



THE CHINA BLOG

EVERYDAY LIFE IN MAO'S CHINA: A Q&A WITH HISTORIAN COVELL MEYSKENS

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By Tong Lam

In addition to teaching at the US Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, historian [Covell Meyskens](#) also curates [Everyday Life in Mao's China](#), a website filled with photographs and other images from 20th-century China. In this interview, Meyskens

discusses the project with historian, photographer, and regular China Blog contributor Tong Lam.

TONG LAM: I noticed that you have been posting a lot of old PRC photographs on your blog. Could you tell us more about this project? What are your goals?

COVELL MEYSKENS: In the early 20th century, Paul Valery predicted that one day in the not too distant future, it would be possible for someone to access information from all over the world without having to travel anywhere. With the arrival of the digital age, this prediction has become our reality. The possibilities that this condition has opened up for contemporary scholarship are truly exciting. A few months ago, I began my first venture into this realm, when I created the website Everyday Life in Mao's China.

The website came about largely by accident. Over the past few years, I had collected a number of digital photos of the Maoist period, but I had not made much of them, except as illustrations in my dissertation. Then, last fall, I began to show some in my courses to spur discussions. A few lively class sessions later, I realized how useful it would be to have a website where people could access all sorts of images of China under Mao.

So, as a public service, I founded a website on life in Mao's China and started posting photos and paintings from roughly the 1930s to the 1980s. I have chosen this broader timeframe in order to encompass China's transition both into and out of socialism. So that people can more readily locate images about certain topics, I am careful to appropriately categorize all postings. I also try as much as possible to include their date and location.

Where did you obtain these images? Did you collect them from the internet? Or did you scan them from old magazines, newspapers, or even from the archive?

All of the images are from the internet. The majority of images are from websites based in China, though I have found some on websites from other countries as well. I normally search for images using Mandarin, so most end up being from Chinese or Taiwanese sites. Some of the images come from Chinese archives, which have digitized and made public some of their visual holdings. These images are particularly interesting, because they tend to be more candid than pictures made for national media outlets like Xinhua. From what I can tell, work teams or local journalists appear to have produced most of this type of image. So, for instance, when a work team went to inspect a [railroad](#) or [city](#), sometimes they would bring a camera in tow and take images. In archives, I have not come across these photos attached to documents. The only photos I have seen are [ID](#)

[type](#) images attached to personnel files. This is perhaps because of the way that archives file materials. I am not sure.

In any case, another source of images is personal blogs, the biggest treasure trove probably being Sina blogs. Quite a few elderly people in China have written online memoirs on Sina blogs and formed online memoir communities, where people with common experiences exchange and comment on each others' memoirs. Some people have also uploaded images onto their blogs. Some of these photos come from other sources, such as [Xinhua](#), but individuals also post images that they took on their [own](#). One really large genre is photos taken by [sent-down youth](#), who probably due to their relatively privileged access to basic appliances, were able to use cameras to document quite extensively their lives in rural China.

As you know, there has been a resurgence of interest in Mao and the Maoist era. Within academia, scholars from a wide political spectrum have been debating the meanings and significance of this period. Do you see yourself contributing to this debate?

Many documents from Maoist China are very programmatic. They are bureaucratic objects. They are about how effectively local areas have carried out some task set by higher levels in the bureaucracy, such as collecting leftover scrap metal, achieving a production target, or teaching correct safety procedures. Their writers focus on telling upper administration about how they are handling whatever administrative assignment they have been charged to do.

Of course, there are also cases where local officials decide not to allow upper levels of government to see into local life and occlude from view certain problem areas or willfully neglect to respond to certain queries by upper administration. Report writers might also employ the reigning wooden language of the day, a dissimulation tactic that also provides very little insight into the happenings of a local area. Occasionally, a bureaucrat might bring up other issues outside the assigned purview of discussion, but bureaucratic documents normally concentrate their descriptions and analyses on a fairly defined range of topics.

I'm not surprised at all that these images as well as their intentions could be very diverse. Instead of speculating on their intentionality, for me at least, it is just wonderful to look at the everyday life, material objects, social and rural spaces, and so forth. These images are telling stories that cannot not be easily captured by texts.

Yes, images are a different sensory apparatus than texts. They allow readers to visually experience time and space in a way that is much different than a text. A document on a given factory might spend pages talking only about whether workers were meeting production targets. On the other hand, a few images can provide a window onto what sort of everyday [routines](#) and [activities](#) workers engaged in, what [clothes](#) people wore, what their [hair](#) looked like, how their [workplace](#) was arranged, what sort of [machinery](#) it had, how people led [work singalongs](#), what sort of tools laborers used, how well a [factory workshop](#) was lit. To cover such a wide variety of topics in a text, a bureaucrat would have to write a rather lengthy detailed report and would probably risk being reprimanded for not staying on point and not following proper report writing guidelines.

To look at the same question from a different perspective, some of the images on the EDL website are [Potemkin](#) images, which like the famed Soviet village present an ideal representation of socialist life for visitors to experience. In the case of photos, these are images where it is fairly obvious that a photographer has asked for people to arrange themselves in a particular place in a certain way and in which the people in the photos almost always smile, even when they are engaged in practices that would have probably involved a much wider range of emotions than happiness.

