

*The Story of Light and Shadow: 20th Century Chinese Photography from Huang Jianpeng's Collection* (2019). Exhibition at the National Art Museum of China.

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At an exhibition of 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese photography at the National Art Museum of China, I encountered a collection of photography of Tibet and Tibetan people, taken by multiple Han Chinese photographers. As a researcher of 20<sup>th</sup> century photography of Tibet, I have read about some of the photographers featured in this exhibition who took photos in Tibet and Tibetan regions throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century under a variety of possible motivations such as documentary, journalism or propaganda photography. But it's the first time that I've seen in person a sizable collection of existing original photographs, shot and processed by the photographers themselves regarding Tibet-related themes.

This exhibition *The Story of Light and Shadow: 20th Century Chinese Photography from Huang Jianpeng's Collection* opened in December 2019 and is the very first exhibition dedicated to a private collection of Chinese photography at the National Art Museum of China. It covers extensively the development of Chinese photography of the 20th century with a special focus on its multiple stages ranging from its early sprouting to the artists' awakening to creative consciousness.

Over the past few decades since 1992, Huang Jianpeng has been collecting works of photography and has grown an interest in Tibet-related themes captured by photographers in and out of Tibet, including Tibetan aristocrat Jigme Taring (active since the 1920s), Japanese Traveler Aoki Bunkyo (active 1913-1916) and Han Chinese travelers and journalists such as Zhuang Xueben (active 1930s-1940s), Lan Zhigui (active 1950s-1970s) and Liu Lijia (active 1970s). These photographs supplement the currently known works of early Tibetan photographers such as the Tsarong family and the tenth Demo Rinpoche, and British photographs from 1920 to 1950 at the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford.

There are many elisions in the history of photography in Tibet and the scholarship on photography in Tibet is still at a stage of infancy. As it is rather difficult to paint a comprehensive picture of the apparatus of image-making in Tibet during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some of the possible frameworks we could borrow from are the study of 20<sup>th</sup> century photography in India and West Africa. When putting together a visual history of India, Nathaniel Gaskell and Diva Gujral defined that "from the start 'Indian photography' has also meant the photography of India by outsiders, framing a sustained and often

fraught dialogue between the country and the rest of the world”<sup>1</sup> and called attention to photography’s double-sided relationship with colonialism. In Giulia Paoletti and Yaëlle Biro’s work on photography in West Africa, the two authors looked at a variety of media on which photographs are printed, and managed to argue that although it was the western photographers who had introduced photography, they did not always have full monopoly over photographic technology and local photographers have also subsequently formed their own “distinctive and spectacular photographic vernacular.” As Paoletti and Biro proposed, “how do we reconcile interpretations and uses of photography particularly in the colonial context, where it served both as a tool of surveillance and a means of emancipation?”<sup>2</sup> Thus in a Tibetan context, how do we understand photography as a foreign technology and the relationship between the represented Tibet and its influx of outsiders and photographers?

Perhaps through a close reading of Zhuang Xueben’s photographs, we may gain some insight about the photographic experience during the republican era and complicate the issue of vision mediated between the self and other in portrait photography. Born in Shanghai in 1909 and started learning photography since 1928, Zhuang grew to be one of the most prominent pioneers of visual anthropology and photographic art in China. This exhibition contains the most comprehensive private collection of Zhuang Xueben’s works.

In a frame, there neatly organized nine photographs of 6x6cm and 6x4.5cm by Zhuang Xueben. Though small in size and slightly worn, these photographs that survived till today did not lose much detail in their only existing original points. Zhuang has captured moments of Cham (Tibetan ritual dance). The ritual performance was photographed from multiple angles, including close-ups of masked figures and an aerial view of the spectacle that showcases the venue and its gathering of audiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Gaskell, Nathaniel. *Photography in India: A Visual History from the 1850s to the Present*, (New York: Prestel, 2018), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Giulia Paoletti, and Yaëlle Biro. “Photographic Portraiture in West Africa: Notes from ‘In and Out of the Studio.’” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 51 (January 2016): 185-186.



