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Poor and Blank: History's Marks and the Photographies of Displacement

William Schaefer

> Apart from their other characteristics, the outstanding thing about China's 600 million people is that they are "poor and blank." This may seem a bad thing, but in reality it is a good thing. Poverty gives rise to the desire for change, the desire for action and the desire for revolution. On a blank sheet of paper free from any mark, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written, the freshest and most beautiful pictures can be painted.
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> Mao Zedong, "Introducing a Co-operative," April 15, 1958[i]

China since the early 1990s has seen both the displacement and migration of populations on a massive scale and the emergence of a powerful documentary impulse in art, film, and photography. The heavy focus of domestic and foreign investment in seemingly endless cycles of destruction and new construction of urban landscapes and in enormous infrastructural projects such as the Three Gorges Dam has driven the displacement of both urban and rural populations, while the accelerated demand for cheap labor to work on such projects, as well as in burgeoning labor-intensive manufacturing in coastal provinces, has led to the creation by the Chinese state of what C. Cindy Fan calls a migrant labor regime, drawing in particular from poor, rural regions.[ii] The sheer scale of such intertwining forces of globalization, urbanization, increasingly uneven regional development, and mass migration (an estimated 98,000,000 rural-to-urban migrants in 2003) has also put intense pressure on the formal and representational strategies of much mainland Chinese art to picture it. This pressure is particularly manifest, I want to argue, in such art's documentary turn, for dispossession as a theme and documentation as a formal practice is central to much contemporary Chinese experimental art.[iii] In her installation, *Transformation* (1997), for instance, Yin Xiuzhen collected hundreds of

rooftiles from houses demolished to make way for a massive urban renewal project in Beijing, and affixed to each tile a photograph of the house of which the tile remains in order to mark the lost homes of displaced residents. And in a rural context, Liu Xiaodong's series of pictures (2003-) of construction workers and those displaced from villages flooded and lost to the Three Gorges Dam project create what one might call "documentary paintings."[iv]

In this essay I want to explore this conjunction of displacement and documentary, not, however, as an impulse within a self-consciously defined realm of art, but rather in an area that arguably creates, negotiates, and transgresses the unstable space where documentation and art overlap, namely, documentary photography. In particular, I want to explore here how documentary photography works as a specific medium of historical thinking about migration in contemporary China, a question I will examine through the example of the work of the photographer Zhang Xinmin. A recent text by the photography scholar, Gu Zheng, suggests as a way of situating Zhang's work a conjunction between social and historical crisis and documentary, between the migration of peoples and what might be called the migration of the visual forms of documentary photography across historical and cultural contexts. Gu introduces Zhang Xinmin's vast project, which since the early 1990s has documented rural to urban migration in China, with a lengthy analysis of the photography of Jacob Riis, whose 1890 book, *How the Other Half Lives*, pictured the living conditions of the urban poor in New York. The turning point in Gu's text from Riis to Zhang is as follows:

> A little over one hundred years later, the process of urbanization that had taken place in America has begun all over again in mainland China. Although the reasons for its recurrence and the specific course it has taken are completely different, one thing, however, is certain, and that is that the very scenes that had already appeared in Riis's photographs have been re-enacted in numerous places in China to an even greater extreme. For instance, the terrible situation in Riis's

> photograph, *Five Cents a Spot*, we can find reduplicated with even greater harshness in a photograph by a Chinese photographer by the name of Zhang Xinmin. In Zhang Xinmin's photograph, we discover even more grievously that within a single tiny space are living twenty people, and with quite a few entire families each occupying a single bed. These are the kinds of conditions that have disturbed a photographer like Zhang Xinmin to set out to track the entire process of China's urbanization. Over the course of the 1990s, he has acutely and uncompromisingly exposed to us all the lives of "the other half" within the course of China's urbanization.[v]

Through this juxtaposition of Riis and Zhang, Gu Zheng's text suggests a connection between the transversal across history and geography (from late nineteenth-century America to present-day China) of the economic and material conditions of migrant labor and the migration across cultural contexts of the visual and verbal forms of documentary photography. Or in other words, the linkages Gu identifies in Riis between the conditions of cheap migrant labor exploited for the expansion of urban building and infrastructure and the aesthetic practices of documentary photography are themselves repeated a century later on another continent in the work of Zhang Xinmin and other photographers.

This temporal and spatial gap and repetition which Gu Zheng's text suggests and performs through its structure leaves unstated but implicit an argument about the intertwined histories of possession and dispossession and the histories of photography, both in the West and in China. Indeed, what Carol Armstrong has called an "alliance between photography and possession" extends back to some of the earliest photographic practices.[vi] In the first photographically illustrated book, *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-46), by William Henry Fox Talbot, the largest category of plates included consists of architectural views. For Talbot and other early commentators – most of them landed and wealthy – one of the first uses recognized for photography was the documentation of their own land and property. The style and composition of Talbot's representations of land

and property drew upon the picturesque landscape aesthetics of Constable and others – an aesthetic practice that, with its emptying of the landscape of traces of habitation and production, was deeply implicated in the Enclosure movement and dispossession of the peasantry that took place in England during the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[vii] Thus, if Armstrong is right in pointing out an early alliance between photography and possession, that alliance is inextricable from an equally early alliance between photography and dispossession. Indeed, in nineteenth-century China, where photography was introduced as part of the apparatus of colonialism, the best-known photographic practices shuttled between possession and dispossession. Felice Beato's photographs, for instance, documented the seizure of Beijing and the destruction of the old Summer Palace in 1860 by British and French expeditionary forces, even as, by virtue of their slow exposure times, they rendered the inhabitants of these places almost invisible. As Andrew Jones has described it, the wet collodion process Beato used had a "neutron-bomb" effect, preserving the architecture and wiping out the people; that is, because the difference between what is before the camera (and the image projected within it) and what is actually preserved on the photosensitive surface, such photographs produce the dispossession of Chinese of their own architectural spaces at the same moment as they make imaginable the possession of such "empty" places by foreign powers.[viii] Two decades later, John Thomson's photographs worked in tandem with their accompanying texts to represent Chinese landscapes as prospects for occupation, transportation, and trade.[ix] The end of the nineteenth century, however, saw the emergence of documentary work whose purpose is to represent the dispossessed. Such a genealogy of the photography of dispossession might locate its troubled origins in work such as that of Jacob Riis, reach its classic moment in the Depression-era work of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, and extend through Sebastião Salgado's recent efforts to radically recombine the old genres of portraiture and place into an epic and baroque

political aesthetic in order to put a face on the mass dispossessions and migrations that are the central product of globalization.[x]

Documentary photographers in China are at present also working within a historical moment in which vast and seemingly impersonal forces of globalization manifest themselves in many local dispossessions. Indeed, one of the cultural effects of China's remarkable urban transformation over the past two decades has been the increasing invisibility of the countryside as a focus of social concern and popular imagination; at the same time, however, the dispossession and dislocation of vast populations from the countryside on an unprecedented scale has been counterpointed by a thriving market amongst urban consumers for nostalgic images of rural China and the traces of the past in hinterland villages. A popular series of photobooks by the name of Xiangtu Zhongguo (Native-soil China), for instance, published over the past decade by Sanlian Press, depicts villages, chosen for their picturesque qualities, as being as full of exquisite architectural forms and details as they are empty of living inhabitants. While it is tempting to say that such villages are depicted as if at the moment when the last inhabitant has migrated away, it would be more accurate to say that these books' careful focus on place leaves migration entirely outside their frames. The only migrants in these books are, as it were, their images, which have been taken from hinterland villages and reprinted in an urban context. This is not, of course, to claim a simple causal relationship between the fate of rural populations and the urban image market; and yet it is striking the degree to which a desire for nostalgic images depicting rural settings as places of the past's traces has emerged precisely at this moment of widespread dispossession. Hence if, as is often imagined, the present historical moment is one in which images are a force of deterritorialization and even of the dematerialization of reality, and in which images can now be produced and circulated between the most seemingly remote corners of the world and the centers of global capital, it is precisely at this moment that Chinese documentary photographers have chosen to document the deterritorialization of peoples

and the materiality of place. That is, for these photographers, the migration of peoples and the migration of images must be grasped together – not, however, in order to celebrate a supposed freedom of placelessness (if such a thing exists), but rather to reassert a right to place and a right to representation.

