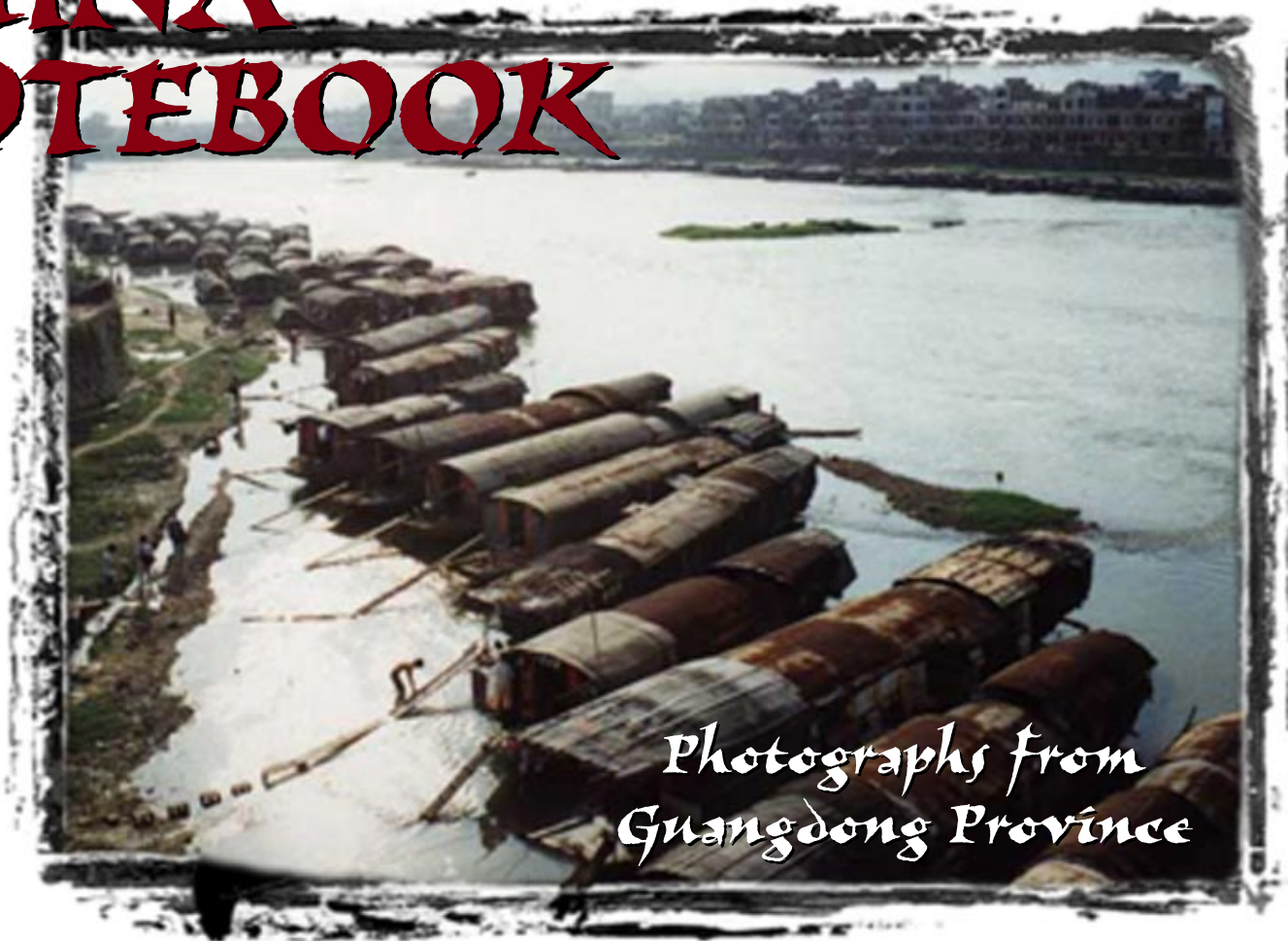


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CHINA NOTEBOOK



*Photographs from
Guangdong Province*

B.H. JIANG

Introduction by E. R. Beardsley

China Notebook is presented in six files:

Introduction

ChinaINT.pdf

Black and White Photographs

Yubei Region: ChinaBW1.pdf

Lianan Area: ChinaBW2.pdf

Guangdong and Szechwan: ChinaBW3.pdf

Color Photographs

Lianan and Yangchun: ChinaC1.pdf

Yangchun: ChinaC2.pdf

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*Heaven and Earth are not ruthless;
To them the ten thousand things
are but straw dogs*

Lao Tse, sixth century B.C.
(from *Ten Thousand Things: all life forms*)



Introduction

I STILL DON'T KNOW for certain how Mr. B. H. Jiang found me, or why he decided to put his faith in a total stranger. It is one of those things that happens nowadays on the Internet. And, because it happens so casually, so innocently, it takes a while for us to realize that it is altogether marvelous.

