



# Visual Presentation of Body Symbols in the Postmodern Context: A Content Analysis of Chinese Winning Works in the World Press Photo Contest

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**Abstract.** Drawing on the embodiment theory, semiotic theory, and theoretical discussions about the body, this study conducts a content analysis of Chinese winning works in the World Press Photo Contest (WPPC) between 1988 and 2023. We analyzed the social attributes of the body, photographic techniques, and visual presentations. Results show that these works present artistic, catastrophic, political, and resistance body symbols, and are characterized by postmodern artistic features such as fragmentation, conflict, and imagery. We conclude that the body can play an active role in journalism photography, reflecting the significance of embodied communication in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Body symbol; World Press Photo Contest; Postmodern; photojournalism; Embodiment.

## 1 Introduction

According to Saussure, cultural components such as language and words are symbols, which can be interpreted through semiotics [1]. With the process of symbolization of the body gaining prominence, Baudrillard developed the theory of body consumption, explaining how the body becomes a commodity in the media. Baudrillard argued that the body, as a commodity, is a kind of symbol for consumers [2]. Today, postmodernism, as a prevailing sentiment, exists in daily life and is widely reflected in various artistic fields, including photography. News photography exhibits high documentary and news value, enabling it to convey more information than general photographic works. The World Press Photo Contest (WPPC) is one of the most authoritative international professional news photography competitions, which is open to journalists and freelance photographers all over the world. The body symbols presented in photographic works that gained universal recognition in the competition not only reflected how photography influenced the portrayal of body symbols but also revealed how the artistic trend changed the significance of body symbols in the context of postmodernism. Meanwhile, in order to explain how body symbols influence and regulate various

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dimensions of social interactions, we need to draw upon the concept of embodiment from the phenomenology of embodiment developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Maurice Merleau-Ponty thought that the subjectivity of humans lies in their active engagement as living beings, intervening in the world through the distinctive physiological structure of the human body. "Embodiment" refers to the characteristic of incorporating non-body elements into one's body and forming a connection between those non-body objects and the body [3]. Cognitive scientists Lakoff and Johnson explore the mind-body relationship following the framework of perceptual phenomenology. They proposed that the conceptual system and cognitive abilities can be shaped by the brain, body, and the interaction between bodies [4]. Therefore, it can be observed that embodiment emphasizes the integration of mind, body, and environment as a unified whole. As one of the most significant themes in postmodern photography, the human body is encoded by photographers as a body symbol with special significance. Beyond reflecting identity information such as age and gender, the body symbol can be decoded by viewers to convey various meanings, which possesses great social values and significance.

Currently, studies about body symbols in photographic works prefer to apply the case study approach. And in these studies, the body in photographs is commonly regarded as an object of observation or a container representing social realities. For instance, Hai Jie considers the body as an objective landscape and believes that artists express their perspectives on reality through the body portrayed in photography [5]. Additionally, previous research on the WPPC's winning works has mostly focused on visual rhetoric, photography techniques, semiotics, and narratology. They provided a comprehensive analysis of the origins, themes, artistic techniques, and news value of the award-winning works, and also analyzed the works from various perspectives, such as China's image, female representation, and refugee imagery. For instance, by using the combination of content analysis, observation of the judging process, and making semi-structured interviews with the judges, Marta, et al found that the WPPC winners guide viewers to a universal understanding of war and disasters through visual metaphors [6]. Besides, other research has studied the representation of the body in postmodern photography, which mainly focused on the relationship between visual rhetoric and persuasive practices. For example, Hill and Heilmers have adopted a multidisciplinary approach to examine the connection between visual images and persuasion, in order to understand how images influenced readers [7]. It can be observed that existing research has been predominantly from the perspective of visual rhetoric, while limited research investigated the embodiment of news photography using communication theory. What's more, the exploration of the underlying significance behind the representation of bodily symbols in news photography has not been sufficiently deepened. Therefore, our study focused on the body symbols presented in the winning works of Chinese photographers from the WPPC. Specifically, we will answer the following research questions: "What visual rhetorical characteristics are manifested in the photography works?" "What kind of body images do these works construct?", and "What representative types of bodily symbols are presented?"

