

Public Welfare Photography in China

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Abstract: Public welfare photography, a combination of photography and public service, has gradually become popular in China. In an environment where photography is gradually popularized among Chinese, it is meant to play a more significant role not only in the field of public services but also in the way of communication. At present, it is of great significance to see the problems of the development of public service photography in China. Therefore, this paper looks into three aspects, namely, photography as a tool for “charity shows”, the excessive focus on disadvantaged person, and the aggressive side of public service photography. Current research and reports about public service photography are combined with image analysis in this paper. This research finds that public service photography is used as a tool to show off sometimes and has distorted the essence of public service photography. Photographers put the underprivileged under over-exposure to capture the public’s unnecessary attention and even show aggression

Keywords: public welfare photography, media studies, charity, visual analysis.

1. Introduction

The superiority of photography in public welfare lies in its powerful recording and communication ability. Nowadays the impact of photography on China’s public welfare includes the establishment of the Chinese public photography association. It guides the photography industry and public activities, including caring for disadvantaged people, taking pictures for them, and giving photography lessons for people who are passionate about photography but are in tough conditions. In this process, public welfare photography has also achieved good repercussions and public effects. For photographers, photography not only let them feel about goodness but also passes this blessing to people around them, and because of this, photography activities can contribute to public welfare. However, these activities have also negative impacts. The word “public service” does not necessarily free this style of photography from criticism.

In this context, this research focuses on the following three questions: Will public service photography become a tool for “charity shows”? Does it overly care about the disadvantaged groups? Is it too aggressive? This paper uses documentary research and image analysis to answer these questions, taking full advantage of current research and reports about concern photography.

Public service photography not only serves the disadvantaged groups but also causes some problems which are contrary to its starting points. This research finds that public service photography is used for “hypocritical” public services and activities thus leading to over-caring. The underprivileged persons are likely to be overly exposed to capture public attention which makes a negative impact on their lives and minds. Moreover, public service photography is also characterized by aggression to some extent.

2. Photography as a Tool for "Charity Shows"

Thanks to the powerful publicity and recording capabilities of photography, photography plays an indispensable role in public welfare undertakings, bringing countless public welfare activities and beneficiaries to the public's field of vision from corners that people cannot see. The public feels the warmth and role of public welfare undertakings. However, will such a powerful ability of photography be used by people with intentions as a tool for their own "public welfare show"? Although public welfare undertakings in China have undergone strict supervision and rectification, and there have been fewer scandals and darkness behind public welfare in the past, there are still many cases of using public welfare as a protective shell to seek benefits. The essence of public welfare is not to get fame and fortune. Moderate publicity can bring warmth to the public, but excessive filming and dissemination have already violated the original intention of public welfare, namely for the disadvantaged groups. It is a show with a public welfare gimmick, so as to gain more benefits in front of the public. Photography has become a tool to exaggerate the achievements of public welfare and is used by people with intentions.

Photography, as one of the most authentic recording methods, should present the most objective reality to the public. While playing its own role in China's public welfare undertakings, it should also hold a cautious and truth-seeking attitude in various public welfare activities, instead of making the public lose their trust in photography. The proposition of poverty alleviation through photography may subconsciously give some photographers a hint and illusion that they play a role similar to cultural preachers or artistic enlighteners. It is also easy to make people pay too much attention to the instrumental and even administrative orientation of images, thus largely acquiescing to the long-criticized problems of superficialization, typification, and preaching in such photography and ignoring the essence of photography. Public service photography is a comprehensive expression of technology and art, and more importantly, its effects depend to a large extent on the photographer's cultural accumulation, artistic ability, and historical attitude [1].

3. Is Public-Welfare Photography Becoming Overly "Caring"?

On the occasion of the ninth World Autism Awareness Day, the China Art School of Imaging, together with the Colorful Deer Autism Institute, launched the "Hope for Loneliness" public service photography exhibition. The concept of the exhibition is to show the inability of autistic children to communicate with society [2].