It was several months ago that it began. Late one night, as I made a routine check of my e-mail, a new message appeared with the subject "photographer," and it brought with it a rather hefty attachment of files. The address indicated that the message had come from a "jbh" in Guangzhou, China. As it happens I have a friend with those same initials, and as it happens he is a photographer who went off several years ago to work in Asia. The message read simply: "Mr. beardsley How are you." That "Mr. beardsley" was particularly puzzling because it occurred to me that my old friend would never have been so formal, not even long ago when he was my student.

Soon enough, however, it was clear that my old student remains lost in Asia and that I have a new friend in the person of Mr. B. H. Jiang (or, as it is written in Chinese, Jiang Bao Heng—jbh—with the last name coming first). Mr. Jiang, it turns out, is a man in his thirties who supports himself and his photography by working as a computer salesman in Guangzhou. Guangzhou is a city of over six million people, one of those burgeoning new industrial giants that dot the

Pearl River Delta in southeastern China. It is the capital of Guangdong Province that takes in the cities of Hong Kong (since July 1, 1997), Huizhou, Shenzhen, Dongguan, Foshan, Jiangmen, Zhongshan, and Zuhai. The “registered” population of the delta is said to be about 25 million persons. The “unregistered” population, which includes migrant laborers who come from the interior of China hoping to share in the growing prosperity of these new “special economic zones,” may account for at least another five million persons; some put the number much higher. Mr. Jiang, like so many others looking to improve their lives, came to Guangzhou from Yangzun City, which is further north in Anhwei Province.

I might not have paid much attention to Mr. Jiang had it not been for the photographs he had attached to the first message. I have this past year heard from a number of photographers in Asia, most of them living outside mainland China. All are very competent, even sophisticated, but many also seem too much influenced by some of the worst models in western culture; for the viewer there is little chance of engagement, and in consequence their work is wont to remain, as historian Edgar Wind would say, a passing parade. Mr. Jiang’s photographs, however, are of a different order. They are almost innocent. Most are straightforward black and white photographs of children or scenes of people, many of them plainly living on the edge of modern Chinese society. Most of the children are obviously in poor circumstances, some clearly belonging to minority groups. But the most interesting characteristic of this body of work, its strength, is in the approach to the subjects. Mr. Jiang is respectful, even loving, in a way that seems trustworthy. Moreover, it is one of the few instances where I feel I have encountered a wholly Chinese sensibility at work. In short, I came away with the feeling that for a moment my own eyes were permitted to be Chinese, and that my understanding of what it is to be a human being in these particulars had suddenly increased.

I now have digital representatives of more than a hundred photographs made by Mr. Jiang over several years, including photographs of many more children and adults, a record of a harvest festival for Tibetan farmers (made on one of his excursions outside Guangdong Province to Szechwan Province in Central China), and a very interesting group of color photographs of “boat people” and “peasants” made in Yangchun on the Muyang river. Newspaper and magazine reports tell me that the rivers yield few fish nowadays because most are polluted owing to over-population and rapid industrial development. How these people might make a life, then, becomes a puzzle. Most of the children photographed live in a remote village called Pingshi, which is about 150 miles west of Guangzhou, and part of a district called “Yubei”—described by Mr. Jiang as a region stretching from Lianan (near Qingyuan in the east) to Pingshi (near Shaoguan in the west). The people of this area do in fact belong to minority groups, he told me later. The government refers to them simply as either the “Red Group” or the “White Group.”

For the presentation on these pages I have selected photographs made in Pingshi, Lianan, Yangchun, and in the vicinity of Guangzhou. There are no titles for the photographs, only file numbers with initials indicating where they were made—LN refers to Lianan, YC to Yangchun, JZ is Szechwan Province, but J and CLN remain something of a mystery until either Mr. Jiang or our translator can provide better information. It may help to refer to the map I have provided based on information given to me by Mr. Jiang.

Lastly, I will not comment on specific photographs. It isn’t necessary; I believe that good photographs speak well enough for themselves.

I have included below portions of messages sent to me by Mr. Jiang. They offer a very interesting picture of life in this “new China,” and they give us a glimpse inside the life and struggle of one of its photographers. We learn from Mr.

Jiang, for example, that in China today public interest in “serious” photography is practically nil. Millions of people own cameras and make photographs, but for most it is a kind of sport (though, in fact, I just received from another friend a copy of a 1965 Hong Kong Camera Club publication that offers proof that photography is by no means a new sport in China). But for all the popularity of photography in China today, it remains an “activity,” and not yet a practice. Sadly, there are no commercial galleries, museums, or other institutions that might support and encourage photography. As Mr. Jiang tells us in one note, “[photographs] were sold just like trash.”

But let him tell you the story. His words have the same economy of means and plain grace of his photographs, and what he has to say about his photographs, about the lives of his subjects, and about the conditions in China today for photography and photographers is worth our attention. English remains a struggle for Mr. Jiang, so most of the messages were composed in Chinese. I’m confident that the translations we obtained have captured both the spirit and meaning of his words.

Mr. Jiang (writing in English) concerning himself and his work:

I am a guy who forever is taking photos, and I always went outside to shoot some photos about people and view. These photos were taken in a poor village far from Guangzhou, and the people live a poor life, but the people out there were honest and hard working. So I have taken many photos in the village. I hope the people in the world can take care of these poor children through the pictures. The pictures which I sent to you were a part of me.

