



In Pictures: A Collective Chronicle of One Century in China

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Untitled, from History of Life Courtesy of Imageless and Cai Dongdong

Comprising 415 found photographs across three eras, a new book from artist Cai Dongdong provides a parallel picture of a nation in flux

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TEXT Alex Merola

Though learning his trade as a portrait photographer while serving in the People's Liberation Army in the 1990s, Chinese soldier-turned-artist **Cai Dongdong** soon scrapped formalities. Today, he is known for riffing on Dadaist impulses (à la Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters) via what he calls his "photo-sculptures," in which he pierces found photographs with arrows, spades and so on.

Cai Dongdong can thus often be spotted sifting in flea markets, public libraries and trash heaps in search of photography to play with. His new book, *History of Life*, is the result of an epic editing down of 600,000 snapshots into 415 (for every one included, some 1,500 were excluded). "My selection process was uncomplicated and swift," he shares. "The decision to keep a photograph was based entirely on my intuition. Briefly glancing at an image comprises my visual experience of judging it ... Overall, it took six years. The entire process was one of slow growth."



GALLERY / 20 IMAGES

History of Life by Cai Dongdong

Awash in sumptuous sepia tones, Cai Dongdong's tome tells the story of the 20th century in three roughly-edged chapters: the founding of the Republic, the Cultural Revolution and the "opening up" period. But, while chronology is a guiding force here, Cai Dongdong's masterly edit is also supple in that it's willing to abandon strict sequencing in favour of visual threads. Coupling hitherto unrelated fragments from faraway histories – childbirths and bike-rides, weddings and arm wrestles – each spread, quite miraculously, thrums in melodious euphony.

Oftentimes, the political creeps into the private: schoolkids salute while elsewhere a lonesome Red Army hat sits atop a pile of folded blankets. Yet, without a parade or Chairman Mao poster in sight, it can be said that Cai Dongdong was, instead of pursuing a panoramic account of history, after something more akin to a feeling. "The people's spirit during each era was very different," he notes. "The construction of memory and history is neither complete nor precise – rather, it's imaginative or allegorical."





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With dates never detailed, we're left with sartorial clues to decipher the timeline. Mandarin collars and cheongsams are eventually replaced by western-style suits and even a top hat. Cai Dongdong also observes stylistic trends in family portraits: during the Republic, hair was "full of product," he says. "From the 50s to the 80s, people's demeanours were serious. But from the 80s onwards, people started to look more vivacious." Yet the book also attests to continuity as much as change: the appearance of a shadow selfie rebuts the trope's popular imagining as an internet-age phenomenon, reminding us that it is, in fact, as old as the medium itself.

Cai Dongdong maintains that this work is not as much of a departure from his practice

face of the concept of authorship, in turn embracing the democratic virtues of vernacular photography by proffering a “people’s view”.



Untitled, from *History of Life* Courtesy of Imageless and Cai Dongdong

History of Life is, to date, the closest rival to Thomas Sauvin’s *Beijing Silvermine*, a

The emergence of this treewheeling capitalistic circus, however, signals the wrapping of Cai Dongdong's deft chronology. His is a portrait of China that circumnavigates the political prism through which the country is so often viewed. Yet the title of the book, *History of Life* – not, say, "History of China" – suggests that the essence of this collective tale is even more transcendental altogether. What we call "history" – so vast and supposedly unknowable – is never so far away from the flickering moments of beauty that populate each passing day, year or, indeed, century.

History of Life, published by Imageless, is out now.

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