

Return Home: Photographic Report of a Journey

Retorno a casa: reportaje fotográfico de un viaje

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Resumen: Desde el principio del nuevo milenio una nueva generación de fotógrafos en China decidió embarcarse en un viaje en dirección contraria, volver desde las grandes metrópolis chinas o desde el extranjero y viajar a sus lugares de origen. Aunque cada uno de ellos desarrolla sus trabajos con un toque personal y representa escenas particulares, todos se centran en la misma dirección de su viaje: volver a casa.

Me refiero a fotógrafos como Zeng Han 曾翰, Su Jiehao 苏杰浩, Mu Ge 木格, Zhu Lanqing 朱岚清, Zhang Wenxin 张文心 and Zhang Xiao 张晓. Fotógrafos con diferentes orígenes y edades, que parece han decidido emprender el mismo camino.

No se quiere sugerir un nuevo patrón, ni introducir una nueva tendencia en la fotografía contemporánea china. Sino quiero mostrar como estos trabajos fotográficos comparten intenciones y sentimientos comunes en un periodo de irrefutable cambio.

Palabras clave: Fotografía china, Regreso a casa, Sentido de lugar, Hogar, Desarrollo urbano.

Abstract: Since the beginning of the new millennium a new generation of photographers in China decided to take a journey in the reverse

direction, to return from the Chinese big cities or from abroad and travel back to the places of their origin. Even though each of them developed their works with a personal approach and depicted particular scenes, they all focused on the same direction of their path: returning home.

I refer to photographers such as Zeng Han 曾翰, Su Jiehao 苏杰浩, Mu Ge 木格, Zhu Lanqing 朱岚清, Zhang Wenxin 张文心 and Zhang Xiao 张晓. Photographers with different origin and different age, who seem to have decided to undertake the same path.

I do not want to suggest a new pattern and neither introduce a new tendency in contemporary Chinese photography. But I want to show how these photographic works shared common intentions and feelings in a period of irrefutable changes.

Keywords: Chinese Photography, Return, Sense of place, Homeland, Urban development.

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Return Home: Photographic Report of a Journey

Photography usually narrates new paths to discover new and unexplored worlds. Sometimes it is the attempt to show a new point of view about something that has already been immortalized by cameras many times before. In this article I will analyse a few photographic projects which are a sort of travel photography. The trip in this case, is in the inverted direction. The authors that I will present embark on a journey to and through their own original places. They will not move through mysterious routes because they will travel on paths that they have already been on in the past. It is a spatial journey, because it is from the places where they currently live to their childhood places, from where they left years ago, in order to make their dreams come true. Similarly, it is also a journey through time, to rediscover their own past, or at least of what is still left intact of their past.

The photographic medium becomes the ideal artistic medium to document the journey. Like a prosthesis of the photographer's body, or the extension of their own experiential capabilities, it is perfect to represent the artist's intimate world. The photographs of these artists are a testimonial of what their childhood places consisted of: objects, people, rooms, buildings, animals, etc. They work as traces of their places and their past. Sometimes the photographs are made in an effort to create an eternal trace of these elements, sometimes the artists are moved by the need to understand their origins more profoundly or sometimes they try to give a specific identity to their places and to themselves.

In this article I will present photographic projects that have the same goal and that have been created between 2005 and 2015. The temporal coincidence is probably due to the great awareness of the losses in the social and cultural fabric in China, caused by the frenetic race to economic development. These losses are present in the everyday landscapes and in the life of those people that did not get on board of the train of progress. They are often the main protagonists of the photographic works we will see. Apart from the social critique background, we will find deeply personal works, representations of the artists' intimate world.

One of the first to undertake this journey was Zeng Han 曾翰 (b.1974): “One spring day in 2005, I went back to the place where I was born 30 years ago”.¹ From his journey, he created the series “Leave and Return” (*Liqu yu guilai* 离去与归来), a deeply intimate journey through his own memory.

Then I will analyse You Li’s 游莉 (b.1978) photographs in the series “Latitude of Silence” (*Jijing de weidu* 寂静的维度), taken between 2007 and 2009, that “are about where I come from and times of indecision”.² A project that is both a work of documentation and a personal reconnection process with places.

The same case applies to Su Jiehao 苏杰浩 (b.1988), who after “spent a few years living a nomadic life in China, trying to escape from the sorrow of my mother’s sudden death”,³ chose to start the series “Borderland” (*Bi-anjiang* 边疆), that brought him back to his childhood places.