## 2 Method

Our study uses content analysis to analyze the content, artistic techniques, theme, and body symbols present in the photography works. We collected a total of 47 winning works from Chinese photographers in the WPPC 1988-2023. After excluding works that do not contain the whole body or parts of the body, we obtained a total of 38 samples. As our study focuses on body symbols, for the sake of convenience, we categorized the photography works into two groups: those containing the human body and those without the human body. We labeled "human body photography" and "non-human body photography" respectively. The criterion for assigning the "non-human body photography" label is when a work does not contain the human body at all. The term "human body" refers to clearly defined and realistically depicted physical bodies present in the images, while sculptures, doll models, and blurred body images are not considered as the human body. We applied frequency analysis and categorical analysis to design the coding scheme. And the statistical results of theme categories and body presentations are as follows (Table 1):

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of theme categories and body presentations in the WPPC award-winning works by Chinese photographers

Theme	Number of Awards	Percent of Works with Human Body
Sports	10	100%
Arts	7	100%
Technology	1	100%
Long-term Project	1	100%
News <sup>1</sup>	7	85.7%
Portrait	6	83.3%
Current Affairs <sup>2</sup>	6	83.3%
Daily Life	2	50%
Nature	7	28.57%
Total	47	80.85%

<sup>1</sup> News photography includes both general news and breaking news.

<sup>2</sup> We categorize the photography work *Dim Light in the Abandoned Building* as a long-term project, which won the Honorary Award in the 66th (2023) Asian Photography Competition.

It can be seen that the proportion of award-winning works by Chinese photographers in WPPC that include body symbols is over 80%. In specific categories like sports, arts, technology, and long-term projects, the proportion reaches 100%. The results show that the visual presentation of body symbols is highly valued by both Chinese photographers and WPPC judges. We further analyze the social attributes, shooting techniques, and body presentations, The results are shown in Table Two.

**Table 2.** body symbols in the award-winning works by Chinese photographers in WPPC

Category		Frequency	The proportion among works with body presentations	
A. social attributes	A1. quantity	1.single person	13	34.21%
		2. Small-sized group (consisting of 2 to 10 people)	18	47.37%
		3.Large-saized group (consisting of more than 10 individuals)	7	18.42%
	A2. The age of main subjects	1. Children	5	13.16%
		2. Middle-aged and young adults	14	36.84%
		3. Elderly people	3	7.89%
		4 Children + Middle-aged and young adults	2	5.26%
		5. Children + Elderly people	0	0
		6. Middle-aged and young adults + Elderly people	5	13.16%
		7. Children + Middle-aged and young adults + Elderly people	5	13.16%
	A3. The gender of main subjects	8. Hard to identify	4	10.53%
		1. Male	13	34.21%
		2.Female	9	23.68%
		3.Male+Female	15	39.47%
B. shooting techniques	B1. Color	4. Hard to identify	1	2.63%
		1. Color Image	31	81.58%
	B2. shots	2. Grayscale Image	7	18.42%
		1. full shot/ long shot	23	60.53%
		2. medium shot/ medium closeup	11	28.95%
		3. close up	4	10.53%
C. body presentations	C1. Nudity	1. Full nudity	1	2.63%
		2. Partial nudity	15	39.47%
		3. Non-nudity	22	57.89%
	C2.Emotion	1. Positive	11	28.95%
		2. Negative	15	39.47%
		3. Neutral	12	31.58%

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Visual Rhetorical Characteristics

##### **Fragmentation.**

According to Table 2, the award-winning works by Chinese photographers in the WPPC often adopt a middle shot, close-up, or detailed shot to present partial body parts (N=15, 39.58%). This proportion is relatively high compared to news photography, which mostly utilizes long shots or wide shots. In these works, the human body is deconstructed into fragments such as fingers, arms, and heads. And the unique functions of a particular body part are magnified. For instance, the work "Blood on the Arena" portrays a judo athlete being injured during a competition. The legs supporting the body, fingers, and dripping blood are depicted in close-up, allowing viewers to vividly feel the intensity of competitive sports and the fighting spirit of athletes. In "Battle on the Parallel Bars," the dynamic shadows produced by the athletes' movements add a sense of motion, highlighting the strength of the arms and the aesthetic appeal of the performance. These fragmented body parts stimulate viewers' associations with other parts of the subjects, such as the expression of endurance on the injured athlete's face or the graceful lines of the gymnast's torso and legs. These reflect the characteristics of fragmentation in postmodern photography.