But the problems posed by these relationships between the migration of peoples and the migrations of images are particularly thorny in China, precisely because these photographers are working in the decades after the death of Mao Zedong and the end of his revolutionary politics in 1976 – in an era, that is, coming in the wake of the apotheosis of the peasant, both as a figure whose hard-won rights to land were of paramount national concern, and as a larger-than-life figure whose representations dominated the national media for decades. Now that so many peasants have been dispossessed of the land they were supposed to have reclaimed during the early years following the 1949 revolution, and have been rendered silent and largely invisible in the present by images that work to dispossess them (despite their own visibility everywhere as migrant laborers in the cities whose radical transformation is based, to a large extent, on their labor), through what kinds of aesthetic politics might a photographer now represent rural peoples? And at a moment when historical consciousness of the countryside is so often dissolved by dominant image practices into an ahistorical nostalgia for the "native soil" of the village, what kinds of image practices can represent the rural present as a product of an ongoing history?

An influential text by Mao Zedong on dispossession and representation from the years following the revolution – and, composed in 1958, it comes almost exactly between the work of Riis and Zhang – suggests some of the terms within which the aesthetic politics and image practices at work in contemporary Chinese documentary photography grapple with these questions. The text I have in mind appears as the epigraph at the beginning of this essay, a passage from a speech later made widely familiar in China by its inclusion in the *Quotations of Chairman Mao*, the so-called Little Red Book. In the

midst of this text, which introduces the successful work of an agricultural producers' co-operative and celebrates the transformation of the Chinese working people into the "masters" and "rulers of our land," Mao Zedong raises a problem of representation. As the new masters (*zhuren*) of the People's Republic of China, one might expect that the working people were now in a position, unprecedented in Chinese history, to represent themselves – both through a new political order, and through access to a variety of media of pictures, sounds, and words that would give the people a new visibility and a new voice. But this is not what Mao is saying. The working people are not subjects (*zhuti*) producing representations here, nor are they even objects being represented by others for the first time. There is no question of who might represent workers, peasants and soldiers, in what manner and media, and to whom – questions that had preoccupied Mao in his "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature" of 1942. Indeed, in his 1958 text Mao does not mention at all what kinds of representations will be written or pictured. Instead, taken literally, Mao seems to regard the people as a new *medium* of representation. Poor and blank, the people are the "sheet of paper," the surface or support upon which new words and images will be inscribed.

This new medium, with its blank and unmarked surfaces, is, the text suggests, itself a product of the people's history of poverty. Poverty, that is, is here seen as a lack of marked surfaces; or as an agent in removing already-existing marks – blanking them out, wiping the surface clean – in order to create a blank surface; or even as a productive force that creates the medium and its clean, unmarked surfaces in the first place. The potential of the people conceived of as a medium, that is, lies in their being untouched by the marks of culture even as that unmarked medium is itself a product of history and culture – because the people, Mao's text implies, have been impoverished of culture, denied access to culture. Or, more insidiously, the marks of culture and history have now been wiped clean – the people are not blank, but rather, have been blanked. Either way, for Mao, the medium of a blanked surface is, like poverty, not so much a site of lack as a

site of potential: the surface of any medium guides the imagination, and the combination of blank space and marks enjoins one to visualize something more than marks and blank space: in this instance the surface, like poverty, motivates the viewer to picture change, to take action, and even to make revolution.

It is precisely at this revolutionary moment mediating between former dispossession and new mastery of the land that this new medium has become most urgent and powerful. Here Mao's text locates an important tension. For a medium is not simply a passive surface waiting to be marked; a medium has its own active characteristics. The specific material qualities of a medium enable it to transmit some kinds of images, even as it filters out others.[xi] Furthermore, images and words cannot appear in the first place without the material support, such as a blank sheet of paper, provided by a medium. However, a medium, as W. J. T. Mitchell has argued recently, is more than "the object or material thing in which the image makes its appearance." Media are social and "material *presences* that involve technologies, skills, traditions, and habits." Media are, in short, "the habitats...in which pictures come alive."[xii] It is thus, perhaps, not a contradiction in Mao's text that the people are a medium for new words and pictures and at the same time a force full of desire for change, action, and revolution. The people are the habitats in which pictures come alive, and, judging from the context of Mao's text, the pictures make imaginable a new world in which the people become the masters of their habitats: their land, their villages, their homes. Mao's text, then, is animated by unsettled and unsettling relationships among pictures, words, and media and problems of representation and self-representation in a historical context of struggle between poverty, dispossession, and mastery. The structure of the text's argument frames the conditions of dispossession and invisibility and visualization in terms of medium and surface, blank and mark.

It is thus a poignant irony, to say the least, that these very questions concerning the habitats and social-material practices of images resonate so strongly in our own historical moment. Zhang Xinmin is all too conscious of this irony, for his photography

is centrally concerned with the problems of representing the "poor and blank" of rural China, and thus presents a good opportunity to begin reflecting on the nature of documentary photography and the visual documentation of the past in contemporary China.[xiii] I will examine a photobook which is just a small part of Zhang's enormous project to document rural-urban migration in China, namely, *Liukeng: Zhongguo chuantong nongye shehui zuihou de biaoben* [Liukeng: last specimen of Chinese traditional agricultural Society], which explores life in an isolated village in southeastern China which has become both a source of migrant labor for work in the cities, and a site of urban nostalgia for the countryside.[xiv] Zhang, like his contemporaries, seeks a critical departure from image practices that are complicit with the displacement and blanking out of villagers and migrants, through close and sustained attention to the meanings of place and home in a countryside transformed by migration. Zhang resists the transformation of villagers into the passive "poor and blank" medium of urban nostalgic contemplation through a distinctive and rigorous focus on villagers as makers and users of images, and on their villages as composite media, and indeed on how villagers' understandings of place are manifest, precisely through their image practices. These intertwining concerns are themselves framed by a critical self-reflexivity about photography – and pictures in general – as composed of a complex set of material and social relationships.

Zhang's ongoing project to document rural dispossession and migration, then, leads him to a depiction of an isolated and impoverished village as composed of layers of the traces of present and past. For Zhang, a village is far from simply "poor and blank," but rather is rich in marked surfaces in the form of pictures, writing, graffiti, and illegible scratches; an image is far from being a dematerializing force, but rather is inseparable from intensely material practices. Indeed, surfaces and the marks upon them are the specific sites through which the temporality of history and the spatiality of migration are interconnected. Hence Zhang's photographic practices self-consciously call attention to the ways in which blank and marked surfaces – both the surfaces depicted within his

photographs, and the surfaces of the photographs themselves – are markers of migration, of the rural's visual commodification (and resistance to that commodification), and of the contradictory ways in which postcommunist China is representing its past.

Huizhou: History as Recovered Scene

In order to understand something of the broader context in which documentary photographers like Zhang Xinmin are working, let me first turn to an example of the intertwining of disappearance and nostalgia so prevalent in widely-consumed photographic practices in contemporary China. I take as my example a photobook, first published in 2001, devoted to exploring the Huizhou region of Anhui province, and in particular the distinctive and picturesque architecture for which the region has long been renowned. Anhui province is also among the poorest provinces in China; and being adjacent to some of the wealthiest coastal provinces, as well as quite close to the city of Shanghai, it is one of the largest sources of migrant labor in the country.[xv] Poverty and migration, however, are not the subjects of the photobook. Or if the book does evoke migration, it does so only in a highly displaced form. For the book I have in mind, *Huizhou,* with photographs by Li Yuxiang and text by a historical geographer, Wang Zhenzhong, is part of the series I have already mentioned, Xiangtu Zhongguo (Native-soil China), whose title immediately evokes one of the central tropes of modern Chinese literature and culture, namely, a peculiarly modern and urban form of nostalgia for a sense of home understood to be located in the countryside left behind.

