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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ON COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHY—SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ANNIE LEIBOVITZ AND CHEN MAN'S WORKS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the scenery characteristics of two outstanding female fashion photographers. Born in Waterbury, Connecticut, Annie Leibovitz is a regular big-name photographer for *Vanity Fair* and the highest-paid photographer in the world. She has developed a keen interest in photography since she was young. She often took the window as the viewfinder, and the scenery outside the window was the photo created by her associations. In her high school years, she has developed a strong interest in art. When she was at the San Francisco Art Institute, she met Sasha Michelle, a teacher who had a profound influence on her art career. During this period, her photography skills have steadily improved. Annie is famous for her unique style of portrait photography, and in particular, her celebrity portraits enjoy great prestige in the circle of photography. As a renowned female commercial photographer in China, Chen Man takes photos of many celebrities with exaggerated modeling, resulting in strong visual impact. Chen Man has been fond of painting since she was young, and she was sent to study in the Children's Palace when her mother found her talent in painting. Due to her mother's strict attitude, she successfully gained the opportunity to study in the Photography Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Involved in many fields during her studies, in a manner of speaking, she is a designer, a director and a painter, and also a promoter of traditional Oriental philosophy, which has played a great role in the promotion of her later aesthetic ideas in photography works. She skillfully combines "fashion" with "traditional Chinese philosophy".

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### INTRODUCTION

Photography and painting are closely connected, and painting has matured when photography appeared. In the early photography, painting's body language played a dominant role in pictures, and the crossed combination of characters in photos, the combination of layout and the use of light did not deviate from the mode of painting. Photographers deal with photography and creative photography with painting, which mainly relies on visual experience. In the field of photography around the world, there are all kinds of genres, among which realism and pictorialism are the two main genres and they have their own characteristics. Some of American photographer Annie Leibovitz's works are realistic, but most of them still belong to pictorialism. Although she is inclined to the style of pictorialism, she has her own creation style. In addition to reality, we can know the reasons for Annie Leibovitz's photography and the extraordinary hue and charm in her works, which make people be reluctant to leave in enjoyment.

The influence of western pictorialism on Annie's commercial photography works is self-evident, and in many of her works, character design, clothing selection and background matching seem to be a beautiful picture.

#### Westernized Commercial Photography Creation of Chen Man from China:

Photography started relatively late in China. Observing Chinese commercial photography in the context of international photography, its congenital defects and severe "hypoxia" can be clearly found. In the International Photography Awards, Chinese photography exists in the form of aesthetic salon, that is, accurate lighting design and graceful posture, which is the combination of an absolute elegant rendering and Chinese elements. In this state, Chen Man's westernized, modernized, and alternative attitude has suddenly emerged in the field of Chinese photography. Uncharacteristically, she subverts the traditional method, enters the photographing environment in a strange way, and gains approval in China and even from the world. Chen Man's success is well-founded, but it is also unrepeatable. The artistic concept of "Chinese learning as the fundamental structure" and "western learning for practical application" is becoming more and more clear. In Chen Man's opinion, China's visual growth in this era has changed from "quantitative change of copying

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like drawing a tiger with a cat as a model” to “qualitative change of independent innovation and self-discovery”, resulting in a new round of quantitative life process. In this era, she herself is an independent changing individual, creating a new and independent artistic language under the media in mixed times. During this period, her “Skateboard Girl” series and “Great wall” series are published in *New York Times* and in Germany’s *Der Spiegel* respectively. In the second stage, Chen Man-style image has got rid of some characteristics of students and combined with more diversified and complicated elements. Chen Man has incorporated her own ideas into her works, and each piece of photo has its own characteristics with exaggerated modeling. Each model is so sexy, which deeply stimulates the audience’s visual sense.