##### **Contradiction and Conflict.**

In the sample works, the number of body symbols ranges from 2 to 10, and nearly half of the works (N=18, 47.73%) include small groups composed of bodily symbols. These works exhibit strong visual conflict, manifested in the conflicts between the small groups and their external environment or within the small groups themselves. In the work "Dafen Oil Painting Village," the distinct difference between the Eastern features of Chinese painters and the Western features they depict in their oil paintings creates a striking visual contrast. The use of a single skin tone for their bare bodies also contrasts sharply with the vibrant colors in the oil paintings, causing a strong visual conflict. In the work "Saving the Bride Who Jumps Off the Building," the contradiction between the bride in her wedding dress and the surrounding ordinary-dressed crowd, along with the expected joy of marriage and the desperation of jumping off, also creates an intense conflicting situation. Contradiction and conflict are one of the characteristics of postmodern photography, which can cause viewers' curiosity and attention, compelling them to explore the reasons behind the contradictions depicted in the images.

##### **Narrativity and Imagery.**

We discovered that in some sample works, it is difficult to determine the age and gender of the photographed subjects because the body symbols in these works are more like imagery. They only need to "be here" to present a relatively complete narrative, and there is no need to be "clearly seen." For example, in the work "Monkey Play," the body is represented by a hand holding a whip, with no inclusion of the head or shoulders. From the fearful expression of the monkey, viewers can infer the cruel nature of the

person, expressing criticism towards those who abuse animals. In the work "Dim Light in the Abandoned Building," the body is facing away from the camera. This work illustrates the scene of people inside the abandoned building looking toward the outside lights, in order to tell the story of the pain brought to ordinary people by the Chinese real estate crisis. These imagery body symbols enhance the narrative of the images and expand the depth of the news being conveyed.

### 3.2 Representative body symbol types

#### **Artistic body symbols.**

The award-winning works of Chinese photographers often embody not only the physical body itself but also its symbolic significance. Among the samples, works reflecting positive emotions (28.95%) often use the body as an artistic symbol, which explores and shows the aesthetics of the human body to express affirmation and admiration for humanity itself. One of the most representative works is the photo series "Moments of Sports in 2007." The photographer skillfully uses light and shadow to highlight the graceful hand movements of synchronized swimmers. Additionally, the photographer places the body against a grand background environment, such as capturing the silhouette of mountain bikers in a vast and geometrically beautiful desert, which adds to the artistic quality of the entire work. Similar works include "Synchronized Swimming". In these works, the human body is undeniably the center of the image, emphasizing the beauty of strength, lines, and the underlying spirit of struggle. This not only affirms the beauty of the human body but also reflects a postmodernist inclination towards affirming the essence of humanity itself.

#### **Catastrophic body symbols.**

In the samples, fully nude and partially exposed works account for 42.11%, which is higher in nudity compared to other news photography. The photograph work "AIDS Village" depicts people suffering from AIDS, with a large portion of their bodies exposed, emaciated, and skeletal. "Monks Cremating Victims" shows stacked and completely naked bodies of victims. These are victims of disasters, including both natural disasters like earthquakes and human-made disasters like AIDS caused by unsafe blood-selling practices. They visually present the morbidity and horror of death.