The idea of native soil that drives the photobooks in the Xiangtu Zhongguo series is one in which, according to the general introduction to the series, the production of images through visual and verbal means is an essential task. For,

> modern urbanites have been left unable to speak about the traces left by history. Perhaps the old village, the ancient town, the old dwelling, the decaying ancestral temple, and the yellowing genealogical records can stir people to ponder rural

> China. This series aims to introduce Chinese folk traditions and local cultures; using the form of the informal essay in images and text, it disseminates to the masses the essence of China's native culture, and recovers scenes from distant history.[xvi]

Within its language of cliché, this passage manifests a conception of the work and effects of pictures that is central to the book's particular nostalgic project. For the text here progresses from alienated urbanites to a rural cultural essentialism and from speechlessness to vision and imagination, by way of a movement from "the traces left by history," through material artifacts (village, town, dwelling, temple, genealogical records) still marked by the yellowing and decaying of time, and finally to recovered "scenes from distant history." That is, while the text begins by invoking traces and markings – the historical materiality of surfaces seen close up – those traces gradually disappear during the course of the passage, while distant scenes gradually emerge, come into view, and replace those initial marks. It is as if the marks have to be seen past or even forgotten in order to see the distant scenes, much as certain modes of looking at a picture, as James Elkins has argued in another context, seem to depend upon seeing past or suppressing the seeing of the marks that compose it (dabs or strokes of paint or ink, the grain of photographs) and focusing instead on its iconography or narrative, lest the marks (which manifest the material history of a picture as a made object of which iconography and pictorial narrative literally consist) disturb one's viewing.[xvii] Given the power of this manner of looking at and conceptualizing pictures in books like *Huizhou*, then, I believe it is not overstating the case to suggest that the passage from the series introduction strongly implies a claim that it is when one sees past and forgets the traces and marks of the past in favor of scenes and tableaux that history becomes recoverable, and speakable for urbanites, and writeable as narrative.

Wang Zhenzhong defines the project of joining photographs and words in *Huizhou* as an attempt to "seize the flash of history from within the process of gradual

change" (vii). Yet despite the similarity of Wang's phrase to Walter Benjamin's well-known photographic figure for the work of historical materialism, the work of this book is distinctly dematerializing, the image of the past being seized not, as it is for Benjamin, in a moment of danger and in opposition to historical narratives claiming to represent the past "the way it really was," but rather from gradual processes of change.[xviii] For through photographs toned to create the effect of old sepia prints and the overwritten and sentimental style of the text, the book transforms the "dwellings of mountain villages" into "one tableau after another that tugs at the heart strings," representing the village literally as a visual image of the past (96). To walk through a village, Wang claims, is to walk through a "historical scroll." "One's thoughts follow the cobbled alleys, and as one strolls through the changing scenes, distant historical memory is gradually recovered" (94). This apparent transformation of place into image through both words and photographs characterizes the historiographical operation of the entire book. A great number of Li Yuxiang's photographs in the book are comprised of empty street scenes and panoramas, and isolated architectural details. Wang's text wants us to see how these houses' designers and householders in the past combined carved beams, calligraphic scrolls and paintings, and, "through rich rural artistic language, skillfully organized them into a pleasing visual image" (99). Wang then goes on to praise "this method of using architectural components to imply a philosophy of life" (108), one in which the work of scholars and wealthy merchants (the owners of such houses, that is) is equally valued. Wang and Li thus construct a historical picture of Huizhou through this recurring pattern of analysis, in which a photograph of an architectural feature leads to a discussion of history or of the customs of the past; in Wang's text, these customs and practices of the past come to stand for the "essential" culture of Huizhou as such, for Huizhou's days of producing great scholars and merchants is, quite literally, a thing of the past. Thus, while Wang and Li can be said to be engaging in an analysis of material culture, in which architectural style manifests its own social and natural origins, their analysis has the

effect of collapsing historical time between photographs of Huizhou's structures in their present form and a text that narrates the people and customs of Huizhou's past, leaving the present literally timeless.

Such a collapsing of historical time is founded upon an invisibility that structures both photographs and text. What is kept invisible are any traces or marks of the history that has intervened *between* the production of such images in the past and their recovery in the present (or, their re-presentation). And what is literally invisible in most of these photographs are the people who continue to live in these villages now, in the present, for almost every photograph in the book is empty of people, and those very few people who do appear are shot at a considerable distance and are entirely dominated by their physical environment, mere random details amongst the architectural details the photographs endeavor to show. What philosophy of life might the present-day villagers understand from the pleasing visual images? How might they speak about these historical traces? What are the social and economic conditions of life in such sites of nostalgia for urban consumption? Except for sections of the book on folk customs, the living villagers are mostly gone without a trace, and when they do appear, it is never as individuals: folk customs seem to exist without needing people to practice them. The only individuals in the book are historical and literary figures from the past; indeed, the very production of the visually pleasing built environment of Huizhou is attributed to the taste of the elite designers and owners, and not at all to the labor of the villagers of the past, while the few villagers mentioned in the present are old and made to represent something unchanging about their villages. As a result, the local culture is essentialized, and any change is portrayed as decay.

"Space," as Michel de Certeau memorably remarked, "is a practiced place."[xix] A place, that is, derives its vitality not so much from its physical form as from the "ensemble of movements" and activities of its dwellers. However, in the process of transforming the real, three-dimensional space of Huizhou into the virtual, two-

dimensional spaces of its photographs, the book erases all marks of the practices of place in the present; in *Huizhou*, place is practiced in the past, in historical records, or by "the folk," or not at all. It is only practiced in the present by urbanites who imaginatively walk through the villages as if through a "historical scroll." In order to create a "museum of traditional culture," Wang's text explains the architectural components in Li's photographs, and Li's photographs illustrate Wang's text. This may help urbanites to overcome their speechlessness about the traces left by history and to visualize the past, but this collusion of texts and images renders the villagers and their histories both silent and invisible. The book *Huizhou* is thus a product of multiple displacements. It is through emptying the village of its living present that it becomes a series of scenes of the past, a virtual space to be occupied by the imaginations of the book's intended urban audience – which the book in turn defines as the product of displacement from a rural past. In this form of nostalgia photographs, the work of what David Harvey calls "accumulation through dispossession" is done precisely through visual and verbal representation.[xx] Poor and blank, indeed.

Now, strictly speaking, one might reasonably claim that Li's photographs are designed to be documents – documents, that is, of large and small features of the architecture and built environments of Huizhou. But then the ways in which photographs can be thought of as documents, and the relations and even differences between the idea of photographs as documents and that of documentary photography, have long been contested in writings about photography. The Chinese term most commonly used at present in the PRC for documentary is *jishi,* which, according to one dictionary definition means a "record of actual events," or an "on-the-spot report."[xxi] More literally, we might translate *jishi* as a "record" or even "verbal mark" or "notation" (*ji*) of the "real" (*shi*) or of "facts" or "the factual," or of the "true," or even of the tangible, the full, and the visible. The term *jishi,* then, resonates well with the history of the term "documentary" in the West, for as Joel Snyder has argued, the term "document" entered the vocabulary of

photography in the early twentieth century as a substitute for terms like "copy" or "reproduction" in the sense of being representations of the visible first surfaces of things. A photographic document, that is, came to be thought of as simply a "record of the visible."[xxii]

The book, *Huizhou,* could indeed be said to provide photographic documents of the visible surfaces of architecture, while the text, by focusing on, for instance, the "mottled walls" of the village and the "crumbling and ruined temple partitions and honorific archways," does seem to indicate a close attention to material qualities of the surfaces of things. What Wang tries to see from such surfaces, however, is not the continuous passing of historical time, but rather the "fragments of the past surviving within the depths of historical memory" (59). Out of such fragments of the past, "nooks of history" which are preserved "in the tiniest crevices," Wang hopes to "recover true and complete scenes" (vii). That is, Wang's text is more concerned with using these surfaces as points of departure toward an imaginary and sentimental recapture of an idealized past unmediated by the present.[xxiii] The very photographic documents that make up much of the book themselves betray this aestheticizing desire. For all of the book's attention to architectural details and its purported focus on surfaces, the photographs of Huizhou buildings are carefully composed to focus *only* on those details from the past and to crop out any signs of the wear and tear of historical events or everyday life – whether in the form of graffiti leftover from the Cultural Revolution or 1966-1976, say, or the tread of footsteps – or the photographs are taken from far enough away that such surface markings are largely invisible. In order to create their nostalgic scenes, the photographs thus suppress the very tactility of the surfaces they depict – surfaces which register the traces and textures of everyday life across historical time – and replace the historicity of Huizhou's surfaces depicted within any given photograph with an aura of the old that is created on the surfaces of the pages of *Huizhou* by toning the photographs in sepia. This use of sepia, like the sentimental style of Wang's text, works to separate past from

present by making photographs taken in the present look as if they were themselves the products of photographic technologies of the past, not of the present.

