

Guest Editor's Introduction

Photography's Places

How does one place a photograph like the one featured on the cover of this special issue, Zhu Shouren's "Qu jing" ("Picture Taking")? What does it represent? What does its surface show? With what pictorial, discursive, spatial, and material contexts does the photograph engage, and what conditions does it create? What traces can be gleaned of the material conditions of its production? What kinds of knowledge are (or can be) produced through the materiality of this photograph? Or, rather, what kinds of knowledge did the photographer think he was producing, what kinds of knowledge might the photographer's audiences have produced through their consumption of it, and what kinds of knowledge can we produce in the present through our engagement with it?

This photograph appeared in the July 1932 issue of one of the most prominent and lavishly produced art photography publications of the day

in Shanghai, *The Chinese Journal of Photography* (*Zhonghua sheying zazhi*), and, at first glance, it exemplifies the landscape aesthetic promoted in the journal. The photographer employs a relatively shallow depth of field in order to maintain a sharp focus on the main subject (as can be seen in the finely delineated details of the boats in the foreground), while allowing the distance to grow vague (as the far shore and pagoda in the background threaten to dissolve into a blur); such an aesthetic draws on practices of pictorialist photography that were circulating globally at the time, one of whose goals was to reproduce the effect of a momentary visual impression. This practice was perhaps most closely associated with the English photographer Peter Henry Emerson, whose work had been exhibited in East Asia as early as 1893.¹ The specific practice made manifest in this photograph, however—which we see as well in other photographs by Zhu, as well as in the work of Hu Boxiang and Lang Jingshan, among others—is the deployment of pictorialist techniques to reappropriate long-existing Chinese techniques of landscape representation. For with its bands of sky, shore, and water, whose slight diminishing and broadening balance each other across the composition, the photograph seems designed to appear as if it were a section of a handscroll that continues beyond the 4×5 photographic frame, the lens blur of the pagoda and far shore evoking an ink wash as well as atmospheric perspective. What distinguishes this photograph, however, are the two dark figures at the lower left, which have been burned in for emphasis during the printing process to contrast sharply with the more lightly exposed landscape and boats. It is not uncommon, of course, for a spectator to be depicted in a landscape picture as a stand-in for the viewer of the picture as a whole. But, in this case, the place of the depicted figure contemplating the landscape is taken by a photographer; for the figure on the left, judging from his stance, is peering down into the waist-level viewfinder typical of a Rolleiflex or of a portable 4×5 large-format camera, such as the U.S.-made Graflex, both of which were used at this the time in China by both foreigners and Chinese.

So how do we place such a photograph? As a redeployment of the Emersonian pictorialist practices of photography once prevalent across East Asia? Or as an evocation of other mediums, such as landscape ink painting? Or, since the pictorialist practices it uses to evoke ink-painting now appear

dated, do we locate this photograph in the past, as a document of a moment in history with its specific modes of transportation, dress, camera equipment, and, of course, photographic aesthetics? Or, as it is primarily a landscape photograph, should we understand it as an evocation of a *place* at a particular moment in the past?

The title, “Picture-Taking,” complicates these questions, for it does not refer to the landscape or view as such, as would, say, a title like “Fengjing” (“landscape” or “scene”), or a reference to a specific place. Instead, Zhu’s title calls attention to the act of picture-taking. The English translation that appears with the published photograph suggests the act of selecting a scene to represent, in a usage that originated with painting but found its way into photography through terms like *qujingqi* (viewfinder). As such, the photograph then becomes more a reflection on the processes of representing “place” than a contemplation of a view, in which the photographers taking a picture of this scene themselves become a part of a landscape that is itself photographically rendered to evoke an ink painting—all framed within a photograph of the same 4 × 5 large format seemingly also used by the photographer *within* the picture.

But yet another context frames the photograph, its title, and the page on which they appeared. For “Picture-Taking” was published in the first issue of *The Chinese Journal of Photography* to appear after the Japanese bombing of Shanghai in 1931, one of whose many casualties was, at least temporarily, Shanghai’s publishing industry. In his introduction to this issue, Zhu (who not only made the photograph but was also editor of the journal) discloses what he believed to be the real stakes of such pictorialist photography. Having referred to Japan’s recent violence in Manchuria and Shanghai, Zhu complains of the violence done to China “even in the arts,” where “Japan has appropriated just a smattering of our national painting [guohua, as Chinese landscape had come to be called]. . . . And yet internationally, it is actually believed that [the Japanese] are the true representatives of Eastern art.”² Moreover, the Japanese had put forth the view that Japan was the “center of Eastern photographic art, [and] that Japanese culture [is] sufficient to represent the East, [while] insinuating that China [is] still back in a primitive era” (47). In other words, Zhu accuses Japan of stealing not only China’s land but also the very image of China and its landscape art practices, which