Zhang Wenxin 张文心 (b.1989) has a different approach in “Five Nights, Aquarium” (*Wu ge yewan, shuizuguan* 五个夜晚, 水族馆) from 2014, with a precise goal: “I try to reconstruct my inner journey from trips I’ve made between my home country China and San Francisco during these two years”.⁴ Zhang develops her photographic journey on the thin line that separates fiction and reality.

“In 2005, I visited my hometown, a place I am as familiar with as the back of my hand”,⁵ are Mu Ge’s 木格 (b.1979) words that introduce the series “Going Home” (*Huijia* 回家), finally completed in 2009. His view

1 Zeng Han, “Leave and Return”, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://www.zenghan.com/index.php?/projects/leave-and-return-2003-05/>.

2 Quoted in Pixy Liao, “China Week: You Li – Latitude of Silence”, *Lens Cratch*, January 10, 2014, <http://lenscratch.com/2014/01/youli-latitude-silence/>.

3 Tom Griggs, “Interview: Su Jiehao”, *Fototazo*, January 6, 2015, <http://www.fototazo.com/2015/06/interview-jiehao-su.html>.

4 Zhang Wenxin, “Five Nights, Aquarium: Statement”, accessed August 6, 2021, <http://www.zhangwenxin.com/fna>.

5 Mu Ge, “Back Home (2005-2009)”, *Private – International Review of Photography*, no.50, autumn 2010, p.6.

is more critical, despite an intimate and poetic style, because he is traveling through the lands of a displaced community of people, after the building of the Three Gorge Dam along the Yangtze River.

Among the most recent works I will analyse Zhu Lanqing朱岚清 (b.1991). In her series “A Journey in Reverse Direction” (*Fuxiang de lücheng* 负向的旅程) created between 2013 and 2015, she says that “shooting hometown seems like a journey in reverse direction”,⁶ and then affirms that these pictures are “leading me to the vague memories in dark and the bottom of my heart”.⁷

And finally, we will see the exhibition “About my Hometown” presented at the Blindspot Gallery in Hong Kong, including the latest work from Zhang Xiao 张晓 (b.1981). In this exhibition the artist focuses on “his experience of homecoming after a prolonged absence”.⁸

I am not looking at a particular trend, and there is not a direct link between these artists. All the authors that I will analyse have many things in common, like the decision to leave their birth places to continue their studies or find a job inside or outside the country. These artists also share this path with a large part of the Chinese population, which has been obligated to leave their original places in search of a better workplace and better life conditions. This population, normally labelled as “fluctuant” (*liudong* 流动), goes back home at least once a year from the places where they work, often thousands of kilometres away. After all, these photographic works are not so different from these trips of reunification with the original places and the loved ones, that year after year take place in what is a sort of national ritual. So, the idea of mobility is deeply related to these photographic projects. Their life experience is bound to the experience of migration. Those artworks would not have been possible without

6 Zhu Lanqing, “A Journey in Reverse Direction: Dongshan Island 2013-2015”, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://www.zhulanqing.com/book/a-journey-in-reverse-direction/>.

7 Zhu Lanqing, “A Journey in Reverse Direction: Dongshan Island 2013-2015”.

8 Chun, Mimi, “Foreword”, in *About My Hometown – Zhang Xiao* (Hong Kong: Blindspot Gallery, 2015) 1.

this first step of distancing themselves from their homeplaces and looking for new places. As Russell King affirms: “Migration is a dislocation from one place and a physical attachment to another – although the emotional attachment may well remain with the place of origin. At an individual level, migrants’ experience of displacement raises complex psychological questions about their own existence and self-identity”.⁹

In the photographic works that we will see the authors are looking for a “place” that identifies them or where they identify themselves with, in an attempt to define or consecrate their rootedness. Compared with the trend of the “Native Soil Art” from the eighties, we can see an important change: it is not about a search for the historical and cultural roots anymore, but rather the personal roots, that are the foundation of the identity of the individual. The artists escape from the need to represent great narratives, and focus on the immediacy, the everyday, the intimate and personal world.

