READING FROM CUTOUTS

THE AESTHETICS OF ALIENATION
IN PHOTOGRAPHS OF CHINESE FACTORY WORKERS

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RAI

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Figure 1   Product photography settings at the conference room at Tiantian Food.

Figure 2   Kimchi product photograph for Tiantian Food.

'When and how should we clean it up?', I asked Zhang, as we looked at the conference room in Tiantian Food,[1] a kimchi-manufacturing company in Qingdao, China. Zhang was the head of the design department at Tiantian Food, and I worked with him as a voluntary designer/photographer in order to study the production and distribution of 'Korean' kimchi in China. Zhang and I took charge of creating new product photographs for Tiantian Food's kimchi products. For our project, we turned the conference room into a studio (Figure 1). Boxes and old curtains were used to block natural light from entering the windows. The conference table was covered with white paper to create a background. A chair was used as a step, so that we could take photographs from a top-down view. A few strobe lights on stands surrounded the table covered with white paper. In the corners of the room were various kinds of background items and plates, ready and handy for the photo shoot. The sample kitchen, which was used mainly to prepare and test new products, became a place for arranging the food on the plates and decorating the kimchi for photography. For over a month, I created thousands of product photographs in various perspectives, arrangements and combinations. After multiple rounds of preparation, practice shots and reshoots, some photographs turned out to be good enough for commercial packaging and websites (Figure 2). Nevertheless, it was somehow hard to wrap up the project and move on. All the project participants, including me, felt we could eventually have created 'perfect' kimchi photographs if we kept going. We were hesitant to take down the studio setting and bring the conference room back to its normal role, feeling it could be useful one more time.

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1 In order to maintain the confidentiality of my interlocutors, I refer to them and their company by pseudonyms.

Xu, a general business manager at Tiantian Food, asked me to take photographs of production-line employees using the studio setting. Tiantian Food employed around 150 production-line workers. However, many personnel changes over the years made it hard for security guards to recognize and identify factory employees. Most workers, who came from rural towns far away from Qingdao, lived in the dormitory annexed to the factory building. Some of them secretly brought their family and friends to their dormitory rooms, despite management's perception of them as threats to the company's security and hygiene. So, Xu decided to introduce employee cards with photographs, to supervise workers' entry and exit. She could have used the ID photographs that workers submitted for their job applications. However, if the ID photographs were attached to employee cards, workers could easily fabricate a fake employee card by replacing the picture with another one. In addition, some workers submitted photographs taken a long time ago, from which it was almost impossible to recognize them. To prevent such forgery or confusion, Xu wanted us to take head shots of production-line workers, using the studio setting we had just used for product photography.

So, Zhang and I went back to the conference room for another photo shoot. We pulled out the white paper on the table to create a background. We saw stains from kimchi soup on the paper, but unable to find a clean one, we could only hope these could be obscured by subjects. We put a chair in front of the background, to be used as a step. We slightly adjusted the angles of the lights. We asked a company driver to sit on the chair as a model while adjusting the setting. We did not like the lighting, which created a shadow on the right side, but workers began flooding into the building before we could make further adjustments. We had to start shooting.

We could not hold them too long, as they would soon have to have lunch or return to work. One by one, workers wrote down their names and departments. Then, they sat down on the chair in front of the white paper background. In this way, I started my task of photographing of about 150 production-line workers during their lunchtime.

It took no more than 30 seconds per person, unless I had to correct their posture or facial expression. We had spent over a month taking thousands of pictures of kimchi, and we had thought that was not enough time. But we had only one hour during the lunch break to take pictures of 150 production-line workers. With the time constraint, I focused exclusively on their faces, the only part to be included in their employee cards. The photographs I took had the upper half of their bodies, but with limited time, I did not — and could not — care much about what they wore or how they wore it. I did not care if figures in the photographs were not centered or if the edges of the background paper appeared in the images (Figure 3). They could and would be cropped out to produce their head shots in employee cards. As long as I had a proper image of a face that could be cropped into suitable photographic ID, I said '*haole*' (okay), and asked the next person to sit down and pose.