Thus while the book *Huizhou* provides urban viewers with photographic documents, it is not an instance of documentary photography, not at least as photographers like Zhang Xinmin understand the term. To be fair, nowhere does Wang's text claim that *Huizhou* is a documentary work; he doesn't use the term, *jishi*, or "documentary," and arguably he eschews a use of this word because of its associations with the realities of the present. To redeploy the terms of Philip Rosen's historicization of the idea of indexical traces in photography and film theory through an analysis of nineteenth-century architectural debates, the image of the past books like *Huizhou* offer is not one of *preservation,* which "emphasizes respect for time's passage" by valuing "the wear on the surface, which marks a building as genuinely old," and "refusing to interrupt its passage through time." Rather, such nostalgia photography subscribes to the ideology of *restoration*, which seeks to return buildings to their imagined state in the past by "removing or covering up traces of both natural wear and the reworkings of old buildings over the centuries in the interests of unity." Thereby, Rosen remarks, it "denies part of 'the life' of a building and kills it."[xxiv] What is troubling about a book like *Huizhou*, then, is its use of photographic documents that render the living present invisible in order to provide a fantasy of the possibility of access to the past unmediated by an intervening and often messy history of which the present is also a part. In short, *Huizhou* offers a history without the history – an offer has that proved to be very successful with urban consumers.[xxv]

Liukeng: The Historicity of Surfaces

Like *Huizhou,* Zhang Xinmin's photobook, *Liukeng: Last Specimen of Chinese Traditional Agricultural Society,* represents a village from a displaced perspective that is the product of migration from country to city. Liukeng village is located in Jiangxi

province; in 2000 Jiangxi had the highest rate of out-migration in China, and like Anhui province just to the north (where Huizhou is located), this high degree of out-migration is largely because of the stark economic disparities between Jiangxi and the wealthier coastal provinces and cities just to the east.[xxvi] In this context, Zhang's project is driven by something quite different from the desire to recover scenes from distant history for the sake of speechless modern urbanites. In contrast to the fantasy *Huizhou* presents of a stable place for the retrieval of an unmarked or unmediated past, photographers like Zhang Xinmin explore, research, and represent the village as a site of migration and a site of the past which is itself multiply mediated – by the living and the generations that have preceded them and have lived there, or left, or simply passed through, by the images and other marks they have made and left behind, by the images they collect, by the understandings these people have of images, and of the uses to which they put images. Arguably what makes the work of Zhang Xinmin other contemporary Chinese photographers *documentary* in their current context is their effort to represent the present historically.

Zhang, like numerous documentary photographers, pursues a socially engaged formal self-consciousness both within his photographs and through the combination of images and texts he experiments with in his photobook. It is precisely in order to resist the dangers of the kinds of collusions between texts and images that would render people and histories both silent and invisible that the texts and images of a photo-essay don't so much cooperate as critique their relationships with their subjects and each other, or even subvert each other entirely.[xxvii] Zhang Xinmin's photo-essay is characterized by an ethical commitment not to represent the village of Liukeng as a museum, or what Zhang calls a "living fossil," but rather as what he calls a "living specimen" (*huo biaoben*), a village composed of Ming and Qing architecture, images and inscriptions, layered with slogans from the Cultural Revolution, and populated by villagers coming to terms with their very status as a "specimen of Chinese traditional society."[xxviii] For Zhang, this

ethical commitment demands formal experimentation, and Zhang seems to be working toward a composite form in which photographs and texts work in dialogue with each other and their subjects. The difference of Zhang's work from a book like *Huizhou* is immediately apparent if we look at one of Zhang's photographs of an artistic detail of an old mansion (figure 1). The caption refers simply to three inscribed plaques still preserved in one of the mansion's halls. The text of the caption, which would isolate an architectural detail, is immediately made ironic by the dominating presence of village children. The purported subject of the photograph is indeed there, at the top, but we must first look beyond the gaze of the children who are looking out at us. Rather than use a telephoto lens, as would be customary, to isolate a distant, specific detail from its context, here, perversely, Zhang uses a wide-angle lens to show a distant detail, thereby creating a tension between lens and depicted detail in which the detail that is the purported subject of the photograph is almost lost within its context. Furthermore, only one of the three plaques is visible; to see the others, perhaps we must look through the eyes of the child standing above the others, whose gaze, like ours, is directed toward the ceiling, only beyond the frame of the photograph, where we of course cannot see. The discrepancy between caption and photograph calls attention to that which is invisible to us but is visible to the villagers, while the photograph itself replaces the kind of knowledge a book like *Huizhou* promises with that which such a book renders invisible: the village as inhabited by the living, in the present.

This ironic use of a caption (instead of a lens) to focus on an isolated detail within a larger – and populated – image is a device Zhang uses throughout his book. Such a photograph also points toward Zhang's conviction that the problem of understanding Liukeng village is raised by the problem of looking. Zhang writes, "How should one look at [or understand – the word is *kan*] Liukeng? Those researching ancient architecture, local history, ancient culture and art, folk customs, classical texts and stele inscriptions, artifact preservation and environmental preservation, as well as those

engaged in tourism, or various artistic activities, all...can find their own answers within this village of less than four square kilometers" (n.p.). Zhang's own search for an answer in Liukeng leads him to examine his role as photographer in the light of the responsibilities of representation: representation in the sense of depicting something, but also in the sense of making visible people who have been overlooked, speaking on behalf of others, or, in Zhang's case, not so much "giving voice" to others as helping to make their voices heard. The problem of looking for Zhang, then, leads to the problem of speaking and writing. Zhang intends to represent Liukeng, its history, and the relationship of this history to the lives of its present residents. But, he writes, "as far as narrating the process of change goes, photography's limitations are obvious to see, and thus the appearance of narrative language here is imperative" (n.p.). The material of these narratives is largely made up of conversations with the villagers which Zhang tapes and transcribes. In this way, he urges us, "when you face these village portraits, you must listen attentively" (n.p.). Zhang makes photographs, then, that not only ask to be seen, but also to be heard. He has described how desperate the villagers of Liukeng were to make their voices heard during his visits there; as Sebastião Salgado has vividly described his own experience, "they come to your camera as they come to a microphone."[xxix]

And yet this effort to create images to be heard raises a crucial problem. If, for Mao, one of the virtues of the Chinese people is that they are a blank surface, a tabula rasa, upon which words and pictures may be inscribed (or, more to the point, onto which an official voice of the people may be projected), and if books like *Huizhou* empty out villages and project a nostalgic voice into their picturesque spaces in order for urbanites to overcome their speechlessness, then the problem of the relationships and tensions between images and words is one with high stakes in the cultural politics of contemporary China, as Zhang Xinmin and his fellow documentary photographers are all too aware. This problem animates Zhang's work. For, in order to grapple with it, Zhang

composes his entire book through dialectics of looking and listening, seeing and reading, photographing and tape recording, images and words. But for Zhang the matter is clearly more complex than one of simply joining words to photographs in order to make images speak. For one thing, Zhang's text is not simply a singular form of writing placed in a fixed relationship with the photographs. Rather, Zhang's text is a complex assemblage of different kinds of texts: transcripts of oral narratives and reflections on photography, as we've seen, but also personal and ethnographic narrative, various historical sources – even the transcripts of a tour guide's spiel. Unlike Salgado, who separates his words from his photographs entirely (the lengthy captions for his book, *Migrations,* for instance, appear in a separate booklet accompanying the larger volume in which the photos appear), Zhang's combination of images and words seems to betray an anxiety that the camera is not *enough* like a microphone. There is also, in Zhang's book, not a single kind of fixed relationship between images and texts; rather, the relative importance of the two, their relative claims to authority, indeed, the very borders between them, shift throughout the book. This shifting border is located precisely at the ethical heart of the book. This, I take it, is the spirit in which Zhang enjoins us – in a modern echo of a traditional aesthetic – to "look at the stories within the photographs, and read the photographs within the stories" (n.p.).[xxx]

Furthermore, Zhang's book works to keep this border between images and texts complex and porous, rather than reified, through understanding both images and texts – including his own photographs – as traces of the past and present; or, better, as marks made on surfaces, a notion that complicates the dialectic of visual image and word through a crucial third term: tactility. For Zhang takes his photographs in such a way as to emphasize the textures of things. As can be seen in figure 2, Zhang's choice of a richly-toned black and white as well as his frequent choice to frame his photographs at an angle from both the surface he is photographing and the light that is falling upon that surface, both serve to call attention to the surfaces of Liukeng as being heavily marked by

the fall of light and shadow, by the weathering and decay of time, and by layer upon layer of facture, the marks of human intention and labor.[xxxi] In this photograph, for instance, the textures of the cobblestones and, especially, of the folds of the old woman's garment are heavily marked by light and shadow. And, crucially, sharp contrasts in light and shadow and the monochromatic tonalities of the film and its developing bring out (or mark) the traces which the archways in this corridor still retain of the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s in the form, as the caption tells us, of the cogwheel mouldings plastered around their outer edges; these transformations of this building's surfaces, while heavily weathered, themselves partly cover earlier reworkings of the wall's surface that have decayed even more to reveal the structure underneath.