Zhu and others claimed to be essentially Chinese. The aim of practicing art photography, Zhu suggests, is thus to reclaim the image of China from Japan, to enlist artistic photography to represent China to the world as the essence of “Eastern” culture — thus calling forth a photography of competing essentialisms, competing imperial landscapes. Chinese photographers, Zhu concludes, must create photographs that show to the world that “we have our own national characteristics, our own national style,” so that China could “occupy its rightful place” on the international stage (*ibid.*).

Thus, from within its specific location, Zhu’s photograph raises questions about place: its selection and making — as well as its taking, in several senses. By *picturing* the picturing of place, Zhu literally foregrounds the place of such picturing practices within the landscape — through a photograph that appropriates Western pictorialist practices to resituate photography in the aesthetics of Chinese landscape (or “national”) painting.³ The photograph collapses together the places that photography might occupy, both among Chinese representational practices and within China’s landscape. That is, landscape is not only a representation “of” a place, it is also a geographical site that is itself always already a representation, even as the act of picture-taking that this particular photograph stages is also meant to be a “taking [back] of the scene,” to claim a place within the cultural geopolitics of colonialist modernity.⁴

All this suggests that to consider photography in East Asia is to consider its places within specific East Asian cultures, and as well as globally, and to examine the viewpoints that East Asia offers within a truly global history of photography. It is to ask what kind of a medium photography is; or, better, what kinds of mediums constitute it, and how various photographic practices have been perceived vis-à-vis other mediums and representational practices, both across historical time and geocultural space. It is also to ask what kinds of historical, social, political, epistemological, and spatial relations photography mediates, and how, within specific locations and practices. For East Asia’s relationships to the world and its own regional past have become increasingly mediated by the global circulation of images, as photography has enabled the visual documentation of the world in Asia as well as the West. Paradoxically regarded as both a medium for reconstructing East Asian identities and a specifically foreign way of seeing and image-

making, photography has been implicated as a crucial pictorial practice in Asia's colonial and postcolonial histories; it has been a medium for both producing commodified images and for questioning received images.

Much critical and theoretical writing on photography has been at something of an impasse in recent decades. This seems due, among other things, to the stranglehold of underexamined ideas about photography, such as the still-prevailing conceptualization of the relationship between photographs and reality by an appeal to the semiotic notion of "index," or a sign with a causal relationship to that which it represents. Arguably, one of the problems this notion has led to is the conflation of the photographic practice of marking surfaces with light, with pictures that may or may not be made of such marked surfaces, a conflation of index with icon. The assumption that follows from such a conception is that photographs are an "imprint of the real," that they reproduce the real rather than use the real to constitute images. Furthermore, there is a widespread assumption that photography is a singular and more or less constant technology (so that one can write of an essentialized notion of "the photograph") rather than a wide range of technologies for marking surfaces through photochemical means, each capable of constituting very different kinds of pictures (if they create pictures at all) with very different epistemological and ideological effects.⁵ To elide this plasticity of technical means that necessarily mediate between the real (or, more specifically, the light and shadow of the real) before a camera lens and the finished photograph is to elide much of the ideological work that happens between the real and its "imprint" — and, inadvertently, to render that elision natural by conceptualizing photography as simply an imprint. We can perhaps attribute this critical impasse to a split between technical knowledge of photographic processes, on the one hand, and the practice of cultural theory and criticism, on the other (as opposed to the majority of the important nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century texts on photography, which were written by theorists who were themselves practitioners, and for whom theorization was inseparable from material knowledge of photographic practices).⁶ Indeed, some of the most rigorous recent writing on photography has sought to rebridge this divide, to enable material and historical analysis by attending to the technical properties of photography's various mediums.⁷ Another recent (and long overdue) approach has been to explore

“photography’s other histories”: articulations of photographic practices outside the West.⁸ The danger of this approach — not always avoided — is its tendency to reproduce the same old unexamined clichés of indexicality and referentiality in new cultural contexts.