The general public may not be able to empathize with the feelings of autistic children in the face of cameras and strangers. Even for a normal adult, it is difficult to accept the sudden exposure and cameras, even if they did this in a kind and caring way. The media did not deny that the original purpose of public service photography is to call for more people to care for this group, but these autistic children's feeling during the process of recording and filming was ignored

The original intention of public service photography is to make photography humanistic. Xu Hongxu, the sponsor of the National Light and Shadow Project once said, "five years ago when I started to do public service photography, the biggest problem is the misunderstanding. Most people think that current photography is an area of economic interest and personal honor. Promoting public service photography makes many people feel incredible, and they may even think that you are either a fool or have another intention" [3]. He believes that the path of pro bono photography is not always easy and it requires not only financial and time resources but also courage and perseverance. However, some of the projects and activities of public interest photography seem to have deviated from this original intention. With the banner of "public welfare" in mind, in the process of filming the subject, unnecessary harm might be produced. In the end, the public service activity was a complete success and the photographer captured satisfactory material which gained public praise and appreciation, and the care for autistic children may also be increased to a certain extent. Nevertheless, the children were the ones who were injured in the process. It ran counter to the original purpose of photography and public service. This is not just the case for this activity. Photographers should also raise their cameras at the right time based on the different groups of people, rather than blindly shooting the public service objects, which is a kind of respect and real care.

4. Is Public Welfare Photography "Aggressive"?

The aggressiveness of photography in this era may be manifested in two aspects. One aspect is that it continues to expand in the direction of higher saturation and higher pixels. The emergence of various Photoshop software and filters makes the scenery in photos shrouded in a kind of artificial splendor and completeness; on the other hand, it is another extension of the "aggressiveness" of the lens, shooting more private, adventurous, and rebellious pictures to bring viewers emotional agitation [4].

4.1. An Extension of Documentary Photography

Public welfare photography is essentially an extension of documentary photography. In general, documentary photography refers to the real record of objective reality, but the "reality" here has two meanings. The first meaning is the reality of "representation", which means the objective reality; and the truth of "expression" refers to the "reality" in the connotative sense which goes beyond the essence of things but refers to the inner meanings. There are two kinds of contradictions about "reality" in contemporary Chinese public welfare photography. Furthermore, as it is argued, "photography's rejection of words is almost a primitive instinct. The figurative presentation and expression as well as the unparalleled equivalence between image and reality are enough to make photography defy any interpretation. This superficial nobility has given photographers an inexplicable sense of superiority for a long time" [5]. AmRlein also pointed out that documentary photography is defined by a highly skilled and dedicated photographer with any series of photographs taken by a wide-format camera that captures the realistic nature of the human, showing living conditions, whether good or bad [6].

The way of "reproducing" reality is the most basic one in documentary photography. It only requires the photographer to use the camera as a medium to objectively record the real environment he sees, but recording objectively is not easy. Photographers are the main body of creation. It is difficult to separate their own ideas from shooting. They often bring their own life experience and values into the shoot. The pictures are always full of personal feelings and prejudices. Therefore, can a photographic work that "expresses" the real thing counts as documentary photography? This is another controversial topic. "Hitherto, photographers continue to explore various forms of

expression, and they shoot in a certain artistic photographic way. For example, in the historical period of the process of photography, the distinctive periods are always associated with, co-produced by, and influence each other, but works, usually don't" [7].

The way of "expressing" reality will be freer for the creator. The creator can add his own opinions at will and finally present them in the photographic works in the form of various symbols. For example, Big Eyes, the most famous work in Chinese public welfare photography, is a photographic work about the Hope Project organized by Xie Hailong in the Dabie Mountains of Anhui in 1991. In the picture, a girl raises her head and looks at the camera. This photo moved many people far away from the city. At the same time, Xie Hailong also took many photos of the same series, revealing the living conditions of left-behind children in rural areas. Since then, "big eyes" has become a symbol. People have added many adjectives to describe the "big eyes". The most popular one is "desire". The child in the photo is still holding a pencil, lying on the desk, and so many symbols seem to push people to understand this work in a similar way that "poor children in the mountain villages opened their round eyes, revealing their thirst for knowledge". Xie let this "little girl" become a typical character. The reason why mainstream society understands this work and attaches so many labels to it is that Xie added a strong personal emotion to it. The emotions that photographers added subjectively are affected by many aspects, including social experience, personal social status, and personal views. Compared with the little girl in "Big Eyes", according to the mainstream society, Xie's social status must be higher than hers, so this also determines that Xie treated these children with a higher attitude when shooting them. The higher posture will inevitably bring sympathy and compassion, which also leads to a serious lack of objectivity in this work, but it can strongly show the author's personal emotion. Even though this work is full of personal and subjective factors, it is still respected and it has been the "Chinese classic documentary photography".