The Chinese scholar Yi-Fu Tuan affirms that a “place” is born from pause, as it allows the creation of a shared system of values and feelings.¹⁰ In a society of constant movement, as is the contemporary, which is persistently building and destroying spaces and places, the individual is looking for stable and established “places”. The authors that I will analyse in this article seem to try to recreate a link with their original places, from where they once left to move to new localities. It does not seem like an escape from the new places, where they currently live, but rather a personal search of their own rootedness. Photography becomes the ideal instrument to register these elements of the everyday life that allows to build an idea of place, a sense of place. The indexical feature of photography, its direct relation with the referent, allows to reexperience something that is not there anymore.

⁹ Russel King, “Migration, Globalization and Place”, in *A Place in the World?: Places, Cultures and Globalization*, eds. Doreen B. Massey and Pat Jess (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 7.

¹⁰ Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place – The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) 138.

In these photographers' work there is a sort of struggle against time, where photography could illusorily help. They seem to want to create an archive for their memory, because they will have to leave again, far away from their land.

A personal point of view

In 2015 Gu Zheng conceives the category "Photography of Places" in a short essay dedicated to Zhang Xiao, that was the introduction to the exhibition held in the gallery Blindspot in Hong Kong, titled "About My Hometown" (*Guanyu guxiang* 關於故鄉). Gu Zheng, analysing Zhang Xiao's works, affirms: "I feel that after experiencing an expansive (or even surging, at times) 'spatial turn', contemporary Chinese photography may be on the verge of a new phase, which is how to return to a particular 'place' through photography"¹¹. And then, he adds: "Perhaps such photography may already be called the 'Photography of Place', and Zhang's works about his hometown can be seen as the inception of the 'Photography of Place' in China".¹²

First of all, I want to avoid the need to label each novelty in the Chinese artistic panorama and avoid also generalizing an always rich and heterogeneous photographic production. But Gu Zheng is right when affirming that in the recent photographic production a change has taken place, the need to analyse the world starting from a personal point of view, and not from the need to "perform the Nation"¹³ that has often characterized the Chinese experimental and vanguard artistic production.

As scholar Yi-Fu Tuan affirms that: "Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified

11 Gu Zheng, "From Coastline to Hometown: On Zhang Xiao's Artistic Creation and Its Shift", in *About My Hometown – Zhang Xiao*, (Hong Kong: Blindspot Gallery, 2015) 8.

12 Gu, 8.

13 Robin Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Post-socialist China*, (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010) 133.

and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning”.¹⁴ In this new way of approaching the “Chinese world” there is the common intention to show reality through a personal filter, of the artist or of the people portrayed.

In the exhibition “About My Hometown”, the latest works from Zhang Xiao are gathered, and even though they are based on the same topic, they differ in technique and style: in the series “Shift” (*Yi* 移), made between 2012 and 2015, he creates collages using emulsified paper extracted from Polaroids; for the series “Eldest Sister”, “Relatives” and “Three Sisters” (*Dajie* 大姐, *Qinqi* 亲戚, *San zimei* 三姊妹), Zhang recovers family portraits made by “peddler photographers”; in the series “Living” (*Huozhe* 活着) Zhang re-enacts the action of his mother who, in order to get her pension, sent pictures of herself holding the current daily newspaper to the authorities, so that she could prove that she was still alive; and finally, “Home Theater” (*Jiating yinyuan* 家庭影院) is a mixed installation, connected to the author’s childhood memories.

The creation of these works, and the exhibition that gathered them, has many similarities with the works that we will see below. In Zhang’s case, after he walked thousands of kilometres to produce his previous works,¹⁵ he decided to go back “to reacquaint himself with the homeland that had become unfamiliar through photography”.¹⁶ It is always through photography that he tries to recreate this link, even though it is with a new approach of the medium. The exhibition gathered different works made with different techniques, which denote, compared to his previous works, a shift to conceptual art.

In the series “Shift”, Zhang uses polaroids to reproduce people, objects, building and animals from his homeplace, the city of Yantai in Shandong

14 Yi-fu Tuan, “Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective”, in *Philosophy in Geography*, vol.20, eds. Stephen Gale and Gunnar Olsson (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979) 387.