Zhuang Xueben, *Cham Series in Xikang Ba'an* (present day Batang, Sichuan), single existing originals printed and processed in 1940.  
Image Courtesy of Huang Jianpeng Gallery

Photography as a medium has its own specificity. As Susan Sontag argued, “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed” and “a photograph can [only] be treated as a narrowly selective transparency.”<sup>3</sup> While the mechanism of camera devices is designed to truthfully reflect the likeness and existence of the subject behind its lens, it also grants the photographer an ability to control, manipulate and even produce perceptions that are beyond what our eyes perceive. In the case of portrait photography, it is further complicated as Richard Avedon said, “A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion. There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth.”<sup>4</sup> When Paul Bowman summarized Rey Chow’s work on film (including photography) and modernity, he pointed out the importance of “facing” in all cultural encounters as a starting point. Such act of

<sup>3</sup> Sontag, Susan. *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Fuqua, Paul. *Faces: Photography and the Art of Portraiture* (Burlington MA: Focal Press: c2010), 16.

“facing” fundamentally pervades any form of contact (which means both real-life and metaphorical engagement) and in the context of portraiture, “facing” especially indicates an exchange of gaze and a process of imaging when a face is being seen and looked at. “Even when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, photographic portraits, individual or group, personal or social, artistic or commercial, showcase a favored choice of identity representation and a singular or collaborated effort of projection from the figure and the photographer. Furthermore, as Bowman elaborated, the participants in these cultural encounters “represent themselves and their others to themselves; they ‘look’ and ‘contemplate’ the other in ways that always entail both imaging and imagining.”<sup>6</sup>

Among the Tibet-related photographs in this exhibition, which occupy around one fourth of the total images exhibited, many of them are close-up portrait depictions of Tibetan people. In one enlarged portrait, a Tibetan youth looks directly into the camera with slightly narrowed eyes as if he was squinting under the glaring sun. Zhuang’s portraits reveal an attempt at humanist photography where the figure is ennobled with a sense of dignity. The young boy is in relatively calm and unhurried posture – his facial expressions relaxed and his gaze gentle and yet attracting attention. Through controlling the subject distance from the camera, Zhuang heightens the sense of spatiality between figure and ground and manages to create portraits that have unique visual tensions. At the same time, Zhuang seems to eliminate the interpretations of the photographed subject from both himself and the exterior, bringing the viewers into the inner psyche of the photographed. These visual techniques in Zhuang’s close-up portraits manage to render an atmosphere of visual power and empathy that is beyond space-time and cultural boundaries. Such visuality is closely associated with Zhuang’s close interaction and living experience with the local residents. Zhuang usually would give printed images to the photographed figures as gifts. His way of scheduling photoshoots is also very localized – the chief of one region would send a letter to the chief of the next region with photographs attached and Zhuang would then continue his expedition to the next region.

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<sup>5</sup> Sontag, Susan. *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> Bowman, Paul. “Part 1. Modernity and Postcolonial Ethnicity” in Rey Chow, *The Rey Chow Reader [Electronic Resource]* (New York: Columbia University Press, c2010), 2-3.



Zhuang Xueben, *Tibetan Youth*, taken in Shiqu, Sichuan, 1937.  
Image Courtesy of Huang Jianpeng Gallery



Zhuang Xueben, *Tibetan Nomadic Girl*, taken in Litang, Sichuan, 1939.  
Image Courtesy of Huang Jianpeng Gallery

However, Zhuang's photographs are by no means examples of absolute neutrality – due to the specificity of photography and the intrinsic aporia of gaze within portraiture. Other than the multiple approaches through which people attempt to analyze Zhuang's works – speaking highly of his humanist qualities and skills as a visual anthropologist, how do we contextualize and investigate Zhuang's photography, his motivations of traveling to western China and the implications of his expeditions to the borderlands?

