewer so that he or she can recognize that a past story is being narrated.

In Chen Nong’s practice, history has been considered as a form of cultural memory, exactly like those of texts, images, and monuments, all of which contribute to the construction of cultural memory (J. Assmann, 2011b; Tamm, 2013). History is also a symbolic form “through which knowledge of the past is handed down in a culture” (Bodrogi & Tarczali, 2001, p. 463). Through imagination, history can be reconstructed and memory can be activated in works of art. Based on research into past events and contexts, Chen invoked his imagination to construct a story of ourselves and to envision the future of humankind in a novel way rather than representing a truthful history. Chen Nong’s practice proves that imagination as a mode of narrative is necessary in making coherent sense of the past and connecting it to the present and the future.

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From Reconstructing Cultural Memory through Landscape Photography in China

2000-2010