But of course the photograph *itself* – through Zhang's choice of a wide-angle lens (which greatly exaggerates the perspective from the door on the right to the seemingly miniscule opening to the left), his position vis-à-vis the wall and the direction of the light, as well as his use of fairly low exposure to emphasize shadow and texture, capture the brightly-lit scene on the left, and block up the shadows within the three archways – is *also* a manipulation (and not merely a record or imprint) of surfaces: the surfaces of film and photographic paper and the kind of picture of surfaces in Liukeng which they create.[xxxii] For, given that the dynamic range of light from highlights to shadows in the scene (which would likely be visible to the naked eye) exceeds that which can be registered on film, making a photograph of a scene like this poses a difficult exposure choice to a photographer of what areas in which to register detail and where to allow either blown-out highlights or blocked-up shadows. Zhang could have opted to allow the door on the left to appear as a detail-less blaze of light in order to represent the interiors of the archways. Instead, through his exposure choices of holding the brightly-lit details of the doorway on the left and placing the other archways in shadow, he at once indicates a social context extending beyond the immediate area of the wall and opening out onto the world outside, and blocks the viewer's visual penetration of the interiors of this part

of the village. In turn, the villagers in the photographs, characteristically, both acknowledge the presence of the photographer, to the left, and look beyond the frame, to the right, to areas of the village that extend beyond where the viewer can see; that is, while the framing of the photograph also registers the marks of the photographer, the social interactions with the people depicted within the photographs are themselves traces of the photographer's presence. Zhang's photographs, then, call attention to a reality that *Huizhou* tries to suppress and yet unavoidably betrays: that a choice of photographic style intersects dialectically with the represented space within a photograph.

This distinction between the photographs of *Huizhou*, whose presentation as being themselves products of the past (through sepia toning) works to conceal their manipulation of the village's surfaces and spaces, and the photographs of *Liukeng,* which call attention to the interaction of photographer, camera, photograph, the represented surfaces of the village and the manipulation of the village's surfaces, also derives from the two books' divergent attitudes toward the marks that have been left on those village surfaces. As I suggested earlier, the photographs of *Huizhou* manifest a restorationist impulse in their efforts, in Rosen's terms, to cover up "traces of both natural wear and the reworkings of old buildings over the centuries." Zhang Xinmin's photographs, by contrast, manifest a preservationist impulse in their valuing and even emphasis upon "the wear of the surface, which marks a building as genuinely old" and hence, in Rosen's terms, their refusal to "interrupt" their represented buildings' "passage through time." While it may be tempting to dismiss a book like *Huizhou* for being superficial – and even to evoke familiar critiques of images as being "mere" surface – it is arguable that the problem with *Huizhou*'s photographs is that they are precisely not superficial *enough;* they withdraw from attention to the surfaces of things. Zhang's photographs, by contrast, attend closely to the surfaces of things; it is precisely their superficiality – or, better, their surficiality, the texture and tactility that are the conditions upon which the visual presentation of images depends – that is critical to them.[xxxiii] *Liukeng* does not oppose

"superficial" representations of "the village" with an appeal to the "depths" of history, or to the notion of history as a matter of depths, of substrata. Rather, in its exploration of surfaces, *Liukeng* proposes a critical historical surficiality.

This is why Zhang's most visually striking strategy is to photograph Liukeng's surfaces as composites various kinds of marks. In figure 3, for example, the wall of an ancestral temple becomes a surface upon which Cultural Revolution slogans are inscribed and a plaque from the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) leans: mediating between them are panels covered with writing, numbers, symbols, graffiti, and other marks cut and scratched into the wood. The Qing plaque at the bottom, which reads, "San ye chong guang" or, roughly, "Glory repeated across multiple [literally, three] generations," is just the kind of detail a book like *Huizhou* would focus on. Yet here, the plaque has been displaced from its customary position high up on a wall or above a doorway: it now rests on the floor. As represented by this photograph – since we don't know where exactly in Liukeng this plaque came from – the plaque has been displaced by something the *Huizhou* book would never show: a slogan from the Cultural Revolution celebrating a meeting establishing a Red Guard production team revolutionary committee of the poor, lower, and middle peasants. The slogan on the right reminds the viewer of the importance of Mao Zedong Thought in making revolution. But these three signs from recent and more distant pasts both frame and are mediated by those panels in the lower middle with their hundreds of tiny marks, made apparently during and after the intervening years. Crucially, these marks are mostly illegible, or in their repetition and fragmentation of characters they render sense into nearly illegible texture. That is, this photograph both shows, literally, the marks of time that mediate between past and present in a way the *Huizhou* book will not – but also it frustrates the easy readability of the past that a book like *Huizhou* wants to claim. There are at least three eras in this photograph – the Qing, the Cultural Revolution, and the intervening period – flattened together onto a single plane by the photograph (which itself, of course, manifests the presence of yet

another era). The plaque in its fallen position, then, is both a part of the image and occupies something like the position of a caption in the image – a point subtly reinforced by the placement of Zhang's camera at the level of the plaque, emphasizing the plaque while the wall seems to taper away toward the slogans above – so that the "three generations" its text literally refers to in the past also seems to refer to these three eras visible together in the present.

For such a photograph to do its critical work, it must play upon the relationship between a photograph *of* marked (and layered) surfaces and the idea of a photograph as *itself* a marked surface. Zhang's photograph of the Qing dynasty plaque and the Cultural Revolution slogans, then, makes self-conscious one of the central (but not exclusive) abilities of photography: "to fix," as David Summers puts it, "the appearances of surfaces" – here, of the wall and the plaque – "on other surfaces," that is, the film surface.[xxxiv] For, according to Patrick Maynard's similar insight, photographs are not first pictures or images but are rather part of "the general class of *marked surfaces*: that is, of (1) surfaces that (2) have been marked – in this case by light."[xxxv] While, as Maynard goes on to argue in his carefully and rigorously material (if not "marksist") account, there are many kinds of marks (30-31), and not all markings are images (33) or even necessarily referential (60), images are "usually physical states of surfaces of which people make mental (that is, cognitive) use" (24). The "physical states of surfaces and...the actions of altering those states [are] among the many ways in which people address the surfaces of the world" (55). This is clearly the case in the photograph under consideration: in the joining together of wooden surfaces to make both the temple wall and the Qing plaque; in the pasting of paper and cloth to the wall's surface; in the use of paint and brush to write "Glory across the generations" on the plaque and revolutionary slogans on the paper and cloth attached to the wall; in the innumerable scratches – both legible and illegible, intentional and unintentional –marking the wood of the wall; in the displacement of the Qing plaque from ceiling to floor; in Zhang's choice of lighting,

camera position, framing, lens, filters, monochrome film, development and papers for his photograph; and, for that matter, in the decision to place this photograph on a single page of its own in the photobook, surrounded both by a black shadowy frame and blank white space.

All of these surfaces share specific qualities of tactility and spatiality. What distinguishes Zhang's photograph from most of the marked surfaces depicted within it is that it is also, of course, a picture. In Maynard's terms, pictures are "a kind of physical image, marked surfaces that mandate our imagining things. To be more precise, they mandate that we imagine *seeing* things" (104). The marked surface of which the printed version of Zhang's photograph consists mandates at the very least that we imagine a particular place in Liukeng with special attention to the physical qualities of its surfaces. What Zhang's photograph and the surfaces in Liukeng it depicts have in common, however, is the function of their markings to bring "to our minds things not present," that is, to call "to mind the absent" (60). Zhang's photographs call to mind a Liukeng that, for most viewers, is not present to them, even as the marks on the surfaces within this photograph call to mind the absent and present makers of these marks: these marks they made many – even hundreds – of years apart, are now all present together in the same place and time.