In an era of great uncertainty about the nation's future, Zhuang Xueben was deeply captivated by the newly introduced photographic technology. From 1931 to 1934, Zhuang served as a clerk at Nanjing International Savings Society and Nanjing Datong Real Estate Company, became friends with a staff at a nearby photo studio, and thus gained knowledge and experiences of photo taking and processing. From 1934 to 1942, Zhuang spent almost ten years at borderland regions of western China taking photographs, especially portraiture in multiple areas where Tibetans reside.

Zhuang's photographs had been selected by publications such as *Liang You* pictorials and *Science Magazine*. In September 1940, Zhuang as photographer and writer, published a special edition of *Liang You* dedicated to Xikang called *Xin Xikang Zhuanbao*.<sup>7</sup> *Liang You*, through its incorporation of diverse images and bilingual format, is an embodiment of the magazine's cosmopolitan visuality and international vision and has been deemed as a "visual emporium"<sup>8</sup> for its creation of information and commercial value via visual exchanges. It has been argued by Susan Sontag that to photograph "means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge-and, therefore, like power."<sup>9</sup> Such visual culture is partly associated with the concept of aesthetic modernity and the thirst for knowledge radiated from urban centers in China. As Menglan Chen also argued, Zhuang is using photographic technology to "produce visual knowledge" about this country and that photography becomes "a tool for the production and transmission of knowledge."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Exhibition Catalogue, *Reviewing the Masterworks: A Selection of Ethnic Tibetan Related Photographic Artworks by Master Photographer Lan Zbigui and Zhuang Xueben* (Nanjing Museum), 8-11.

<sup>8</sup> Pickowicz, Paul, Kuiyi Shen, and Yingjin Zhang. *Liangyou, Kaleidoscopic Modernity and the Shanghai Global Metropolis, 1926-1945* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Sontag, Susan. *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Chen, Menglan. TAIKANG SPACE. "写作 | 庄学本的摄影图像与西康." WeChat Official Accounts Platform. Accessed August 23, 2020.

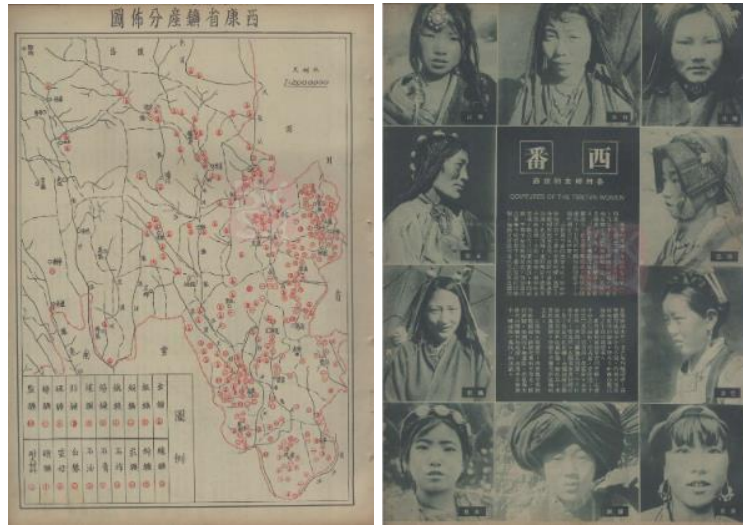


Cover of *Liang You Xin Xikang Zhuanbao*, Issue 158, 1940.  
Image Courtesy of Cnbksy

Furthermore, publications such as *Liang You* and *Kodak Magazine* encouraged young generations to venture and document the society. As Yajun Mo pointed out, Zhuang's first long-distance travel was part of a trip in 1930 with "National Hiking Group" (*quanguo buxing tuan*) where a group of young people from Guangzhou toured around the Republic of China on foot, in seek of a new sense of nationhood.<sup>11</sup> Thus Zhuang's exploration of ethnicity along the borderlands overlaps with the making of a nation at the time. Zhuang applied photography to capture the other while visualizing a utopian nationhood with "imagined community" of ethnic groups along the Xikang borderlands. Furthermore, Xikang to some extent served as an "ethno-laboratory" and was "one of the most written-about and photographed places in wartime China."<sup>12</sup> Ethnologists at Academia Sinica taught Zhuang Xueben body measuring skills and provided him with equipment for future measurement of minority people on his trips. Presumably because he was partly in charge of the physical measurements of ethnic population, the front and profile portraits Zhuang took have distinctively ethnographic characteristics. In this particular issue of *Xin Xikang Zhuanbao*, there also included many maps and ethnographic portraits of ethnic groups along the Xikang border and even a reproduction of a thangka of Palden Lhamo, a wrathful protective goddess of Tibetan Buddhism.