At their most daring, the essays in this special issue seek ways beyond this critical impasse. They are gathered as a survey of some of photography’s places in East Asian cultures and as an exploration of how conventional conceptions of photography may be altered by examining its specific histories in East Asia, taking as point of departure a broadly conceived notion of place. This conception of place brings together the virtual spaces depicted in photographs, the spatial qualities of photographs as physical objects, and the social spaces in which photographs are produced and situated, as well as the metaphoric places the medium occupies in specific cultural-historical moments.⁹ Through their exploration of photography’s many places in East Asia, the essayists approach photography as both an object and a medium of cultural critique. They do so by attending to the material and historical conditions of the conception, production, circulation, and consumption of photographic images, and the ideological meanings that both inform and result from these material practices. And by engaging in what might be called a historical anthropology of vernacular understandings of image-making technologies, they consider the social and institutional practices and contexts within and against which the processes of making photographs produce meanings and knowledge.¹⁰

Maki Fukuoka’s essay asks the fundamental question of how the supposedly “ontological” relationship between photography and the real is understood in specific historical contexts. Indeed, the cultural embeddedness of familiar and well-worn theoretical claims of photography’s “realism,” “indexicality,” and “objectivity” is just one of the insights revealed by examining photography from a position “outside of” the West — an embeddedness of which practitioners and writers on photography in Asia from its earliest years were acutely aware, and which is all too often elided in writing in the West. The crucial move of Fukuoka’s essay, however, is that she does *not* write the early history of photography in Japan as one of importation and adaptation — or, worse, as a response to and nationalist overcoming of the West. Rather, she attends to the genealogy and social life of the term

that came to mean “photography” (*shashin*, which might be translated as “transcription of the real”) as a site of negotiation between existing pictorial practices and new photographic technologies. Before it was taken to mean photography, *shashin*—a term that circulated from China to Japan—was already in use during the nineteenth century to refer to images produced through other mediums (such as copper etchings and ink rubbings) that were understood to afford a high degree of visual accuracy for the purposes of observational verification in the collection of botanical and pharmacological specimens. As Fukuoka discloses, *shashin* before photography did not signify realism or direct observation, as has often been assumed, or even the quality of a representation; rather, it signified the relationship between an object and its representation.

Fukuoka's detailed analysis also makes clear that the specific material conditions of a given medium are inseparable from the epistemological claims that medium is understood to make possible. In addition to framing and compositional strategies, the technical choices in the production of photographs—the availability or choices of formats, lenses, apertures, shutter speeds, as well as the photochemical processes through which images are constituted—are equally crucial to their ideological productions of place. Again, this is not so much a matter of the ontology of photographs—that is, asking what photographs “are,” and assuming that what a photograph records is an “imprint” of the real. Rather, to redeploy the central question of Andrew Jones's essay on architectural photography, it means asking what photographs “do.” Felice Beato's photographs, for instance, document the 1860 seizure of Beijing and destruction of the old Summer Palace by British and French expeditionary forces, even as, by virtue of their slow exposure times, they render the inhabitants of these places almost invisible. As Jones puts it in his powerful discussion of Beato's photographs, the wet-collodion process that Beato used was “the neutron bomb of nineteenth-century photographic techniques,” preserving the architecture but wiping out the people in its pictures. Because of the differences between what lies before the camera, the image projected within the camera, and what is preserved on the photosensitive surface, such photographs pictorially both dispossessed Chinese people of their own architectural spaces and enabled foreign powers to imagine the possession of such “empty” places, an imagination underscored

by the apparent equation of the deep perspectival space constituted by camera lenses with the penetration of conquered places.

Jones demonstrates the ideological work that occurs in the gaps between the space in which a photograph is taken, the photographic surface, and the resulting virtual space represented by the photograph. For Yomi Braester, however, the key ideological and performative work of making photographs occurs in the relations between viewfinder and lens, on the one hand, and represented spaces, on the other, as well as in the gaps between the frames of the picture and of the location in which the photograph is taken. By situating his work in one of the most ideologically fraught locations in modern China, Tiananmen Square, Braester shows how the pictorial spaces framed by a camera viewfinder and the topological borders framing the Square — “image and space,” as Braester puts it — “combine to form an ideological framework that defines the relationship between photographed subject and prevailing social values,” whether that means framing an individual in parallel with Tiananmen’s space and, by implication, accepting its ideological frame or challenging that ideological frame by using a spontaneous, unstable frame at an angle from the space of the square that makes Tiananmen less a “monumental architecture of state emblems” and more a spatial *objet trouvé*.