This tendency to have one emotion dominate the visual realm of socialist cultural production suggests that there was probably an official rule that everyone in photos distributed in the mass media had to look like they were enjoying what they were doing, as if everyday life was an experience of constant happiness in a country, like Maoist China, where people were in theory incessantly working for the creation of a socialist universe of experience not just [in China](#), but in the entire [world](#). Historians of visual images from Maoist China may have uncovered such a rule already, I do not know, but even if such a rule did not exist, the abundance of smiling faces in Maoist era mass media implies that there was at least a tacit expectation that photographers knew that a good socialist cultural worker would airbrush cheer onto nearly every visage approved for wide distribution.

To be fair, staging for documentary purpose is hardly unique to socialist photography. Many, if not most, of the iconic scenes that we see in poster shops are staged or at least reenactments of something that the photographer had encountered earlier. I guess your point here is that those socialist stagings are rather formulated. But are there also photographs that do not fit into this genre?

There are definitely counter examples, even for such icons of Maoism as [Lei Feng](#), who apparently rode a motorcycle through [Tiananmen Square](#). Other images show that the State wish — fantasy of socialism incessantly lighting up every face with positive

feelings was patently not true. For instance, [this photo](#) contains a family reading Mao's works at home. No one in the family looks particularly happy, enthusiastic, or excited, as the dominant ideology prescribed them to be when reading Mao. Nor do they appear to be especially enlightened, even though they are imbibing the great beacon of international socialism — Mao Thought. Instead, most of the figures in the picture look rather bored or amused that someone is taking their picture. Their minds seem to be not there, but elsewhere. They are not occupied with contemplating Mao's words, nor are they engaging in a lively discussion to more fully understand Mao. They seem instead to be distracted.

The Potemkin style of course was not restricted to images. It had a sort of analogue in the world of documents. It is the kind of document I referred to earlier which consists almost entirely of wooden political slogans, like “lift high the great red flag of Mao Thought” and other bureaucratic phrases that are almost completely abstracted from a specific place or time. These documents erase locality, subtract out geography, and make all China appear as a simulacra of the reigning ideology at any given moment. They make it seem that there is only one China that is the nearly the same everywhere. How a specific political campaign played out at a mine in [Sichuan](#) was exactly the same as how it was unfolding in [rural Hubei](#) or a [Beijing market](#).

Scholars of China use another type of simplifying language, when they, for instance, describe the few years after the Great Leap Forward (1961–1964) as a period setting the stage for the Cultural Revolution, all the while occluding from view the [plethora](#) of social practices [various groups](#) engaged in, such as [kids](#) riding a hobby horse, professional gamers playing in an international [Go competition](#), families taking [portraits](#), city folk attending a [Lantern Festival](#), a reporter making a newscast from a [flood zone](#), a family going to a [pastry shop](#) in Shanghai or taking a stroll in a [park](#), an old man receiving a [telegram in Lhasa](#), thousands of people gathering for an [anti-Vietnam War protest](#), holiday revelers setting off [May Day fireworks](#) in Tiananmen, engineers designing a [public bus](#) for Beijing, or an artist painting a [dam](#).

Every historian admittedly has to choose a topic, time period, and location to examine and characterize. But, for a historian to become aware of the [panorama](#) of practices current at any given time in Maoist China, she has to read a rather large volume of files from a number of different sections of the government, an endeavor that takes a huge amount of time and requires a high level of access to archives that is not likely to be possible in the CCP's current drive to keep out of view the archival secrets of its past and not reckon with them in anything but [political fables](#).

To attain the same level of scope, a handful of images sometimes suffice. For instance, another genre of photos on the EDL website is young people during the Cultural Revolution engaging in [leisure activities](#) such as celebrating the [birth of a child](#), visiting the [Leshan giant Buddha](#), or palling around with friends in [Beihai Park](#) in Beijing in 1967 and 1968, a time typically remembered as full of violent political factionalism, not a time for knitting a [sweater](#), practicing [martial arts](#), holding a [wedding](#), or [taking a selfie](#). Historical photographs also show the violent side of the Cultural Revolution in a different light. For example, they contain the kinds of weapons people had, ranging from [machine guns](#) to [improvised tanks](#), and what they did with them, which included a whole host of activities, from posing for [class photos](#) and parading [martyrs](#) around the city to [elementary school](#) red guards and students standing by [memorials](#) for their classmates who had died in factional struggles.

This last batch of photographs that you are showing here are indeed fascinating. For me, many of these images seem to tell stories that are beyond the narrow confines of politics of the moment. These are also images of young men and women coming of age. These are images of joy, sorrow, love, narcissism, and so forth. It seems that their emotions really do reach out to us — the spectators of these photos. The bottom line is that we need to read photographs against and along the grain. In short, your project encourages to use the Chinese socialist photographs, including those propaganda ones, seriously. This, by the way, reminds me of all the mockery of the propaganda photographs coming out from North Korea these days. Perhaps there are other ways to read those photographs as well.

There is certainly more to learn from photos of North Korea than how ridiculous the regime is. In general, ridicule tells much more about the biases of the person giving the insult than about the insulted. I haven't examined a large number of propaganda images of North Korea, but I am fairly sure that they provide avenues into understanding much more about life under the regime than how contemptible the [Workers' Party of Korea] is. Contempt is only one mode of analysis. There are many others.

Image: "[The Village Listens to the Radio, Beijing Suburbs September 1954](#)," from [Everyday Life in Mao's China](#).

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