A political economy of photographic aesthetics

This essay invites readers to compare different genres of images — product, portrait and ID photographs — taken at the same place by the same photographer, but with contrasting aesthetic dispositions. Situating their aesthetic differences within the contexts of photographic practices, and analysing how aesthetic dispositions were differentiated in the processes of preparation, review, editing and publication, this essay interrogates the nature of alienation in capitalist

Figure 3   Unedited portrait photograph that shows the edge of the background paper.

commodity production and its articulation in photographic aesthetics.

Product photographs celebrate the beauty and value of commodities by carefully arranging lighting, background and accessories. The investment of time, labour and money in creating them is justified by the potential profits good ones could help generate. By contrast, I took the factory workers' portraits in a very short time, reusing the studio set up for product photography with very little readjustment. Importantly, these portraits were by-products of ID photography intended to describe and identify subjects' physiological traits.

Nevertheless, as I will show, the workers' photographs embody the honorific features of portrait photography (Benjamin 1972; Maddow 1977). Putting a lot of care and attention into their appearances, especially their clothes, the workers participated in negotiating the meaning and aesthetics of their photographs (Azoulay 2008), attempting to register their aspirations and unique individuality in their images (Campt 2017). However, the workers' portrait photographs did not get published as the photographs of kimchi products did. Instead, they were cropped to be monotonous ID photographs embedded in employee cards and printed with a low-quality inkjet printer. Therefore, the aesthetics of their ID photographs is not inherent in their photographs, which present 'pure denotation' (Mitchell 1994:284) of their physiological traits in a monotonous manner. Instead, the realistic aesthetics of the ID photographs (Sekula 1986) is constructed by repressing aesthetic components that celebrate individual uniqueness, reducing subjects to replaceable bodies (Ngai 2005) with bare physical differences.

Presenting product, portrait and ID photographs, while describing the processes in which these were created at a Chinese kimchi company, this essay explores the political-economic relationships between company, workers and commodities articulated in photographic aesthetics. Rather than seeing the photographs as a reification of conventions in each photographic genre, I invite readers to 'watch' (Azoulay 2008:14) the tensions, oppression and alienation in workers' relationships with the company and commodities enforcing particular photographic/aesthetic conventions. Admittedly, the tensions are not readily apparent in the photographs themselves, especially if they are not seen side by side. Even when taken at the same place by the same photographer, the trajectories of these types of photograph barely converge. Consumers only see product photographs on packages and websites. Security guards only look at ID photographs in workers' employee cards. Workers did not expect to see their unprocessed photographs as portraiture. However, when the photographs are presented, together with the context as to how they were taken, edited and distributed, distinctive aesthetic dispositions reveal not only the workers' alienation from their products, but also their efforts to create ruptures in the formation of photographic subjectivity and conventions (Campt 2017).

The photographs I present in this essay were taken in 2017 during my ethnographic fieldwork at Tiantian Food. After I took workers' portraits for their employee ID cards, I asked all the factory workers for written consent on the public use of their images. In return, I printed out their portrait photographs as gifts and gave digital copies to those who asked for them.

Posing, dressing and being read

The workers' photographs turned out to be very satisfying. They were better than I had expected, or seen through the small screen on my camera. Choi, a co-owner of Tiantian Food, said that these might be the best photographs the workers would have in their entire lives. I realized, only when I looked at the pictures with my computer, that the workers were well dressed and took good care of their hair and other details. Some wore white T-shirts bearing the company's logo, which had been distributed to them a few years previously. The T-shirts were still very white, without any stains or wrinkles. Many middle-aged female workers wore blouses and jackets in vibrant colours — hot pink, emerald green, magenta and rose red — often with floral brooches and laces (Figure 4). While only a few came with their suits, many men wore collared shirts (Figure 5). They

Figure 4   *A female worker's portrait.*

Figure 5   *A male worker's portrait.*

were not as colourful as their female co-workers' blouses, but the shirts were cleanly washed and nicely ironed. Some of them must have changed their clothes in a dormitory or changing room just before the shoot.

Workers were well aware that they were being photographed for employee cards. The background was simply white. Its mode of creation – streamlined coordination of workers' mobility for taking pictures in a limited time (Campt 2017:22) – also exemplifies the nature of identification photography. Their bodily posture in the photographs reveals their acceptance of the conventions and aesthetics of identification photographs: no smile, direct eye contact with the camera, and straightening up their shoulders. Nevertheless, workers still put a lot of care and attention into their appearance in the pictures. It was still an unusual opportunity to have their photographs taken by a 'skilled' photographer

with a 'real' camera, strobe lights and a curated background. Their choice of clothes, intentionally or not, discloses their desire to be presented as individuals with a unique character and style on this unusual occasion.