## SIMILARITIES OF WORKS OF CHEN MAN AND ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

**Color:** Chen Man’s works have distinct western color style, which is a photography of dynamic color using. Just as Pater has said that “all forms of arts tend to be the state of music”, western colors are increasingly moving closer to the beauty of music. The most obvious feature of color theory like the beauty of music is contrast, namely, visual pursuit of color purity produces strong sense of painting. The change in color shows different tensions, which makes the visual sense become more active and then gains audience’s attention. Through bold color contrast, Chen Man creates visual tension, so that the color composition in her works can show the color expressive forces of musical functions like rhythm, melody as well as chord music. The bold color contrast and tension expression of color brilliance are the same as the style of Annie’s commercial works. Just in a photo that Annie has taken for a Hollywood new star Whoopi Goldberg in a bathtub full of milk, Whoopi’s dark skin, like chocolate, blends with the background of milky milk and the pure white bathtub, and the whole picture is so simple full of sense of beauty. Whoopi Goldberg

**Modeling:** The characters’ features are accompanied by the expressions of the post-industrial society<sup>1</sup>, while the expression can be fully revealed through the comprehensive integration of color and modeling. There is no insurmountable gap between body and soul, and the key is how to look at the human body and how to tap the deep power inside the body. The human body is not only an ingenious space, but also a profound cinema, providing a stage for all creation and photographing—including body, mind, and even feeling—the continuation from inner mind to outer world, whether it is a dreamlike symbol in the lens of the human body or a body full of texture like concrete glass steel plate, whether they choose to focus on their own bodies, models, family, friends or select Valentine’s Day as themes, and whether it is directly similar to documentary’s techniques or the composition of abstract forms..... Regardless of motivation, photographing is scientific, aesthetic, and political, and photos should have a soul harnessed to show reflection on beauty in the visual process. Annie and Chen Man often have their unique styles in

terms of character modeling. What is the most prominent is the story-telling modeling and setting in their photography works. The dramatic scenes are created through the cooperation of setting, props and models, while the obvious personalities of characters are revealed through stories. Thus, the audience will feel as if they are personally in a stage play.

**Concept of photographing from female perspective:** Female photographers have more delicate emotional changes, and in our daily lives, female photographers have a more comprehensive insight in the process of photographing compared with their male counterparts. Looking around today’s society, the themes about women around us are more prominent in the media. In terms of the development history of photography, the fact that females have been living under the scrutiny of males and the reality that females’ exploration of life value and gender are ignored force female photographers to pay attention to the differences between individuals and others all the times. Therefore, when females express themselves, they not only choose different subjects for photographing and different explanations of expression from males, but they also make themselves become more independent individuals and no longer view themselves from the perspective of males. Instead, they go back to females themselves, express their personal feelings in a direct way, and pursue their own state of mind. Annie and Chen Man, the two female photographers, carefully observe in their creation with the characteristics including dependence on perception, focus on the process and simple conception. With a certain perception for the selected objects accordingly, they grasp this feeling to make it reinforced by personal factors and then permeated in their works, resulting in the formation of their own rules and styles, and finally the concept of photography has become a unique landscape.

## CONSTANT CHALLENGES FOR PHOTOGRAPHY AESTHETICS, EXPANSION OF COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHY’S LEVEL AND FIELD

**Progress of photography aesthetics:** Venus sculpture is a “disabled woman” with broken arms, but it has become a symbol of beauty. It is said that “red and green don’t match extremely”, but nature chooses to match red flowers with green leaves. Photography aesthetics has a profound impact on photography and has also played a significant role in the history of photography. Photography aesthetics studies the relationship and interaction among subjects, objects, ontologies and receptors and how these factors are arranged according to the law of beauty, and the specific contents are as follows: the aesthetic essence and aesthetic characteristics of photography art, the relationship between photography art and real life and the taking process of images, the relationship between photography art and painting art, the law of formal beauty of photography art, the development history of photography art and the alternation and evolution of photography art’s concepts, genres and styles, the creative law and aesthetic character of photography art, the aesthetic value and social function of photography art, and the psychological mechanism, process, characteristics, significance and methods of appreciating photography art.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Post-industrial society: also known as knowledge society, post-industrial society is the product of the further development of industrial society. Scholar Daniel Bell has divided human history into three stages, that is, pre-industrial society, industrial society and post-industrial society. Post-industrial society takes theoretical knowledge as the central axis with the intention of knowledge competition among people, in which scientific and technological elites become the dominant figures in the society.