In the historical instances examined in all of these essays, theories (broadly conceived) of photography, which are made manifest in both vernacular understandings and specific practices, are inseparable from the technology’s mediation of social spaces and relations. Indeed, as Nicole Huang’s analysis of family portraits from the latter years of China’s Cultural Revolution demonstrates, the very processes of photography (or, to recall Zhu Shouren’s term, “picture-taking”) are social relationships — as are the social lives of the resulting photographs, once taken — mediating the realms of self and other, public and private, at precisely a moment in which private life histories were often painfully immediate to public political campaigns. “The public bombardment of images of revolution, mass mobilization, and absolute devotion,” Huang writes, “contrasted with the everyday use of photography in family rituals. The latter sustained urban fabric and familial ties in spite of political turmoil and marked a realm that was mostly discreet and distinctively private in an era when the private was inevitably politicized.”

The practice of family portrait photography, Huang argues, was a ritual of daily life, mediating one's relationship to family and nation, and forming the material basis of private histories. While this ritual quality of family portraiture is hardly unique, what is striking about Huang's analysis is her demonstration of how crucial was the notion of such photography as a series of nested ritual spaces in that time and place. Such spaces included the locations in which photographs were produced (that is, in local studios); the photographs themselves, conceived of as material spaces or sites, their frames demarcating the represented social spaces within which families were gathered (and the absences of family members marked); and the spaces through which such photographs—once developed and printed—were circulated or collected, hidden or displayed. The very historicity of such image-objects in family life depends on this conception of photographs as image-spaces, for it was the collection and sequencing of photographs that created the occasion for narrative—here, family histories of absence and displacement.

Indeed, in most of the instances examined in this issue, photography mediates historical time (of individuals and families, nations and empires) through highly charged spaces. And in most cases, too, photography serves a documentary function, one that depends not on a presumed ontology of “the photograph” but on specific photographic practices. Furthermore, the power of photographs to serve various documentary functions (scientific, familial, historical, architectural) derives as much from their practices as spatial, physical objects—with specific material conditions of production and collection in private albums, photobooks, or mass-circulation magazines—as from their status as visual images. Even as visual images, photographs operate in close proximity to texts and, in several instances, are conceived of as texts themselves, capable of being “read.” It is thus arguable that each of these essays reflects on the pictorial practices and medium specificity of photography. Such reflections, however, hardly turn us away from questions of cultural and historical specificity (a common, and often deserved, accusation leveled at the discourse of medium specificity); nor do they offer positivist fantasies of transparent, objective, or authoritative pictures of reality “as it really was.” Rather, these essays on photography in East Asia offer the crucial perspective that the specific properties of a medium, and of the larger pictorial practices within and against which they operate, become

problems precisely at moments of cultural transformation and crisis — such as the Cultural Revolution, the Pacific War, and nineteenth-century wars of colonialist aggression, as well as the recent era of destructive reconstruction of urban spaces. As such, our own historical and materialist understanding of (and relation to) such moments is inextricable from what might be called a politics of medium specificity. Such a perspective provokes new questions: What makes a photograph a document? Through what practices and assumptions are photographs constituted as documents? What, for that matter, is the relationship between photographs that are constituted as documents, and documentary photographs? And what kinds of historical documentation can photographs specifically provide?¹¹

In most of the historical instances explored in this issue, to think through photography's places is to think through photography's shifting positions as a relatively new medium of representation (arguably the first modern recording technology) amid other mediums.¹² Its introduction, however, does not necessarily entail the radical shift which drives narratives that would see the history of photography as simply a story of modernization and, in much of the world, Westernization. The process of what, with apologies to Martin Jay, we might call scopic regime change, is never so simple and straightforward.¹³ The introduction of any new medium during a specific cultural-historical moment is accompanied by a formal self-consciousness in both the new and existing media, as each maps out its specific properties and defines its place in relation to the others. It is common for a new medium to be used at first in the manner of existing media, or existing media to be used as a way of understanding the properties of the new, even as the places of older media are reexamined and transformed.¹⁴ For instance, the extraordinary resolution and detail of early photographs both distinguished them from other image-making practices and suggested their usefulness to different forms of scientific inquiry. And yet, as we see in pictorialist photographs from East Asia in the 1920s and 1930s, a number of prominent photographers tried to subsume the medium within art, making photographs look like paintings by suppressing resolution and detail, even as critics redefined ink painting as “essentially” East Asian in contrast to the foreign, perspectival images produced through photography. (Later in the twentieth cen-