15 As in the case of the series “Coastline”, when he traveled thousands of kilometers along the Chinese coastline.

16 Chun, Mimi, “Foreword”, 1.

province. The series is made with an instant camera: Zhang lifts the emulsion from the instant film, then he applies it to paper. The resulting image is composed of one or different photographs, in this last case creating a kind of collage. The idea of place is deeply rooted in this photographic series and Zhang seems to suggest that all the feelings related to homeplace could not be represented in an ordinary photographic way. In the “Shift” series we can find elements that we will see represented in other works in this article, elements that are connected to memories of the artist’s homeplace: people and familiars, objects and details, buildings and landscapes, etc [Figure 1]. Zhang uses polaroid because it has the intrinsic capability to capture the moment without intermediate passages: as theories on indexicality sustain, there is a continuity between the referent and its representation. But the use of collage, that partially breaks with the indexical realism of the photography, allows the artist to modify the traces of his past in testimonies, in something personal, and not cold and objectivised as it could be if registered through a photographic apparatus; in something that could be closer to the substance of which memories are made, always on the point of vanishing.

One of the first authors to undertake this journey back home was Zeng Han, photographer and independent curator, now residing in Guangzhou. At the beginning of his career, his work is characterized by a vision of his nearest world with a personal perspective, as can be seen in the photographs of the series “Hi! Where are you going?” (*Hei! Ni qu nar?* 嘿! 你去哪儿?), taken between 1998 and 2001. After that, he focuses on a critical vision of the new Chinese society and on the urban change of the country, especially in works like “Soul Stealer” (*Jiao hun* 叫魂), made from 2006 to 2008, and “Hyperreality China” (*Chaozhenshi Zhongguo* 超真实中国), from 2005 to 2011.

Zeng Han concludes, from 2003 to 2005, the series “Leave and Return”. Regarding this project, he states:

One spring day in 2005, I went back to the place where I was born 30 years ago. What I have been looking for all this time emerged slowly when I saw my grandmother’s last smile and her yellow coffin in the courtyard. Since I have been moving between towns and cities, different living envi-

ronments and accents, and therefore I could never really get a clear confirmation of my identity.¹⁷

The uncertainty that his research is based on is easily read in the first photograph of the series: the horizon is as blurred as the entire image, but a dashboard of a car can be recognized, and a paved road that stretches to a not entirely clear destiny, while in the background a sunset or a sunrise lights the sky [Figure 2].

The series consists in fragments of different localities, linked by the need to find an identity lost behind somewhere in these places. We can find portrayed inner spaces completely empty, without the human presence, where the objects seem to remember a sense of place. The most intimate photograph is probably the one portraying his dying grandmother, where the disappearance of an important place is that which a beloved one embodies. Zeng's work is probably the most personal and nostalgic of those analysed in this article. And we can consider it the most concluded, in the sense of definitive, created in a circular way. It starts with the photograph of a car, with its blurred horizon, and ends with a last picture where he shows a totally dark enclosed space. A ladder is an invitation to go out through a bright opening in the ceiling. Zeng Han's photographic series seems an escape from a past that he does not identify with anymore, "after all our the years of isolation and expansion, this so-called 'nostalgia' and the search for our origins are an imaginary dream and a lie for our generation".¹⁸ This path in reverse direction, questioning the concept of identity (*genben* 根本) and nostalgia (*xiangchou* 乡愁), as they are products of a narrative imposed from the top, that have no relationship with the experience of the individual in his daily life.

The vague and blurred pictures that Zeng Han shows are the result of a deep personal research. As he himself affirms in issue 16 of "City Pictorial" (*Chengshi huabao* 城市画报) magazine from 2005, dedicated to "Personal Photography" in China: "Pick up your cameras. Photography

¹⁷ Zeng Han, "Leave and Return".

¹⁸ Zeng Han, "Leave and Return".

is your personal life; your personal life is photography!”¹⁹ There is therefore a tight link with his photographic production and his personal life.

Zeng Han belongs to the “Personal Photography” trend, which developed in China mostly from the 2000s, with photographers such as Lin Zhi Peng (a.k.a 223), Sun Yanchu or the duo Birdhead. Photographers whose works are characterized by a “lack of interest in grand narratives and a concern instead with subject matter that was directly related to their everyday lives”.²⁰

Indeed, it does not mean that this approach did not exist before: without going too far back in the past, in the middle 90s there is the example of Rong Rong. About his photographic work, dedicated to the Beijing East Village, Wu Hung writes: “their significance is actually threefold, historical, artistic, and autobiographical”.²¹ Rong Rong undertakes the same path as the authors that are analysed here: when he was forced to go back to his native Fujian after the premature end of the Beijing East Village. In his parents’ house, he took many pictures of the old bed, where the whole family used to sleep together. A journey that brought back memories of childhood moments. This is a crucial moment for him, when he becomes aware of himself and resumes his career as an artist, once back in Beijing.