More about himself and the photographs of the children, this



time writing in Chinese (and, in fact, from here on he writes most of his messages in Chinese):

My job is related to selling computers... but because of certain limitations, I can only take pictures during my spare time.

These photos were taken in November of last year [1996]. They were taken in the "Yubei" area of Guangdong Province. The Yubei area is a poor part of Guangdong Province. People are dependent on agriculture for living. Since it's far from a city and transportation is inconvenient, the educational opportunities are limited, and their thinking is still very innocent and pure. They haven't been influenced by modern society. They are living life freely and without worry. The children of this place study in low quality schools. A lot of the children have to walk at least ten miles on hilly roads to go to school.

These reasons stimulated my desire and creativity to use cameras to record their daily activities. The children are poor and still so innocent. This kind of thing is not possible to capture in the cities. Also, the reason we want to capture the pictures is for people in the cities to know that there are a lot of other poor people in our society and to let them know the reality.

Concerning his camera and darkroom:

My camera quality is not very good, so the contrast might not be that good... The photos I'm sending you here I directly made from negatives, so they were not processed. I'm using a limited-range lens, so the contrast is not precise. I read some books about Ansel Adams,

and I also know something about his "zone system" of photography. But my darkroom is rather rudimentary, so I am having some production difficulty.

About Hong Kong and also the idea of exhibiting on the Internet:

How are you. First, thank you for your concern over Hong Kong's matter. This thing makes every Chinese very happy. It washed off 150 years of humiliation. We will stand up in the world again.

I learned that you are going to display my photographs on the Internet... I will make more pictures using my eyes to discover more things to display the great Chinese people to the world. Let the world understand and care for the Chinese people. Let them know in the Old East there is a group of never-yielding people who are stubbornly laboring for humankind. Our lifestyle and thinking are different from westerners... but we all of humankind.

Recent note concerning black and white vs. color photographs:

I like to take black and white pictures, because color will make people see less. Black and white makes it more interesting.

Concerning the plight of photography in China:

Some time ago, there was news in the papers about a flea market in Peking, of photographs selling for [Chinese amount of \$2 to \$3]. If you buy more, they sell to you in terms of weight. So there was a famous photographer, who as a result bought several kilograms

of photographs. This photographer was very saddened. He said in our country we really don't value photography. These photos, some of them, have won national or international awards. In each photo there is a lot of time and money. However, they were sold just like trash.

And this is truly the biggest sadness of Chinese photographers. Their art is worthless. Therefore, if you want to live as a photographer, it's impossible. Over here, the most you can get is [he gives a vague amount: over \$10, and under \$100]. This amount is not even enough for buying the film. Chinese photographers live in hardship.

Clarifying the location of villages and the identity of the people:

Yubei is in Guangdong [Canton] Province. It refers to the area made up of **Shaoguan** and **Qingyuan**. Therefore, you will not find it on the map. The photos I took were at **Pingshi** in Shaoguan, and at **Lianan** in Qingyuan.

Yaozu is a minority group. There are two different sub-groups. One is the White Group, the other is the Red Group. All live in poor, far-away little towns. The White Group usually wear clothes with black and white colors. Their standard of living is very low. Their yearly income is about 500 Chinese dollars [about US \$66]. My monthly income is 2,500 [about US \$332].

I am showing you these pictures I took ... in Yangchun City... This place is about 300 miles from Guangzhou. This is a poor place... we took a lot of pictures to reflect the life there. I am hoping to get some sympathetic

response... This is an agricultural town, and I'm sending these pictures which reflect the boat people. Their ancestors lived on the boats. Boats are their homes. These boats are not for fishing anymore, this is where they live.

Weather extremes:

June: That day the weather was very hot, over 35 degrees Celsius. That day all of us got sunburn. Even though taking pictures is hard work, I feel it's very meaningful.

July-August: Recently I haven't written you much. Last Sunday I was going to Lianan, to take pictures. However, recently the weather is not very good. It rains every day. As a result, the road to Lianan was being flooded, and there were some mud slides, so the traffic is being blocked. As a result, I was not able to go. If the weather gets better, I plan to go on Friday.

On "modern" Chinese life and his own feelings:

Right now in China, a lot of young people are very empty... They feel life is not interesting. When they work, they don't shoot for perfection. Every day they are just wasting their time. They don't have any ideals. In the modern society, if you cannot make your dream come true, it's very sad. This also includes me, because the pressure from life is great. Every day I feel very nervous. I feel there is no future... Every day I have to do a lot of so many other things, so sometimes I feel down.

Some time ago, I planned to go to Lianan to take pictures. However, because I had a serious stomach

problem, I didn't go. However, now I plan to go to a small fishing village to take some pictures...

Mr. Jiang's most recent communications indicate that he is intent on establishing a website to promote the work of mainland Chinese photographers as well as to provide a place where they can exchange information about photography and other issues. It is my hope to see more photographers like Mr. Jiang come forward. Perhaps then we will begin to see more of the Chinese sensibility that has been struggling to emerge and take hold on a broad scale. When it does, we will all be the richer for it.

E. R. Beardsley
September 1997

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