<sup>2</sup> This paragraph is quoted from Xu Guoling’s *Aesthetics in Photography Art in Journal of Shangqiu Vocational and Technical College*, 2013 (1).

**Change of aesthetic value orientation:** In the modern society, the level of science and technology is continuously advancing, the market economy is constantly improving, the world market for cross-border communications is constantly strengthening, and people's horizons are also wider accordingly, so they raise higher aesthetic requirements for industrial products, household goods and building space environment. In such a context, the connotation of modern commercial photography also becomes quite complex. It is not only an art product, but also a utilitarian economic product, and as if it is incompatible with artistic beauty in the traditional sense. However, with the further expansion of the commodity economy, in some sub-cultural phenomena that grew up based on the development of commercial photography such as design culture, advertising culture and CI image design culture<sup>3</sup>, advertising itself has become a unique knowledge product because of their unique influence in the market. Economy and knowledge are in complete harmony in commercial photography, while the high added value brought by knowledge has become a key part of product economy. Modern commercial photography, bred in modern image culture and supported by modern science and technology, is an essential part of advertising. The use of photographic concepts into visual images, with other advertising factors like advertising slogans and copywriting headlines, is widely used in mass media like packaging design, posters, product presentations, magazines, newspapers and packaging.

Only from the perspective of photography art, commercial photography is the main subject of advertising photography art category, and it is still an aesthetic behavior of photographer himself or herself, which reflects personal feelings and ideas, and pursues the effect and charm of artistic pictures. However, nowadays, the communication of most commercial photography is derived from commercial incentives with the aim to satisfy the taste and consumption psychology of consumers. But judging success or failure by communication impact is as ridiculous as judging the artistic value of a film by its box office. Especially in the knowledge economy era, commercial photography is more and more inclined to be utilitarian, industrial civilization is increasingly pursuing high efficiency while abandoning high emotion, and advertising images are used to show economic and cultural power. What advertising photography shows is the aesthetic sense of product function and modeling, the design of the product and the convenience and fun of using the product in life to determine goods and services. In this period, functional beauty has become the focus that commercial photography and technical aesthetics concern. In the primary stage of consumer civilization, commercial photography advertising aims to cover up the shortage of materials and commodity resources by showing the practical function of material products. Therefore, for the product's external beauty (referring to products as photography beauty or being covered, or aesthetic knowledge products covered by product beauty), the purpose of its functions should contain internal connection, so similarly, the function introduction of the target product should include the aesthetic orientation value. In other words, functional product characteristics should be purposefully displayed, which makes the aesthetic form focus on the product structure itself, thereby

making it easier for people to get close to the product and achieve emotional stimulation.

**Communication Skills of Photographers with Models:** There is more to photography than just pressing the shutter. The whole process requires photographers and their subjects to communicate with each other as inspiringly and productively as possible. Sincerity plays a key role in communication. When Annie Leibovitz was photographing Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono in 1980, she was able to communicate effectively and excitingly with the communication skills she had acquired through training for 10 years in *Rolling Stone* magazine<sup>4</sup>. She also learned a lot from Lennon. What Lennon taught Annie and affected her entire career was sincerity. Annie likes to talk to people about photography while shooting, because she thinks it's good for everyone. A photographer isn't supposed to stay in a room for shooting and talk about something else, such as the weather, pretending he's not taking pictures. It would be a ridiculous idea. Lennon's frankness helps Annie a great deal. She understands that he wants people to understand and get along well with each other.

Every photographer should work professionally enough to cherish every shot and treat every shooting task with great diligence. Chen Man takes her shooting task very seriously. She is actually a photographer who is willing to do anything to get good photos. She would follow her subjects throughout the day as long as they allow it. It is in this process that she usually discovers details of the subject's life that no one else could have captured.

## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHEN MAN AND LEIBOVITZ

**Unique Language of Photographic Expression:** Chen Man's photographs are full of distinct traces of her previous dance learning, such as distorted body languages and exaggerated facial expressions. Her works are featured by fixed poses or movements untypical in Chinese photography (Chinese aesthetic symmetry, rhythm, etc.), which produces an ingenious attraction and freshness for ordinary Chinese audience. Her photographs reflect abrupt changes brought by deep-rooted western aesthetics to old Chinese images, which suggests a great impact on visual expressions for both Westerners and Easterners in physical appearance. It is worth mentioning that women in Chen Man's photographic works seem to have fixed patterns and stereotypes, which also confirms Chen's unique language of photographic expression. Annie Leibovitz also shoots boldly and constantly tries to push the boundaries of the public's visual culture by breaking the moral boundaries of artistic expression. From the point of view of art history, under the constant impact of ethics, artistic expression is trying to expand its richness in language expression and subject matter. Aesthetic life is also obvious in the visual art expression of mass media. Annie's photo of a pregnant Demi Moore on the cover of *Vanity Fair* is a visual expansion of the artistic expression of life.

**Combination of Chen Man's Photography with Chinese Culture:** Most of Chen Man's recent works reflect contemporary Chinese culture. She incorporates traditional

<sup>3</sup> CI image design: CI design was first proposed in the United States in the 1960s, and was widely promoted and applied in Japan in the 1970s. It is a brand-new concept for modern enterprises to move towards integration, visualization and systematic management.

<sup>4</sup> *Rolling Stone* magazine: It's an American magazine on pop and music that was founded in 1967 in San Francisco by Jann Wenner (currently editor and publisher) and music critic Ralph J. Gleason.

Chinese elements into her works, such as the Bund, Tiananmen Square and Oriental Pearl Tower. Modern makeup and styling appears more colorful against the background of these contemporary landmarks, which is a perfect combination of tradition and modernity. Chinese historic buildings, such as the Great Wall, Hutong and quadrangle courtyards, have inspired Chen Man, a photographer born in the 1980s, with a passion for creativity. Stripped of exaggerated embellishment, Chen Man's photography works have become more artistic and pure. As a typical Beijing young woman, her creativity and inspiration is still expanding, which may have something to do with the mixed culture she grew up in the Hutongs of Beijing.

**Annie Leibovitz's Humanistic Concern from the Perspective of Women:** Annie Leibovitz not only turns her lens to portraits in the fashion world, but also prefers to photograph refugees in the midst of war. This change is unlikely to happen if Susan Sontag's influence<sup>5</sup> is put aside. She and Susan Sontag (critic, writer and photography theorist) are very close friends. Under Sontag's influence, Annie begins to focus on the fate of humanity, and with Sontag's encouragement, she travels to Sarajevo and other hot spots to film war coverage. This is a serious challenge to her current reputation. She moves from the balance between entertainment and commercial photography to the other end of humanistic concern. It can not only be ascribed to the subtle influence of Susan Sontag. More importantly, from another perspective, it arises from her need for psychological comfort. In *"On Photography"* (1977) and *"Regarding the Pain of Others"*, we can see Susan Sontag's thorough reckoning and reflections on war photography. Moreover, as a close friend, Annie Leibovitz is a faithful executor of Sontag's photographic theories. Sontag encourages Annie to do better to develop her own unique style of war photography. Annie Leibovitz takes many stunning photos in the field, which leads one to believe that she can not only produce wonderful portraits of celebrities, but also navigate easily across a wide range of subjects. She is even more hands-on with shooting themes of humanistic concern.

**Attitude towards Post-production:** From Chen Man's point of view, sometimes the light and superb photography cannot fully express her ideal picture and content. So post-production is a very important part of her photography. She introduces the outside world to her studio, and tries to operate and create ideals in an arbitrary space of her own. The focus is the repeated consideration of images, which interweaves the thoughts and emotions in the mind of the creator through sensitive nerves and imagination. Eventually she manages to complete the pursuit of the ultimate ideal and perfect realm in a virtual world of information technology. She is a photographer who takes championing ideas and ideas as the essence of photography. In the digital era, powerful post-production greatly increases the creative space of fashion portrait photography and introduces more imagination into the digital post-production, thus broadening the thinking space. Annie greatly improves the overall level of her work through the clever connection between the conception of pre-shooting and post-production. Her powerful and innovative post-production often strikes the audience as holistic, avant-garde, mixed, trendsetting and particularly expressive.