<sup>11</sup> Mo, Yajun. "The New Frontier, Zhuang Xueben and Xikang Province," in Yongtao Du and Jeff Kyong-McClain eds., *Chinese History in Geographical Perspective* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013), 121-139.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 122.



Inside pages of *Liang You Xin Xikang Zhuanbao*, Issue 158, 1940.  
Image Courtesy of Cnbksy

However, although embodying ethnographic qualities, Zhuang's works render the self-and-other relationship differently and do not appeal to magazines at the expense of portraying the ethnic groups as savage. Instead, his relatively "removed" and documentary photographic language and reductionist manner when approaching the self in the photography might have complied with the urge for modern aesthetics in its contemporary visual sphere. Given Zhuang's agency and deep involvement with the local people, it would be rather problematic if we categorize Zhuang's photographs as propaganda photography. As Holmes-Tagchungdarpa furthered this argument, Zhuang's work provides a local perspective of the borderlands.<sup>13</sup>

With only textual biography and ethnography mission of Zhuang in mind, one might relate Zhuang Xueben with American photographer Edward Curtis and be reminded of Curtis's photographs of North American Indians. But Zhuang's approach is considerably different from Curtis's where the subjects are rather visibly romanticized. Through more than forty thousand photographs, Curtis attempted to provide a comprehensive survey of all existing native American tribes. Critics have pointed out that his photographs belong to "the pictorial tradition of photography" and are too romanticized

<sup>13</sup> Holmes-Tagchungdarpa, Amy. "Depicting Life in the Twentieth-Century Sino-Tibetan Borderlands: Local Histories and Modernities in the Career and Photography of Zhuang Xueben (1909–1984)" in James A. Anderson, and John K. Whitmore. *China's Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier Over Two Millennia*, (BRILL, 2015), 365-366.



and picturesque to be used for anthropological purposes.<sup>14</sup> While Curtis was concerned with staging in a way that utmost preserves what is vanishing, Zhuang aimed to reflect the living conditions of diverse groups along the frontiers and thus contained much information about agricultural production, animal husbandry and economy of western China during the 1930s. As a figure representative of the intellectual and documentary photography in that particular era, Zhuang was bound to act as multiple different agents and is an embodiment of complex, overlapping and if not yet incongruous motivations – a complication of his own independent perspectives and professional responsibilities under the larger contextual influence from the society and its aspirations. One then cannot help but question, what exactly were the assigned missions and Zhuang's own aspirations?

It is beyond the scope of this article to conclusively answer this question. However, as represented by the example of Zhuang Xueben's photographs, the images produced during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Tibet are coded with layered agencies and complex motivations. At an era when we are immersed in the excess of visual information, through the lens of these Han Chinese photographers, we have to some extent gained the prism through which we can imagine Tibet in the eyes of early generation camera-owners. These early images from the twentieth century present to us the aesthetic and social significance of Tibetan visual materials. The private collection of Huang Jianpeng also revealed photographs that are other than early expedition photographs from the west such as collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford. These photographs not only preserve the photographic methods that are met with international technological standards, but also showcase the complex motivations of photographers from the last century. Such a collection paves ways for future visual studies of contemporary Tibet and is of profound significance to Tibetan visual culture, film and photography.

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<sup>14</sup> Curtis, Edward S. *The North American Indian : The Complete Portfolios*, (New York: Taschen, 1997), 21.