Places made of people and objects

You Li lives in Shenyang and creates the series “Latitude of Silence” between 2007 and 2009, occasionally going to the Northern border of the country, where she grew up. As the title suggests, silence prevails in her pictures: winter landscapes covered by an imperturbable grey sky; workers on the wire of a power line, suspended as circus funambulist over an empty street; stray lonely dogs moving through muddy streets, snowy lands and mountains of rubbish; empty rooms, where the out of

19 Gu Zheng, “A Theory of Chinese Personal Photography”, in *3030 New Photography in China*, ed. John Millichap (Hong Kong: 3030press, 2006) 15.

20 Claire Roberts, *Photography and China* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013) 178.

21 Wu Hung, *Rong Rong’s East Village 1993-1998* (New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2003) 9.

place bed sheet suggests the presence and absence of the people who live there; railway stations covered by snow, where deep solitude emanates from both trains and men. You Li affirms: “This series of photographs present a somewhat unrealistic Northern China, which probably exists in the gap of my memories”.²² At first glance, one’s sensation is to be facing a documental work, deeply realistic, but with the author’s words we understand that it is approached through a profoundly personal vision. We do not know anymore if these intrinsically surreal places are the result of the artist’s vision or are typical of this “latitude of silence”. There are few portraits, mainly of young people [Figure 3], young faces that she seems to identify herself with: “Perhaps by making peace with my life, the teenage rebellion toward my hometown, the confused and unsettled feelings faded in time, replace by my acceptance, intentional and unintentional silence”.²³ It is a sort of reconciling journey with the land that she left years ago, an attempt to understand these places at the limit of inhospitality, with which she is deeply linked.

Portraits are often present in the series analysed here. At a technical level, they seem to have the same origin, the analytical point of view, distinctive of August Sander and Diane Arbus’ photographs, which evolved with more recent photographers, members or followers of the Düsseldorf School. This vision is characterized by distant framings where the subject, aware of being photographed, poses in clumsy positions. This photographer’s vision could be regarded as cold and distant, but referred to the series analysed here, it is not documentary photography, because the personal factor is fundamental. The authors’ research originates from the personal need to return to their original places, and a part of themselves is often embodied in the people that they portray.

The portrayed people are often relatives of them, which are the fulfillment of the artist’s ideal of a place. But the places embodied by people are, as Yi-Fu Tuan asserts, “elusive and personal”,²⁴ and are not “perceived

22 Pixy Liao, “China Week: You Li – Latitude of Silence”.

23 Pixy Liao, “China Week: You Li – Latitude of Silence”.

24 Tuan, *Space and Place – The Perspective of Experience*, 141.

as general symbols like fireplace, chair, bed, and living room that invite intricate explication”.²⁵ In these portraits there is an aim of fighting this elusiveness and fix the link with these people in time, an unequal struggle with forgetfulness.

Portraits have a lot of presence in Su Jiehao’s work, already remarkable in his first series “Summer’s Almost Gone”, created between 2010 and 2012. The chosen scenery is his own original places, with the purpose of “rebuild the spiritual and mnemonic connection with my birthplace and to search for beauty and poetic grace in ordinary life”.²⁶ The pictures that compose this series of objects, landscapes and people create a world made of places of belonging, linked with past memories, the result of “an intertwining of physical space and spiritual world”.²⁷ The photographs were taken in a moment of his life when he moved to Beijing, where he still resides now, to continue his photographic specialization. The title of the work is also a reference to the short periods of holidays he spent at home, when he took the photographs.

The photograph’s final result is perfect; before shooting, Su carefully chooses the subject and the composition of the picture, always following a precise procedure. Despite this approach, his pictures are deeply personal, visually cold, but at the same time profoundly intimate.

His research continues in the series “Borderland”, made between 2012 and 2015.²⁸ To recover from a situation of displacement that originated after his mother’s death, when he was still adolescent, Su undertakes a long journey through his country: “as a way to look inward and recall my early memories, to reflect on my identity, and to search for a sense of belonging”.²⁹ The photographic project is deeply rooted in a personal re-

²⁵ Tuan, 141.