This does not mean, however, that the marks on the village's surfaces are necessarily left by those long dead. For Zhang, Liukeng is itself a composite medium of memory, a palimpsest of layers of inscriptions, but it is a living palimpsest. If a child stands beside the "ink traces" left by the historical figures Zeng Guofan and Zuo Zongtang in the photograph in figure 4, then in figure 5 other children continue to add their own "ink traces" right on into the present. The making – or marking – of the past continues up through the present moment. Indeed, Zhang's own photographs do not only call to mind a Liukeng absent to most viewers; his photographs are also a mark of his own presence in the village at some point in the (recent) past. All of these marks, then,

do not only call to mind the absent or the past. The marks on the surfaces of Liukeng left by Zeng Guofan in the nineteenth century, and later, by Red Guards during the 1960s – that is, the traces of those who have passed by – remain alongside the marks of those who still live there (and will, in many cases, migrate elsewhere). Unlike the depiction of Huizhou in Wang and Li's book, Liukeng is not so much a place of origin (where people remain, or from whence they come), but a node in the circulation of people, a place defined by leave-taking and return, a place – as it is in the present – of migration. The palimpsests that are the surfaces of Liukeng link in an ongoing process the people of the past and those of the present as all makers of marks. And Zhang's insistence on depicting these marks in his photography itself marks Liukeng not only as a place of the past, or even as a place accumulating the marks of the past, but as a place of passing, as well as of the passed.[xxxvi]

In this focus on the marked surfaces of the past in Liukeng, Zhang's photographs explore visually something akin to Paul Ricoeur's definition of history as "a knowledge by traces."[xxxvii] A trace, for Ricoeur, is a mark of both the "past" and the "passed." The two central qualities of a trace are, first, that it is both a vestige or mark or track left "because 'earlier' a human being or an animal passed this way," and, second, that it "remains" and is "visible here and now" (119). Ricoeur extends this notion of vestige to include facture, or the marks of the "transitory activity of human beings" on "a harder, more durable support" such as stone, bone, clay tablets, paper, recording tape, and so on (120). Thus, for Ricoeur, the trace is "the source of the authority of the document" through which the past is known and narrated in the here and now, for the document, which records events in the past, is itself a physical remainder from the past, a trace of the past. As Prasenjit Duara observes in a discussion of Ricoeur and the writing of histories, a trace, being "the material presence of the past," is "both nature and culture: it is an object susceptible to the laws of causation, but it is also interpretable as a sign, a meaning."[xxxviii]

Presumably photographs can serve as historical documents by virtue of the knowledge by traces they make available. But the question I have been trying to pursue here is somewhat different – a question situated on an intersection of the humanities, the social sciences, and art practice – namely, what kinds of historical thinking can and do photographers practice precisely through their specific practices of making photographs? What kinds of historical documents do they produce through photography? The ongoing work of contemporary Chinese documentary photographers is, I believe, a valuable site for exploring such questions; the particular value of Zhang Xinmin's work is the self-consciousness with which such questions are posed. A substantial portion of Zhang's book underscores the double characteristic of historical traces as both objects and signs in its picturing of a variety of modes of documentation, including visual documents such as old maps of Liukeng and portraits of generations of ancestors, as well as the genealogies that both represent and bear the written marks of past generations. Zhang not only quotes from the genealogies, but includes photographs of them as well; similarly, he not only presents conversations and oral narratives in his text, but also reminds us that they are the transcripts of tape recordings, so that both transcription and photography become modes of historical documentation in Zhang's book.

But in describing Zhang's documentary photography as a "knowledge by traces," I mean much more than that he simply photographs or transcribes documents. For if both historiography and photography can be considered to be technologies of marked surfaces, then the crucial point is that critical practices (and, for that matter, critical analyses) of historiography and photography attend carefully to the relationships between the materiality of traces and the meanings which they are interpreted to depict. If, as James Elkins argues, a critical engagement with pictures depends not on suppressing the intentional and random marks of which they are made in order to focus on pictorial narrative and represented figures, but rather to grasp the unruly and insecure relations between marks and the figures and images they build, then understanding the workings of

traces is, as Duara argues, crucial for critically opening up to contestation historical narratives of the modern nation.[xxxix]

> Transmission of the meaning of a trace or an event is premised upon repression or appropriation of (and sometimes negotiation with) other, dispersed meanings of the trace or event by the structures and signifiers of a narrative. It is of great importance to grasp the *particular process* whereby transmission seeks to appropriate, conceal, or repress dispersed meanings because it is often through this conflictual relationship that we can glimpse history outside of the categories of the nation-state: at the instant when the transmissive act seeks to appropriate the dispersed event. Moreover, we are privileged to view this appropriating instant precisely because there is more than one force which seeks to appropriate it – given that there is more than one way to conceive of the nation. [xl]

What much of Zhang's photography does is to treat the built space of Liukeng as itself a material archive and to focus on, to bring into view, precisely those traces on the surfaces of the village – marks of a past and passing of both elites and the general populace that is ongoing – that are either concealed and repressed or selectively appropriated in histories such as *Huizhou* that would nostalgically narrate a (supposedly lost) relationship between the rural past and urban present, and disperse the many voices and experiences that would complicate and contest such histories.

The work of marked surfaces in Zhang's photographs as a mediation of present, past, and those who have passed, is inseparable from their work as a form of social mediation. Broadly speaking, Zhang's photographs call attention to the social mediations of images as marked surfaces in two ways. The first is, of course, his choice to depict the built form of Liukeng village as itself a composite medium – a composite of various kinds of marks, whether (as we've seen) pictorial, verbal, architectural, sculptural, or illegible and unintentional marks. The traces in Zhang photographs, that is, are located upon the very walls of the place of which they are a history; the walls are the material

support upon which those marks make their appearance. This does not, however, mean that Liukeng as medium is simply a passive surface waiting to be marked. Rather, to recall Mitchell's definition of media as social and material practices, Zhang's photographs work to picture Liukeng's surfaces as "the habitats in which pictures come alive." Zhang does this by playing off of the relations between the marks on Liukeng's surfaces and the spaces they demarcate on those surfaces; the virtual spaces those marks may depict as images (if they are images); and the real, social spaces of the village in which the marks and images are displayed and in which the villagers live.[xli] (The photograph in figure 5, for instance, shows the marked surface of a wall, the figure of a man in the virtual space depicted by some of those marks, as well as two children, who may or may not be responsible for the marks, squatting in the real space of the village of which the wall with its marks and images is part.) If the built form of the village of Liukeng can itself be said to be a mixed medium, then the marks on the walls (and the virtual spaces which some of them create) as well as the villagers share the same habitat, and Zhang's book depicts everyday life both through and amongst the traces of the past.

The other way in which Zhang's photographs call attention to the social mediations of images as marked surfaces is through the organization and manipulation of the surfaces of the photographs themselves – or, more specifically, the choices in framing and exposure through which the marks making up the pictures on their surfaces are manipulated – as the sites mediating the relations between the villagers and village surfaces and spaces depicted *within* the virtual spaces of the photographs, and the *viewers* of those photographs. I want to argue that the significance of Zhang Xinmin's photographs and photobook for thinking about the work of documentary photography lies in how they address the historically-marked surfaces of the world through close attention to, on the one hand, the relations between marked surfaces, virtual spaces, and social spaces as depicted *within* his photographs, and, on the other, the relations between the represented space within a photograph, the photographer, and the spectator *outside* his

photographs. Furthermore, these relationships of marked surfaces and spaces and the historical, spatial, and social relationships they, in turn, mediate, structure both the sequencing of Zhang's photographs and the narrative of his book as images and text explore the present social conditions of life amongst the traces of the past. By way of conclusion, let me sketch how this is so by examining, in particular, the first of the oral histories which comprise the bulk of Zhang's text, for it introduces and encapsulates all of the major themes of *Liukeng*.

The narrative of Zhang's book moves from an exploration of life amidst historical traces in Liukeng, to an examination of Liukeng as a place for thinking about migration within China, and finally, to Liukeng's long historical decline and possible (and ironic) self-transformation into a commodity to be offered to the urban nostalgia market. This narrative, however, is authorized by the first photograph in the sequence of photographs that counterpoints the first oral history in the book, through the photograph's re-collection and foregrounding (rather than repression) of marks and surfaces, gaps, and blockages (figure 6). Most of this flat image is itself comprised of two massive wooden doors upon which are painted the images of two facing door guardian spirits *(menshen)*: the lowermost sections of the doors are cropped out of the photograph, so that the relationship between the position of the doors and the ground is difficult to judge, making the surfaces of the doors appear at first to closely parallel the surface of the photograph, and to comprise its picture plane. But the two images on the doors are not the only subjects of the photograph. Nearly half of the doors' depicted surfaces are covered in random marks and the signs of wear and fading; that is, the wear on the images and on the wood of the door literally mark them with time. Indeed, while the door spirit images at first seem to dominate the photograph because of their relative size and position in the composition, their dominance is complicated by the placement of the camera at standing height. For while this low placement gives the images their dominant position in the photograph, it also renders the most worn and marked areas of the doors' surfaces both

more brightly and sharply portrayed and closer to hand, so that the doors' tactile qualities are emphasized at least as much as their visual qualities.