The desire for recognition is also reflected and mediated by the printed T-shirts that younger workers wore for the photo shoot. Unlike older workers, who dressed more formally, many young people showed up with casual T-shirts. Thin cotton round-neck T-shirts would have been more practical, considering Qingdao's weather in late May and the coveralls they had to wear on top of their clothes (Figure 6). However, the English phrases printed on their T-shirts created a personal aesthetic as much as colourful blouses and jackets did in the older workers' photographs. More importantly, those English words draw viewers' attention and invites them to read (Colchester 2003:177).

Figure 6   Workers in coveralls on the production-line floor. Photographer: Heangjin Park.

Some English phrases were easy to understand and straightforward (Figure 7). Some required a little effort to understand because of minor errors in spacing, spelling or phrasing (Figures 8, 9 and 10). On the other hand, there were a few English texts that I could not interpret even after a long effort. Some were utterly mysterious, and could not be comprehended even with the accompanying images (Figure 11). Some presented no problem with spelling or phrasing, but still made no sense in English or any other language (Figure 12). A few were in broken English, or apparently random Roman characters (Figures 13 and 14).

As Nakassis articulates, these English words on T-shirts, 'written by someone else and produced somewhere else' (2016:119), were not taken up by wearers as a denotational medium. Instead, the English words were applied (by producers), chosen (by consumers), and shown (to people around wearers) as aesthetic devices to embody certain styles and characters, for which their visual qualities as English matter much more than what the English words denote. (ibid.:117–19)

Figure 7

Figure 8

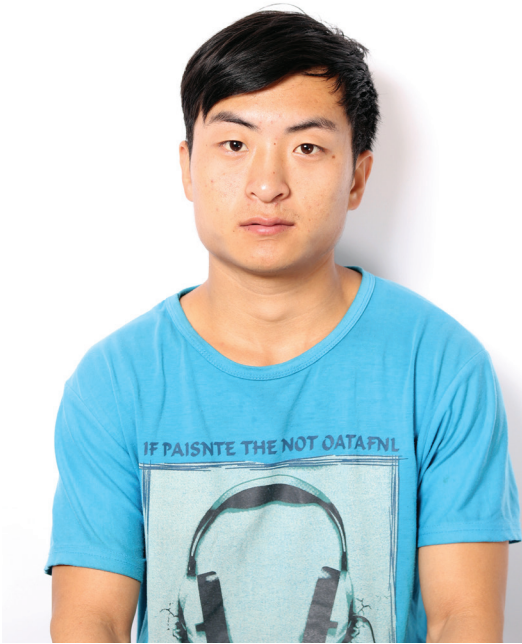*Figure 9*

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

Figure 14

Many working-class Chinese, like the workers at Tiantian Food, are familiar with English (or Roman alphabets), which is widely used in public signs and commercials. However, most of them do not have the ability to understand the meaning of English words or judge whether they are legible for English speakers. When they do not or cannot proceed with the reading of the English words, the hesitance or delay reconfigures their mode of attention. They stop trying to read and start seeing. Then, the English words become aesthetic components 'denuded of denotation' (Nakassis 2016:119).

However, the denotative nature of the English words is not completely replaced by their aesthetic and stylistic functions. The English words embody and project desirable qualities, because they are expected or imagined to be read: not necessarily by nearby viewers but by hypothetical English speakers somewhere else. It is precisely the same rationale as that for adding Korean, English and Japanese product names to the packages of kimchi that the workers make (Figure 15). Those product names, in various foreign languages, are not necessarily intended to be read by Chinese consumers. They are instead designed to provoke the imagination that they will be read by someone who does speak these languages: by Koreans who know better about the authentic taste and texture of kimchi; by Japanese who care about the quality and hygiene of food products; by English speakers who enjoy a cosmopolitan lifestyle and exotic foods. By addressing imagined readers of foreign words, the kimchi manufacturer attempts to position its products as authentically Korean and globally oriented consumer goods, implying their intimacy and connection to foreign consumers and global markets (Park 2021). Likewise, English words on a T-shirt could be seen as a 'cool' aesthetic choice because they provoke the imagination that words

Figure 15   Tiantian Food's Kimchi with English, Korean and Japanese product names.

are scripted, inscribed and read by someone with a cosmopolitan lifestyle, sophisticated taste and intimacy with a better and more affluent world.