## INFLUENCE OF CHEN MAN AND ANNIE LEIBOVITZ ON COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHY

**Changes in Aesthetic Thinking:** The name "Chen Man" is more of a symbol. Her photos are not limited to a photographic level. In fact, they are more of an aesthetic thought, which has influenced her commercial photography style in a subtle way. Chen Man's style is always diversified and even appears as a mix and match. She knows how to give a full play to every style, and even how to drive straight into the theme. Her earlier works are mostly a series of unrestrained conception and post-painting in photographic print media. After a while, the mixing and matching of various elements at home and abroad becomes one of the greatest characteristics of Chen Man's works. In an age of mixing, the intermingling of visual worlds becomes an important theme, so it is quite appropriate to apply hybrid technologies to rendering. One of her representative work in this period is the *"Skateboard Girl"* series where several skateboard girls show different characters: half-naked, Hippy, etc. Every girl has a story of their own, and every story could turn into an intriguing movie.

Seen from another perspective, in Chen Man's recent works, her creation techniques are more exquisite, the structure of her works more complete, and the fusion method of Chinese and Western cultures is more mature. In 2011, Chen Man launched her personal photography exhibition in Beijing, which consisted of two series, *"Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth"* and *"Four Heavenly Kings"*. She has always been adept at using her unique visual languages to explore philosophical systems of thought so as to take a closer look at social issues. In the series of *"Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth"*, Chen Man expounds the "Five Elements" in traditional Chinese philosophy and expresses her reflection on the relationship between man and nature as well as between man and society. The detailed attributes of characters in this series correspond to the traditional five-element classification. It tries to deal with some environmental problems faced by the contemporary reality of the Five Elements, suggesting that the whole living system contains energy of "life".

### Identity Expression in Female Photography

In 1999 Annie Leibovitz published her picture album *Women* featuring a total of 170 American women. Focusing on her visual perspective as the photographer, Annie makes a clever layout of the environment and a unique design of the styling so as to express the identity of the woman being photographed. Annie, as a female photographer, delicately and accurately depicts the situation of professional women, which deeply conveys the social independence of women. Her portrait photography reveals a delicate, tender side that is unique to female photographers, which is an important quality that male photographers usually don't have. She shows such a unique style when John Lennon curls up and hugs Yoko Ono. At that time, even she does not know how it would be, because she just wants to show how deeply the two are in love each other. Nowadays, women are constantly seeking for social recognition and true political ideals and their significance. In a sense, in today's art world, the ideal recreation of female artists has become a most novel part. But there are also some problems. In the process of self-pursuit, some women blindly expand themselves, resulting in a lack of tolerance and an inadvertent exaggeration of the privileges of women, which

<sup>5</sup> Susan Sontag (January 16, 1933- December 28, 2004) was an American writer and art critic.

will definitely hinder the commercial creation of female photographers.

### Conclusion

Through an in-depth understanding of the commercial photography works of Chen Man and Annie Leibovitz, the author believes that a photographer should form his/her unique style in the study of photography. A photographer should have a certain understanding of the subject, have good communication with the subject, and be rigorous and responsible for the shooting task. A photographer should be good at summarizing shooting experience and his/her own life experience to develop his own photographic style during the shooting process. He/she should also learn from other photographers by comparing between the works of one another. In commercial photography, the photographer could be inspired by daily life, because the most simple things around might produce unexpected effects. A photographer should take the essence and discard the dregs from traditional Chinese and western photography. In the future study of photography, it's very important to consolidate one's theoretical knowledge, strengthen his/her photographic practice and strive to produce good photographic works.

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