In this tension between the visual and tactile qualities of the images portrayed, the photograph does the work so characteristic of the entire photobook. For as can be seen immediately, of course, the pair of images remaining from the past is split open and divided by the living. The man who appears between the doors built, painted, and worn down by his ancestors is Dong Zhaorong (the subject and speaker of the book's first oral narrative), whose hands grasp the doors at their point of greatest wear, pointing to and presumably contributing to that wear. But Dong's hands do more than break the continuity of the door spirit images. For in opening the doors Dong splits open what otherwise appears to be a continuous picture plane, and his own presence in the gap between the images marks the split of their virtual space by the social space of Liukeng in which they are located. And from within this split between virtual and social spaces and the marked surfaces that mediate them is introduced the accompanying text's narrative of migration and history, loss, destruction, and decline – a narrative, that is, which emerges from the marked spaces of both the open door and Zhang Xinmin's photograph, but which hardly contains (let alone structures) those intentional and unintentional marks and their possible meanings. The opening pages of the text, which are composed of Zhang's comments as well as the transcript of an interview between Zhang and Dong, begin in a hesitation between a historical account of the doors and their images, and a biographical account of Dong's own migrations away from and back to Liukeng (which are intertwined with an account of national, local, and family decline). This tension is momentarily resolved into a description of the "ink marks of history" (*lishi moji*) that are both the traces left behind (by visitors dating back to the Song (960-1279) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties and, more recently, by the Red Army in the 1930s, and activists from the periods of Land Reform in the 1950s, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution) and the substance making up the words and pictures that mark Liukeng's

surfaces (2). However, this account of the traces of history is itself, in turn, immediately interrupted by the resumption of Dong's telling of his own personal history of displacement and dispossession. The split between virtual space and social space within the photograph, that is, is accompanied by a corresponding split between a history of ink traces and a history of migration and destruction in the text.

Significantly, the only other significant interruption in Dong's interview with Zhang is caused by the visit of a tour group, whose leader requests that the Dong family genealogy, printed in 1582, be brought out and displayed. For this request for visual access to the genealogical record by visitors from outside Liukeng raises another question upon which Zhang's book hinges, namely, the impact of Liukeng's developing relationship with the outside world – in the form of outward migration and incorporation into transportation networks and the tourist, nostalgia, and heritage industries – and the seeming inextricability of the destruction and decline and the preservation and survival of the village. This ambivalence is played out visually as the photographs hesitate between blocking and allowing the spectator visual access to Liukeng's spaces. In the photograph of the door spirits (figure 6), for instance, the doors may be opened by the living to reveal the social space of Liukeng in the gap created between virtual spaces, but, because of the photograph's low exposure and lighting, the depicted interior the opened doors reveal is almost entirely blocked up with shadow. One can only glimpse the slightest hint of another door or wall within that interior, and of the grain of wood and gaps between wood planks – but, for the most part, the doors and wall and the darkness block further visual access to the spectator, even as the opening of the doors would seem to grant it. Indeed, as the images on the doors are guardians, guarding, as it were, entry into Liukeng (given their position in the book), Dong's own position between them becomes ambiguous, seeming both to welcome the viewer and to look out with suspicion.

The blocked and shallow spaces depicted in this and other opening photographs of Zhang's book, however, gradually give way in subsequent photographs to greater spatial

depth and visual penetration of the village. Yet even as Zhang's book seems to offer increasing visual access to the village and its largely disempowered residents, at the same time it repeatedly challenges the power of the spectator of the photographs (and reader of the book) to see – or, rather, the book questions how much the (relatively powerful) viewers of the village can see, and to what ends, in comparison with what the (mostly disempowered) villagers can see. At one point near the middle of the book, for instance, a fragile and old ancestral portrait is brought out and displayed for the benefit of the provincial governor on a visit. Significantly, the governor's visual access to this image from the past is literally blocked by a crowd of the living desperate to read a petition to him calling attention to Liukeng's desperate economic isolation (34-44, 118-119).

Indeed, there is a bitter irony in the ways these questions of vision and access are intertwined throughout Zhang's book with the record of life both through and among traces of the past. Poverty, dispossession, and migration are not figured here as blankness, as Mao would have had it; rather, the one inexhaustible resource the village seems to have is its surfeit of marked surfaces. But a constant refrain throughout the images and texts is the question, what are Liukeng's historical traces worth to the impoverished villagers who live among them? Throughout the book we learn of the village's long historical decline, and the attempts of villagers to get by, first through massive local deforestation, and then through leaving as migrant laborers. When a villager complains to Zhang that there's no money in Liukeng, and Zhang points out that Liukeng does have treasures other villages lack, the villager replies, "I can't see it; I see that all of these old houses are broken down, old, about to fall over....I don't know why all those outsiders want to come here to look, what's there to look at?" (110). Another villager, whose name, Dong Xingwen, as Zhang points out, puns on "Dong Xinwen," or "understands the news," complains of the many reporters who just come and take a few photographs and leave. As Zhang comments, "they hope [the reporters] can be a little more patient, and listen to them speak frankly" (62). While the villagers increasingly

grapple with the economics and politics of looking, of words and images, so does Zhang's book. As shown by a subsequent page layout of a Ming Dynasty hall being used as a school (80-81), economic troubles come to dominate the captions of the images. If the photograph of the hall had appeared earlier on, the caption might have called attention to the facture of the Ming building of which it is a part, but now our attention is drawn instead to the children within it, who are struggling for an education their parents can no longer afford. Perhaps the greatest irony of this economic situation in the present context is that, in contrast to Zhang's efforts to avoid the museumification of Liukeng, many residents there see their only hope in turning their village into a living museum, much like Huizhou; and as it happens, they have already begun charging outsiders for admission tickets.

Zhang, like many documentary photographers, is of course highly aware of these ironies, which he foregrounds throughout his book. His very commitment to his ongoing project to document the many sites of migration within China is charged with both an ethical commitment to representation whose assumptions about referentiality might strike many scholars in the humanities as naïve (or at least awkward to discuss), and an intensely poignant consciousness of the material and visual complexities that mediate and filter any form of representation. Let me, then, conclude with one of the final photographs in Zhang's book (figure 7), for the refusal of an easy resolution to questions regarding the marked surfaces of the past, their presence, uses and authority, as well as the representation of the displaced, past and present, in words and images is a crucial feature of the ethics of Zhang's formal exploration. The only certainty is that which this image makes clear: we who would look at the marks of others' pasts cannot avoid the eyes of the living who look back at us. It is a look that may be poor, but is anything but blank.

I am deeply grateful for the generosity of Gu Zheng, Li Bo, Li Mei, Li Tuo, Lydia H. Liu, Liu Shuyong, Wang Zheng, Yang Xiaoyan, and Zhang Xinmin for introducing me to the complex terrain of documentary photography in China. This essay would not have been possible without many conversations with Prasenjit Duara on the writing and tracing of history. I've benefited from friends and audiences at the University of California, Berkeley; Yipin International Photography Conference, Dongying, China; University of Minnesota; Fudan University, Shanghai; the Seattle Art Museum; and Ecole Normale Supérieure Lettres & Sciences Humaines, Lyon. And I am particularly thankful to Sabrina Carletti, Andrew Jones, Wen-hsin Yeh, and an anonymous reader for *Representations*, for their incisive and thought-provoking critiques of the final draft.

[i]Mao Zedong, "Jieshao yige hezuoshe" [Introducing a Co-operative], *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* (Beijing, 1992), 7: 177-178.

[ii]C. Cindy Fan, "Interprovincial Migration, Population Redistribution, and Regional Development in China: 1990 and 2000 Census Comparisons," *The Professional Geographer* 57, no. 2 (2005): 297.

[iii]According to the 1990 census by China's National Bureau of Statistics, between 1985 and 1990 there were 36 million migrants in China; by the period 1995-2000 that number had risen to 125 million. Fan, "Interprovincial Migration," 298. A subsequent study by the Bureau estimates that in 2001 alone 89,610,000 people left the countryside to seek work in the cities, while another study estimates that number to have reached 98,000,000 by 2003. Cited in Gu Zheng, "Wei diceng de shijue daiyan yu shehui jinbu" [Visual mouthpieces for the underclass and social progress], in Zhang Xinmin, *Baowei chengshi: xiang chengshi de yuanzheng* [Besieging the cities: the long journey of China's peasants toward the city] (Xi'an, 2004), 15. All translations mine, unless otherwise noted.