²⁶ Jiehao Su, *Summer’s Almost Gone*, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://jiehaosu.com/summer-is-almost-gone/text/>.

²⁷ Su, *Summer’s Almost Gone*.

²⁸ The title utilized for the first exhibition of the series, held in 2014 in Actual Size Gallery Los Angeles, was “In Search of Home: Jiehao Su’s New Work”.

²⁹ Tom Griggs, “Interview: Su Jiehao”.

search. Su reconstructs his identity through a series of urban landscapes, people portraits and special places: “Together the images comprise a delicate, phlegmatic, and melancholic meditation on my personal history”.³⁰

It can be seen through his work that he uses the camera as a way of curing his illness: “In this sense, *Borderland* is an intimate work of remembrance, tenderness, and self-consolation”.³¹ The camera becomes a sort of curative tool, through which he finds consolation for personal pains. After all, the house, as a place, is symbolically connected to the places of nursing: home becomes the ideal place to recover from an illness.

On the contrary, Zhang Wenxin’s approach is very different. In the 2014 series “*Five Nights, Aquarium*” she moves on the thin line of fiction and reality: “The narration of journey moves from real to imagined spaces, exploring the boundaries between autobiography and fiction”.³² In Zhang’s pictures, everything is suspended in a dreamlike atmosphere, where places and people’s faces refer to the artist’s own stories and memories. Zhang encloses these journeys, that took her from her original places in Anhui province to the city of San Francisco, in a made up space-time frame, a sort of story that develops in five nights and inside an imaginary aquarium. The artist affirms: “In this aquarium, cityscapes are fish tank decorations, people are fish, and writings are tank labels”.³³ In this surreal vision of the world that surrounds her, the artist creates a microcosm, embodied in the image of the aquarium, where she observes the action of men/fishes in this immutable scenery. The first picture of the series is an urban landscape in a grey day, made of grey buildings and an abandoned plot full of rubbish and weed. Every night in the series is matched with a story, with places related to her own memory. In the first night, she talks about her relationship with her hometown, which evokes a strong feeling of alienation. A particular place appears in the first lines: “I used to stand

30 Tom Griggs, “Interview: Su Jiehao”.

31 Tom Griggs, “Interview: Su Jiehao”.

32 Zhang, *Five Nights, Aquarium: Statement*.

33 Zhang, *Five Nights, Aquarium: Statement*.

for hours on top of a giant ring-shaped foot-bridge on snowy evenings”.³⁴ From here one can only imagine other places.

The other stories are not related to the photographs, there is not a direct link between the written text and the pictures that are presented. Everything represented in the work, people or places, objects or animals, is like an abstract -but at the same time specific- collage of places, bound by the intimate reflection of the author, located on the ephemeral border between reality and fiction.

Objects are other recurrent elements in these authors' pictures. As Yi-Fu Tuan sustains, “enchanted images of the past are evoked not so much by the entire building, which can only be seen, as by its components and furnishing, which can be touched and smelled as well”.³⁵ These objects seem insignificant in the everyday use, but they become, because of physical and temporal distance, a sort of totem of the authors' memory.

The rooms they photograph are often empty, with only objects or furniture filling the space. The objects become therefore a kind of physical trace left by the people that live there. For the artist, these objects are directly connected to the place, people or memories of the past, even if for us, observers of the scene, these things do not have much value apart from the representation of everyday objects.

Original places in a changeable landscape

The analysed works in this article are the result of a shift in the way of seeing the world by some photographers: leaving aside the documentary component of the medium, and the cold analysis of the changes under way in the Chinese society, in favour of a personal approach, an intimate vision, not only of the closest world, but also of the country's reality, a vision both particular and collective.

In his essay dedicated to Personal Photography in China, Gu Zheng advises that it “needs to evolve to express something that is useful to society or

34 Zhang Wnxin, *Five Nights, Aquarium*, accessed August 6, 2021, <http://www.zhangwenxin.com/fna>.

35 Tuan, *Space and Place – The Perspective of Experience*, 144.

face its demise”.³⁶ This warning almost seemed to be heard by the authors analysed here, and so when they made their journey, in addition to using a personal point of view, they also made critical reflections about the under-going changes of the country during the last decades.