#### **Political body symbols.**

In the samples, works featuring body symbols representing different age groups, including children, young adults, and the elderly, account for 13.16%(N=5). Works with more than 10 body symbols representing a large group of people account for 18.42%(N=7). When the subject is a national leader with strong political significance, the works often take the form of group portraits, aiming to portray the leader as approachable and respectable. For example, "Deng Xiaoping in Retirement" displays scenes of Deng Xiaoping's harmonious life with his family after his retirement, portraying him as approachable. "Returning Home" records scenes of the people's enthusiasm for artistic works like Mao Zedong's portraits, portraying Mao Zedong as respectable.

**Resistance body symbols.**

In the samples, works expressing negative emotions have the highest proportion, accounting for 39.47%(N=15). In "Push-Ups," the photographer is fully naked, doing push-ups at the location where a controversial social event occurred. The photographer's nakedness is inappropriate for the surrounding modern architecture, creating a sense of strangeness and absurdity. This collision captures the viewers' attention and prompts them to explore. The use of the naked body as a symbol of protest is not uncommon in modern society, such as for environmental issues or advocating for the rights of minority groups. However, employing it in news photography is innovative.

## 4 Conclusion and Discussion

Our study focused on body symbols in the award-winning works by Chinese photographers in the World Press Photo Contest. We found that these works present artistic, catastrophic, political, and resistance body symbols, embodying postmodern artistic characteristics such as fragmentation, conflict, and imagery. These bodies did not merely play a role as passive objects of observation or instruments for representing social realities. Instead, they exert a potent agency through news photography, embodying a congruence with the paradigm shift in postmodern philosophical theories that emphasize the notion of embodied agency. In the discourse of postmodern philosophy regarding the body, Nietzsche was among the first to take the body as an object of study, proposing that the body is not a slave oppressed by the subject but rather the embodiment of the forces of the world [8]. Following Nietzsche's focus on the strength of the body, Deleuze regarded strength as desire, which possessed the potential to produce and create reality. He argued that the body could actively create reality through the eruption of sensations and the flow of desires [9]. This further exemplifies the initiative of the body. Foucault believed the disciplinary power in modern society had molded individuals into "docile bodies" [10]. This seemed to return to a discourse emphasizing the passivity of the body, but his theory carries a distinct subversive quality, aiming to dismantle various mechanisms of bodily discipline such as laws, prisons, and rationality. The initiative of the body was not entirely lost. According to Saussure's linguistic theory, language is viewed as a conceptual expression of symbols, and other symbols comprising the world were related to linguistic symbols [11]. Similarly, in the award-winning works by Chinese photographers, bodies are not silent or passive subjects. Instead, they actively engage in "expression", displaying the forces of the body akin to Nietzsche's and Deleuze's theory.

At the same time, the relationship between media technology and the body has always been an unavoidable issue in communication research. As Peters wrote in "Speaking into the Air," the status of the body has been diminishing, while the "anxiety of how technology affects humanity" has always existed [12]. Some researchers emphasized disembodiment, such as Hitler's "information materialism" [13]. In the realm of photography, the body seems to be gradually distorted and detached due to technological advancements. Post-processing techniques can beautify the body, and VR can even create new bodies in cyberspace according to our preferences. Such bodies appear more

beautiful than reality, seeming to foster an increasing resistance towards our own physical reality. Maurice Merleau-Ponty posited that the core of "embodiment" is not "I think" but "I am". In other words, our cognition does not merely mirror the external world, rather, it emerges from our bodies and movements [14]. From this perspective, photography can be regarded as an art of embodiment. Firstly, photography is the interaction between the human body and the camera. Our bodies are both important subjects of photography and the controller of the camera. Secondly, in photojournalism, the power to evoke people's emotions is authenticity, which needs real bodies as evidence. For example, works like "AIDS Village" evoke a strong sense of "terror" through the depiction of diseased bodies. Lastly, photography with body symbols is an interplay of bodies. The photographer's thoughts and the symbolic meanings of the photographed bodies communicate with the viewer through the medium of photography. Only when originating from actual bodies of the same kind, can reduce the loss of meaning in the transmission between bodies and evoke maximum empathy. For this reason, only authentic bodies can effectively portray and stimulate the spirit of resistance in postmodernism. The visual representation of these bodies in photography needs further exploration, involving deeper philosophical and aesthetic considerations.

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