In summary, the 'English' words on workers' T-shirts are barely legible if trying to decipher their denotational meanings. They are meant to be seen, but their charm is premised upon imagination that they would be read and recognized by someone else somewhere else. Thus, with 'English' words on their T-shirts, workers quietly resisted being identified by the physiological traits that indicate where they come from (Campt 2017; Pegler-Gordon 2009). Instead, the workers wish to be identified with where they aspire to go (Chu 2010; Wang 2016), with English words on their T-shirts indicating

desire to access a world of wealth, power, and fashion — a world where people read and write 'English' (Wang 2004). Quietly, they posed in front of the camera as they were told, but in so doing they presented portraits that enforced serious reading.

A space for portraits

The studio setting in which I took the workers' photographs was perfectly adjusted for shooting kimchi from various angles, but it was not suitable for taking portraits. I had very little time to readjust the background, lighting or camera. The workers did not receive the same amount of attention and care as kimchi did. While I spent a month taking thousands of kimchi photographs to get just a few images that were right, I could not spend more than half a minute for each worker, who could neither check their pictures nor request a reshoot. More importantly, we used the product studio setting because that was the easiest, fastest and most economical way of creating workers' employee cards. Ironically, although the photo shoot was hastily arranged, and proceeded without any investment, besides that already made for product photography, the setting prepared for the kimchi photographs was already far better than any previous photographic opportunities for the workers. The white background, prepared to highlight the bright red colours of kimchi dishes, made the workers' colourful T-shirts stand out. Powerful strobe lights, set up to create crisp images of every detail of kimchi products, created interesting contrasts on workers' faces. When a fraction of the spotlight reserved for commodities was shared, it could indeed create 'possibly the best photographs for workers in their lives', as the owner Choi put it.

Nevertheless, the aesthetics representing workers' personalities and aspirations did not

Figure 16   A female worker's portrait that did not make it to her employee card.

make it to their ID photographs. Although workers' clothes, hairstyles and other individual characteristics caught my attention, I had to crop them out from the headshots I needed for their employee cards. High-resolution images of their portraits were resized to be just good enough for printing to one square Chinese inch (*cun*). The cropped headshots did not look as good as the original portrait photographs, with the overly monotonous colour of headshots making the shadow behind them more obtrusive. I managed to take a portrait of a female worker who burst into laughter (Figure 16), but Xu advised me to use a less smiley photo for her card, as it was deemed more appropriate for security purposes. The headshots were embedded in the employee

Figure 17   Employee card template (names and company's logo being redacted).

Figure 18 Employee card in a silicon case. Photograph courtesy of Tiantian Food.

card images with names, departments, positions and the company's name with the logo. The card's background was light grey, which gave little contrast to the headshots with their white background. For the sake of efficiency, nine employee-card images were laid out in one image file, filling an A4 paper (Figure 17). These image files were printed with inkjet colour printers on regular copy paper, cut out one by one with a snap-off utility knife, and laminated with the laminator in the office. The cards were inserted in silicon pouches with colourful neck lanyards (Figure 18), which made the photographs on the cards stand out even less.

Ironically, English words on T-shirts, the strong contrast between the white background and colourful jackets, and the shadows behind heads were all included in the initial images, because the photographs were to be resized and cropped later. The availability of post-production — cropping, realignment and resizing — allowed the accidental inclusion of aesthetic components that deviated from the conventions of identification photography, and contributed to creating photographs closer to portraits celebrating the unique individuality of the subjects (Maddow 1977). But then the post-production processes realigned the images to the conventions of ID photographs by removing or nullifying the aesthetic components. Unlike foreign product names on kimchi packages, English words on workers' T-shirts were excised from the ID photographs. The shape and style of their clothes were barely recognizable in the ID photographs, as they were irrelevant for identification purposes. The colour in the headshots was monotonous, as the colourful clothes were cropped out, but that was not deemed problematic for identification. Even the low resolution and poor printing quality did not matter. As long as the photographs indicated gender, age and body size, they would suffice for security guards' work. They could even be resized to a lower resolution, so that they would not take too much processing time on my desktop computer, and so they could be printed with inkjet printed onto regular A4 paper.