In his statement from the series “Going Home”, made between 2005 and 2009, Mu Ge talks about the encounter with his own home: “My home was practically the same: a sofa in the shadow, furniture covered with dust. But the decorations on the wall suddenly had a sad poetic sense. The home harbours ignore reality. As time flies, it remains silent, keeping the secret of life. These works are about my hometown”.³⁷ Mu Ge lives now in Chengdu, Sichuan, but he is original from the county of Wuxi in the municipality of Chongqing. The daily reality of this area during the last years is directly linked to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. His photographic work is dedicated to the places and people that, despite tremendous changes, seem to resist with imperturbable strength. Mu Ge’s journey along the river Yangtze shows a landscape that has undergone a profound process of change: “On my way home I could see old cities soon to be buried under water as the water level rises after the completion of the dam and new emerging cities along the river”.³⁸ Despite this enormous state of modification of the surroundings, the people who he encounters in his way back home go on with their lives with pride. Mu Ge affirms: “As I was travelling home, I wanted to capture the warmth of sunlight on the back of a young man: all the faces in front of my lens with silent expressions that reminded me of how life struck me with awe” [Figure 4].³⁹

Unlike the rest of the authors in this article, Mu Ge favours outdoor spaces; he never represents an intimate or private space. The character of this documentary series, however, blends with a deeply personal vision, because it is not an alien eye looking at a certain detached reality. Mu Ge

³⁶ Gu, *3030 New Photography in China*, 17.

³⁷ Mu, *Private – International Review of Photography*, p.6.

³⁸ Mu, *Private – International Review of Photography*, p.6.

³⁹ Mu, *Private – International Review of Photography*, p.6.

belongs to these places, maybe not sharing destinies anymore, but he is nevertheless linked to them through a shared past.

The photographer Zhu Lanqing, after studying in Beijing and Taipei (now residing in Amoy city), runs away from big cities to return to her birthplace, the Dongshan Island in Fujian: "Inevitable urban development gives people amnesia. They often forget what existed here before. I can only follow its pace, with my camera to 'fight' with these changes in my hometown. My hometown has influenced me and shaped me since I was born".⁴⁰ For the artist, this is a journey into the past. In fact, the series created between 2013 and 2015 is titled "A Journey in Reverse Direction": "Shooting hometown seems like a journey in reverse direction, leading me to the vague memories in dark and the bottom of my heart".⁴¹ Her images are composed of everyday objects, houses, open landscapes, portraits of family members or people in the street, details of places that recall moments of her past [Figure 5]. The series is collected in a self-edited book,⁴² designed as a diary but also as a guide to these places:

40 Zhu, *A Journey in Reverse Direction: Dongshan Island 2013-2015*.

41 Zhu, *A Journey in Reverse Direction: Dongshan Island 2013-2015*.

42 As Zhu sustain in an interview released to Sheung Yiu, for Invisible Photographers Asia, the idea of this book originates after she was invited to participate to a project created by Ren Yue, a professor of journalism at Renmin Daxue. See Sheung Yiu, "A Journey In Reverse Direction, Zhu Lanqing", *Invisible Photographer Asia*, January 27, 2016, <http://invisiblephotographer.asia/2016/01/27/zhulanqing-interview/>. This initiative is been promoted in 2012 by the OPFIX Studio, an educational project dedicated to photography established by Ren Yue herself. After the first edition they edited a collection of photographic pictures contained in a box with the title "Photography as Adventure: Return Home" (*Sheying ru qi yu zhi huanxing* 摄影如奇遇之还乡). The photographers selected for the publication are 31, and between them there was also Zhu Lanqing. The next year Ren Yue whit the collaboration of the ONG Mulan realizes a parallel project, where few women migrant workers documented in Instagram, with mobiles phones supplied by the organization, their own travel back home for the Spring Festival.

In my work, I use Bachimen (the bridge to Dongshan Island), home, Food, Land, God, sea as the clue to reconstruct my hometown and put these fragments that I collected from my hometown into a book which can be read or showed. In this form, these spaces, people and objects can condense on the paper. Through the covering and unfolding these pages, it starts to reveal the meaning of my hometown to me. This handmade book represents a guide book of my hometown.⁴³

Zhu's work is created in two different moments: when she decides which subject to portray and takes the picture, and then in the moment to leaf through her book, which resembles a personal diary. It is the diary where she gathers memories of her journey and also reproduces the pictures that connect her to her past and her land. One of Zhu's intentions is to reflect on Chinese urban development, showing the other face of China's reality: "It's a section of all our hometowns which drifting away in the urban developing. It will give us a chance to stop and touch our hometown, reflect on what is the meaning of home at the same time".⁴⁴ Once again photography seems to offer the chance to "stop", to freeze the image of one's land, in this constant race to the future.