4.2. Field Investigation and Aggressiveness

Furthermore, for a long time, the basic research method of anthropology has been based on "field investigation". Yang Yunchang said that from a historical point of view, the field investigation images produced by anthropologists are the same as the social documentary photographs taken by photographers. Both serve very specific political purposes and ideologies. Examples include Lewis Hine's documentation of child labor in the early 20th century and the FSA photography program led by Roy Stryker in the 1930s and 1940s. Many examples can also be found in China, including Zhuang Xueben's images of ethnic minorities in the southwest, Zhang Zudao's video field investigation of Jiangcun from the 1950s to the 1990s, and the effective use of field investigations by some photographers during the documentary photography boom in the 1980s and 1990s. At the beginning of the 20th century, Edward Curtis's "North American Indians" made people believe that he recreated the living conditions of Indians, but his posing and romantic shooting style were later questioned, indicating that more and more people in the future will be skeptical that photos can reflect "reality" [8]. In this case, photographers are required to live with their subjects for a long time and be a bystander. In this way, people can more objectively understand the real life of the subject and can shoot relatively objective documentary photographic works. Contemporary Chinese public welfare photography lacks the spirit of "field investigation". A public welfare project can be completed in just a few days. This is an extreme means of "expressing" reality, imposing one's own personal emotions on the subject and trying to portray them as the poorest people in the world. In order to achieve the shooting effect, the photographer completely abandons the "reproduction" of "reality". For example, "Mother's Hope" shot by Edwin Ong Wee Kee, a Malaysian photographer was later exposed as a staged shot. The description of this work is only the author's personal interpretation. Such work has only "expression" and no "reproduction".

The biggest problem with the public welfare of modern and contemporary photography is the aggressiveness of photography, and this aggressiveness will be enhanced by certain factors, such as the relationship between the photographer and the subject and the state of the subject at the time. When a person is pointed by the camera, the subject will be alert or even unconsciously resist. For example, when photographing sick children, how can a photographer protect children's portrait and personality rights, prevent them from secondary injury, and protect their self-esteem? The inherent aggressiveness of photography makes good coordination and communication with the subject more important. The process of creation is actually a two-way communication process. Both the photographer and the person being photographed need to be respected equally, and they need to obtain the value of photography on an equal basis. It is also necessary to go deeper into reality, further understand the object of respect, meet the needs of modernization on the basis of respect, reveal the truth of the facts, maintain the integrity of the work, and reflect the changes in things.

It is the general trend of art to embark on the path of public welfare, and it is the success of the humanistic spirit of the continuous development of society. Photography, as one of the special techniques to restore life with picture authenticity and objectivity, should naturally be included. In this regard, Chinese scholar Hu Fei, who is responsible for related research, believes, "From a global perspective, survey data show that compared with developed countries, my country's public welfare investment in the field of culture and art is significantly lower. With the continuous development of the economy, many basic welfare programs are fully covered and developed, and there is no need for individual or group investment" [9]. Is the lens of public welfare photography standing too high to "look down" on the object of public welfare? Public welfare photography should not use the lens to override the subject but place it at an equal angle to the subject. Song Qiao, Vice Chairman of the Nanjing Photographers Association, said that combining photography and public welfare is not only a combination of forms and communication on the surface but also a way to serve the growing public interest in photography [10]. Before people picks up the camera, the first position is to be a "person".

5. Conclusion

Photography might become a tool used by people with intentions for their own "public welfare shows" in the immature public environment in China. Excessive filming and dissemination violate the original intention of public welfare and show a kind of aggressiveness and superiority. As an immature way of public services and a direction of photography, public service photography does not have a sufficient audience base and the public's perception of it is not clear enough. It is still a product of the combination of photography and public services. It does not have a clear direction for development. In the future, both Chinese photography and public services should be involved in more areas and bring new possibilities.

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