Wu Hung, in a slightly different but related context, discussed the pressures of the sheer scale of social transformation on contemporary Chinese art in "Contemporary Chinese Art and China's Urban Transformation" (lecture, symposium on China Transformed: New Art and Urban Life, University of California, Berkeley, October 17, 2008).

[iv]Other notable examples include Rong Rong's haunting "ruin" photographs of the interior walls and abandoned pictures and artifacts of domestic spaces torn open in the midst of urban demolition and renewal in Beijing (1996-1997), and Wang Bing's sprawling nine-hour film, *Tiexi qu* (West of the tracks, 2003), which meticulously documents the physical and social destruction of the homes and community of an entire working-class neighborhood in the northeastern city of Shenyang. On Yin Xiuzhen and Rong Rong, see Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 1999). On Liu Xiadong, see Jeff Kelley and Kaz Tsuruta, *The Three Gorges Project: Paintings by Liu Xiaodong* (San Francisco, 2005).

[v]The Riis photograph Gu Zheng has in mind is *Lodgers in Bayard Street, Five Cents a Spot* (1889). Gu Zheng, "Visual Mouthpieces," 15. Gu would be well aware that to use the word "expose" to describe such photography is to risk cliché, but there is something more specific in his use of the word here. For unlike Riis's exposure of lives largely segregated and hidden from the intended audience of his photographs, Gu argues that the migrant laborers whose appalling living conditions Zhang depicts are hidden in plain sight in China's cities, hidden only by the prejudices of city dwellers and the indifference and even deliberate concealment by the mass media. Or as the photographer Hou Dengke put it in the introduction to his own work on rural migrant labor, in Chinese texts "The People" (*min*) as an abstraction are omnipresent, but "people" (*ren*) are largely invisible. Hou Dengke, "Wo pai 'maike'" [I photograph "wheat-hands"], in *Maike* [Wheat-hands] (Hangzhou, 2000), n.p.

[vi]Carol Armstrong, *Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book, 1843-1875* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 168.

[vii]Armstrong, *Scenes in a Library*, 167. On the Enclosure Movement, see W. J. T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power,* ed. Mitchell (Chicago, 1994), 17-18.

[viii]Andrew F. Jones, "Portable Monuments: Architectural Photography and the 'Forms' of Empire in Modern China," forthcoming in "Photography's Places," ed. William Schaefer, special issue, *positions: east asia cultures critique*, forthcoming.

[ix]James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago, 1997), 61-70.

[x]For a suggestive argument that Salgado's so-called aestheticization of poverty is a strategic politicization of the aesthetic, see David Levi-Strauss, "Epiphany of the Other," in *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (New York, 2003).

[xi]For a discussion of imaging technologies as both amplifiers and filters of detecting, depicting, and imagining powers, which has been crucial to my own discussions of photography and representation in this essay, see Patrick Maynard, *The Engine of Visualization: Thinking Through Photography* (Ithaca, 1997), 75-87.

[xii]W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, 2005), 198.

[xiii]As critics like Gu Zheng and Li Tuo have observed, it is precisely through engaging critically with the question of representing the past and its presence that documentary photobooks like *Liukeng* have emerged. Gu Zheng, "Zai xianshi yu jiyi zhijian: 20 shiji 90 niandaide Zhongguo jishi sheying" [Between reality and memory: Chinese documentary photography of the 1990s], *Zhongguo sheying* 263 (May 2001): 40-44; conversations with Li Tuo, spring 2001.

[xiv]Zhang Xinmin, *Liukeng: Zhongguo chuantong nongye shehui zuihou de biaoben* [Liukeng: last specimen of Chinese traditional agricultural society] (Hangzhou, 2000).

[xv]Fan, "Interprovincial Migration," 305-307.

[xvi]Wang Zhenzhong and Li Yuxiang, *Huizhou* (Beijing, 2001), n.p. All further references noted within the text.

[xvii]James Elkins, "Marks, Traces, 'Traits,' Contours, 'Orli,' and 'Splendores': Nonsemiotic Elements in Pictures," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 4 (1995): 822-860.

[xviii]"The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again." Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938-1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge MA, 2003), 390-1.

[xix]Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley, 1984), 117.

[xx]David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (New York, 2003).

[xxi]*ABC Chinese-English Dictionary,* ed. John DeFrancis (Honolulu, 1999), s.v. "jishi."

[xxii]Snyder made this remark as part of his presentation for the conference, "Photography and the Limits of the Document." Tate Modern, London, June 2003. Also see his discussion of this point in the context of the early uses of photographs as legal evidence in his "Res Ipsa Loquitur," in *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, ed. Lorraine Daston (New York, 2004), 213.

[xxiii]On the idea of images as marked surfaces used for the functions of imagined seeing, see Maynard, *The Engine of Visualization,* esp. chapter IV, "Imagining Technology."

[xxiv]Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis, 2001), 50-52.

[xxv]This ideology of restorationism in contemporary China is not limited to urban images of the village. The recent Xin Tiandi project to restore meticulously a neighborhood in

Shanghai to its state during the 1920s-1930s – based, as it happens, on the dispossession of thousands of former neighborhood residents of their homes – is very much of the same historical moment as that which has produced photobooks like the Xiangtu Zhongguo series. For a useful description of Xin Tiandi and a summary of the controversies surrounding it, see Haiping Yan, "Tropes of 'Home': Shifting Views of the Global Shanghai," unpub. ms.

[xxvi]Fan, "Interprovincial Migration," 299, 307.

[xxvii]W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Photographic Essay: Four Case Studies," in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, 1994).

[xxviii]Zhang Xinmin, *Liukeng*, n.p.. All further references noted within the text.

[xxix]Sebastião Salgado, "Migrations: Humanity in Transition" (Avenali Lecture, Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, Berkeley, 2002). Zhang made his remarks during a panel discussion of an early version of my essay at the Yipin International Photography Conference, Dongying, China, August 2001.

[xxx]I refer to Su Dongpo's familiar remark of Wang Wei's work that there are poems in his paintings, and paintings in his poems.

[xxxi]For an extended reflection on the idea of facture as a starting point for exploring the nature of images, see David Summers, "Facture," chapter 1 of his *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London, 2003).

[xxxii]I derive this notion of a photograph as a manipulation of the surfaces it depicts from Summers, *Real Spaces,* 331-332.

[xxxiii]On the notion of surficiality as a condition of images, see Summers, 336.

[xxxiv]Summers, *Real Spaces,* 331. Also see the continuation of his discussion on 332-333.

[xxxv]Maynard, *The Engine of Visualization,* 22. All further references noted within the text.

[xxxvi]In calling attention to this self-consciousness in Zhang's work of photographs as a form of marked surface, and of the relationships between photographs *as* marked surfaces to photographs *of* marked surfaces, I want to be careful to distinguish my argument from a critical commonplace in writing on photography, namely, the notion of "the photograph" as a trace, as inherently indexical, or as an imprint of the real – a commonplace vigorously critiqued in the work of Joel Snyder. My concern with the idea here is that it elides or even collapses the many mediations – choices of camera format, position, lighting, lens, aperture, shutter speed, depth of field, type of film, processing, the development of the print, and so on – that lie between the moment of the reflection of light from whatever was before a camera and the finishing of the print. What is insidious about a conflation of a photograph and the real, or marked surfaces and pictures (despite the critical intentions of many writers who use such concepts) is that it conceals the many *social* mediations between a photograph and its referent beneath a claim to photography's immediacy and veracity. The documentary qualities of Zhang's photographs lie precisely in the mediated nature of their traces, in the choices and manipulations involved in making the photographs' marked surfaces in order to engage with the surfaces of the world. Through their formal self-consciousness, Zhang's photographs work, not by calling attention to some imagined "immediacy" of their traces, but rather by conceiving of traces as themselves a form of mediation.

[xxxvii]Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, 1988), 3: 120. All further references cited within the text.

[xxxviii]Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago, 1995), 72.

[xxxix]Elkins, "Nonsemiotic Elements in Pictures."

[xl]Duara, *Rescusing History from the Nation*, 73.

[xli]The distinctions between social space and virtual space, as well as the spatial (more than visual) definition of images they assume, were coined and developed by David Summers in *Real Spaces*.