Conclusion

Reading the authors' words and observing their works, it is possible to deduce a strong personal and subjective character of their researches. They are a glance to their childhood places, a journey through time, between past and present, and through space, because the artists currently live far away from these places. These series often work as a diary, and it is in this modality that photography diverges from other artistic disciplines. When we observe a photographic picture, we can witness, again, the event taken by the camera, or feel that the portrayed person is in front of us. The pictures of these photographic series work as "traces" of places, whether they embody specific spaces, particular people, or common objects.

⁴³ Zhu, *A Journey in Reverse Direction: Dongshan Island 2013-2015*.

⁴⁴ Zhu, *A Journey in Reverse Direction: Dongshan Island 2013-2015*.

After all, these photographic works seem to be the result of the need to reconnect or give substance to a supposed identity, lost in the vortex of modernity, which seems to inhabit in the authors' original places. A need as a consequence of the enormous, and extraordinary rapid, changes that the Chinese society and the physical landscape of the country have undergone over the last decades.

A great part of these works has a particular purpose: to document something, a landscape often, or a net of human relations, that is irremediably disappearing under the huge weight of progress. This is also why many of them seem to take an objective distance from the reality they are trying to capture.

As with any reportage, it's time to come back to where you started, and once there, to give new life to these photographs, or a new function: to prevent the memories of those places, those objects, those people, to vanish completely. Even if the artist does not succeed in the task of keeping or shaping an identity, at least it opens a window to the past and to places otherwise irretrievably doomed to disappear.

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Captures List



Figure 1.

Zhang Xiao, *My Childhood Neighbour Grandma Zhu*, from the series *Shift*, 2012,
Instant film on paper, 24 x 27 cm, courtesy of the artist.

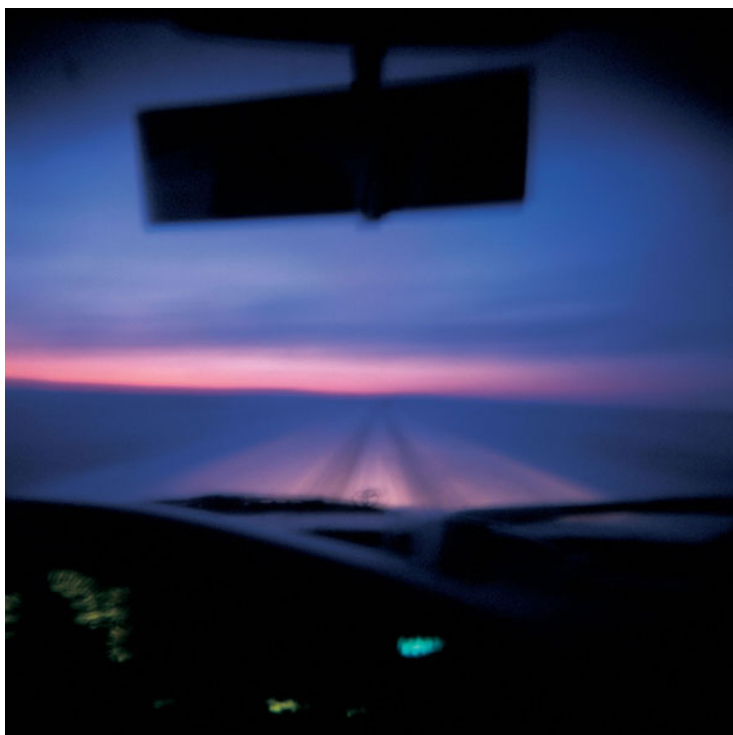


Figure 2.

Zeng Han, *Leave and Return*, 2003-2005, photograph, courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3.

You Li, *Latitude of Silence*, 2007-2009, photograph, courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4.

Mu Ge, *Going Home*, 2005-2009, photograph, courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.

Zhu Lanqing, *A Journey in Reverse Direction*, 2013-2015, photograph,
courtesy of the artist.