

## CULTURE &amp; ENTERTAINMENT

## From Shanghai, a Snapshot That Winks

## [ The Moment ]

BY JAMES T. AREDDY  
Shanghai

Male partnerships are easy to find in the worlds of boy bands and comic-book duos, but the two photographers who make up Birdhead are showing how two guys and a camera can make art in a fast-changing city.

For the past eight years, Ji Weiyu, a 32-year-old trained in graphic design, and Song Tao, a 33-year-old who once made money sculpting five-meter tigers for China's nouveau riche, have been documenting the ordinariness of Shanghai, their hometown.

Theirs is a Shanghai free of superlatives, a rough and dusty Pearl of the Orient often shot in black and white. The architecture is so out of vogue that sometimes all that's left is rubble. No one eats fancier than KFC.

But this isn't gloom—these two are jokers, and their photos are glimpses at the unremarkable. The effect is urban surfing, along banal city streets, into the subway and eventually home to a messy apartment. As Mr. Song puts it, Shanghai itself is riding "a wave."

Friends from high school, Messrs. Song and Ji began collaborating in 2004 with a book of self-portraits that they produced in just a month (the name Birdhead, they say, was suggested by a computer while saving photos). Mr. Song was already a photographer with gallery representation, and the book was meant to commemorate Mr. Ji's return home from a British university program. They printed two copies, and, according to Mr. Ji, lost one of them.

Today, Birdhead's work is much easier to find: They are part of the Museum of Modern Art's "New Photography 2012" exhibition in

The duo behind Birdhead appear in a photo from 'The Song of Early Spring' (2012).



Birdhead and ShanghaiART Gallery

Journal's James T. Areddy about their hometown, photography and the Facebook generation. Here is an edited transcript.

**The Wall Street Journal: As you call it, "the question everyone asks": What's up with the computer-generated name?**

**Mr. Ji:** We think it's good. Not "Pighead." "Birdhead."

**How do you plan your shots?**

**Mr. Ji:** Our plan is always very stupid, so we don't plan.

**Mr. Song:** Plans have no point.

**Your work has been described as speaking to "the obsessive documentation of the Facebook generation." Do you agree?**

**Mr. Ji:** You know, in China we can't use Facebook. The Facebook generation is everyone taking pictures and uploading to Facebook. This is the Facebook generation. Of course we are the Facebook generation.

**Mr. Song:** We haven't a website. We don't like uploading. We like printing books.

**Why books?**

**Mr. Song:** Every photographer

**Are you showing the ugly side of the city?**

**Mr. Ji:** We don't think we make Shanghai look bad. Shanghai is our home. We don't think our home is ugly.

**But your photos deviate from the modern look the government prefers to show.**

**Mr. Ji:** The government already has people to do these things. We don't need to do these things.

**Are you nostalgic for Shanghai's past?**

**Mr. Ji:** The past is always better

But we also like to shoot the Dongfang Mingzhu [Pudong's modernist Oriental Pearl TV Tower] and the Jin Mao Tower. We like these two buildings, even though Dongfang Mingzhu is very ugly.

**What impression do you want people to come away with?**

**Mr. Ji:** We can't control what people think. If people see these pictures and think, "You make very beautiful Shanghai," it's good for Shanghai. If you think, "It's very ugly Shanghai," then it's ugly Shanghai. It's not our business.

**Why film instead of digital? How did that make sense for two guys starting out with no money?**

**Mr. Ji:** At that time, digital was the more expensive, film was cheaper.

**Mr. Song:** The [digital] camera design for us was very ugly, not beautiful. In the 1960s, the 1980s, the camera factories, they designed a lot of very beautiful cameras.

**Mr. Ji:** The only cameras we use are used. We only have two or three new cameras.

**Why do you put the date on many photos but not provide other information, like the location?**

**Mr. Ji:** The date for a photo is a good idea, because the photo captures the time.

We don't want naked. We just want to wear underwear. [Location] takes away all the clothes.

**Mr. Song:** If the picture also tells you "where"—too much.

"When" is OK. The time is OK. The address is too much. It's stupid. The feeling will change to very, very boring.

**Mr. Ji:** It's not a picture. Too cold. Not warm.

**Mr. Song:** Another reason: Here is where. The picture tells you where. It's totally enough. It's why, in our books, we haven't written too much text. In a lot of tradi-

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Over coffee, soda water and cigarettes (Zhongnanhai for Mr. Ji, Double Happiness for Mr. Song) on a drizzly afternoon, the duo talked with The Wall Street

Birdhead and Shanghai Art Gallery



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**Mr. Song:** Plans have no point.

**Why don't you identify the photographer?**

**Mr. Ji:** We always know. For the outsiders, it doesn't matter. It's a Birdhead book. You don't need to know which one is Ji, which one is Song. You can guess. Not important.

**Your work has been described as speaking to "the obsessive documentation of the Facebook generation." Do you agree?**

**Mr. Ji:** You know, in China we can't use Facebook. The Facebook generation is everyone taking pictures and uploading to Facebook. This is the Facebook generation. Of course we are the Facebook generation.

**Mr. Song:** We haven't a website. We don't like uploading. We like printing books.

**Why books?**

**Mr. Song:** Every photographer likes books, so we did books.

**Mr. Ji:** We are very stupid online. We don't know how it works.

**Mr. Song:** He doesn't know, and me too.

**Mr. Ji:** We tried three times to do a website. Failed. So we don't do this. Face-to-face is better.

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**Are you nostalgic for Shanghai's past?**

**Mr. Ji:** The past is always better than now? Not always. Of course we have some memories.

They always destroy buildings and build a new building. Sometimes you feel sad...where you played when young, the area already disappeared. You can't find any memory.

Shanghai. It's not our business.

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**Online»**

See more of Birdhead's photography of Shanghai at [WSJ.com/Scene](http://WSJ.com/Scene).