Kimchi product photographs also went through a rigorous post-production process. Owners, office workers and online-sales agencies all gathered around my computer to choose the best product photographs, discussing whether lighting, arrangement and colour composition were all right. They could always find problems in the photographs, which often resulted in reshooting with new dishes and kimchi, and different background and lighting. Even when we settled down with a set of good product photographs, Zhang, the head of the design department, spent hours removing shade and dust in the photographs

that would be barely noticeable by consumers, who would spend only a few seconds looking at them. To sum, post-production for product photographs was oriented towards highlighting the commodities' best qualities while concealing the unappealing components, and often involving hours of retouching and redrawing. Everything surrounding kimchi — background papers, accessories, dishes and strobe lights — was carefully arranged to celebrate the beauty and value of the product, just as a portrait photographer would aim to portray the same qualities in their human subjects.

The post-production had the opposite effect on the workers' photographs. It solely focused on producing images that could be used for photographic identification while using minimum time and resources. The mechanism of photographic identification is premised upon the idea that photographs can capture a 'truth' about subjects that can be matched with the look of their holders (Pegler-Gordon 2009). However, such 'truth' is not found within photographs, but is constructed through various processes and practices (Sekula 1981; Tagg 1982), including the removal of 'irrelevant' components. Aesthetic components that celebrate the individual characters of factory workers, whether carefully arranged by the subjects or unintentionally deriving from the material settings prepared for product photography, were cropped out for the sake of 'objectivity' and efficiency. In so doing, the workers were rendered identifiable with low-quality and poorly printed headshots, and were reduced to replaceable bodies (Ngai 2005) with a few noticeable physiological differences. In fact, the reason the workers needed to be identified through ID photographs was that they were indeed replaced quite frequently.

The photographic aesthetics of alienation

The product, portrait and ID photographs I took at Tiantian Food's conference room follow the aesthetic conventions in the respective genres. Thus, when looking at them independently, they are typical product photographs for commercial use, portrait photographs with some interesting characters, and ID photographs that fit the purposes of identification and supervision. However, when considering how their aesthetic dispositions were made different from one another in the processes of photographic production, they articulate something beyond the rectangular frames: the political-economic relationships among the company, workers and commodities. On the one hand, commodities are photographed to celebrate their virtues and value, with a significant investment of time, resources and attention to every detail. Their relationship with the workers, who spend 14 hours a day making kimchi, is effectively effaced, while the products are rendered appealing and relatable to potential consumers. On the other hand, workers are photographed to be identified as bodies with a few basic physical traits, representing them as replaceable within factory production lines rather than as individuals with unique characters and dreams. The aesthetic, compositional and material distinction between product and workers' ID photographs reifies factory workers' alienation from the commodities they produce and their status as replaceable labour-power for the capitalist mode of production (Marx 1976).

We live in a time when photographic technologies are ubiquitously used for identification purposes, even if we are not always aware of it (Alba 2020); when smaller and better cameras reduce the need to have a professional photographer create one's portrait (Saltz 2014); and when numerous commercial

images compete fiercely for potential consumers' attention (Chapnick 2014). Nevertheless, the spread and advance of photographic technologies do not necessarily enable everyone to create, edit and circulate photographic images as they might like, nor do they negate the traditional aesthetic conventions in different photographic genres. Instead, the distinction in photographic aesthetics is reconfigured in various photographic practices and settings, articulating the political-economic relationships between photographers and subjects or among photographic subjects (Tagg 1982).

The photographs, nevertheless, do not passively reflect dominant socio-political orders in society. Photographic subjects, either intendedly or unconsciously, successfully or unsuccessfully, challenge the aesthetic conventions in photographic production, and register their aspirations and resistance in their photographs (Campt 2017; Pegler-Gordon 2009). Factory workers, being well aware of the purpose and convention of ID photography, did not completely surrender to the disciplinary gaze, but attempted to register their individual characters in their photographs. Therefore, the portrait photographs of factory workers in this essay not only show how the subjects quietly question and disrupt the 'modes of being and forms of visibility' (Ranciere 2004:13), as well as how their voices are dismissed in the political-economic apparatus in which photographic practices, settings and aesthetics are configured.

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