tury, the tables would turn when photorealist artists such as Luo Zhongli attempted to make paintings virtually indistinguishable from finely detailed photographs.) At the same moment, illustrated magazines that featured pictorialist photography also prominently displayed scientific and avant-garde photographs well beyond the narrow categories of art photography that made available new modes of perception, in what, to use Miriam Hansen's term, might be called a vernacular modernism.¹⁵ Photography also interacted with nonvisual modes of representation. In Chinese fiction of the late Qing, for instance, photographs became objects of exchange, subsumed with little comment within an economy of love (as in Fu Lin's 1906 novel, *Stones in the Sea* [*Qin hai shi*]). By the 1920s and 1930s in both China and Japan, photography increasingly informed writing and vice versa, and it was used to model and disturb realist and antirealist literary narrative.

But while negotiations between photography and other media could take a wide variety of forms, in all cases the ideological stakes of such formal questions were high — indeed, perhaps heightened precisely because of the instability of the formal categories used to define various media. In Japan, for instance, conflicting perspectives on the relationship between still photography and narrativity have been imbricated with questions of sexuality and gender. As Kirsten Cather's case study reveals, even long after the introduction of photography in East Asia, the censorship trial of Oshima Nagisa's controversial 1976 film, *In the Realm of the Senses*, hinged on attempts to define the power of various kinds of images and the mediums through which images travel. In the trial, the film was considered in relation to photography and written texts; the relative powers each medium was understood to have to arouse and unleash “uncontrollable” (and erotic) mental images in spectators depended on the distinctions participants in the trial made among them. Cather's analysis discloses the ideological assumptions underlying these distinctions, and what was at stake in making them. Yet while photographs were distinguished in Cather's account from filmic narrative, owing to their stillness, in Sarah Frederick's essay on “photographic fiction” from the 1930s to the 1950s, photographs that were styled after films were sequenced together into narratives (lending themselves to a narrativity that exceeded their stillness) to suture spectators into orthodox ideologies of

gender and modern life. In both cases, the ideological effects of photographs are enabled precisely through their placement vis-à-vis other photographs and other media.

As all of the essays make clear, the aim in drawing out the problem of photography's places is not to essentialize "the photograph," let alone any kind of "East Asian photograph," but to find a point of departure for thinking through the stakes of various photographicies in East Asia. Whether we consider photographs as framing and depicting places and rendering them transportable, or as objects that circulate and mediate places or are collected, archived, and displayed in specific spatial contexts, or whether we consider photography's places vis-à-vis other mediums and other technologies of surface-marking, recording, or image-making, to theorize photography as a range of practices in and of place is to engage with photography as an elastic set of historical practices, with a wide range of epistemological and ideological effects. We are only beginning to explore the histories of photography and the histories that can be produced by thinking through photographs and photographic practices in East Asia. Given the rarity of extant archival materials, due to destruction or negligence, such histories may never be fully mapped. Yet even photographic histories as thoroughly mapped as those of the West still exclude more practices than they include—such as nonart, nonrepresentational photographs that do not easily accommodate familiar problematics of realism, representation, and indexicality.¹⁶ In place of a full-fledged history of photography in East Asia, then, the essays that follow examine a few key sites, a few of photography's places.

William Schaefer, Guest Editor

Notes

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1. Emerson's work was first shown as part of an exhibition of foreign photography in Japan in 1893. For a conventional survey of pictorialist photography in Japan, see Kaneko Ryuichi,

- “The Origins and Development of Japanese Art Photography,” in *The History of Japanese Photography*, ed. Anne Wilkes Tucker et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 100–113. For a discussion of pictorialist photography and the assumptions about vision, sensory impression, and perception on which it was based, see Peter Henry Emerson, *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art* (New York: Arno, 1973).
2. Zhu Shouren, “Bianjizhe yan” (“Editor’s comments”), *Zhonghua sheying zazhi (The Chinese Journal of Photography)* 1 (July 1932): 47. All further references cited in the text.
 3. It is noteworthy that two decades before, the photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn was deriving his own compositional practices from the woodblock prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige.
 4. W. J. T. Mitchell, introduction to *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
 5. The work of Joel Snyder has been crucial in its ongoing critique of the prevailing conceptions of photography. See, e.g., Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, “Photography, Vision, and Representation,” *Critical Inquiry* 2 (1975): 143–69; Joel Snyder, “Documentary without Ontology,” *Studies in Visual Communication* 10 (1984): 78–90; and “Inventing Photography: 1839–1879,” in *On the Art of Fixing a Shadow: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Photography*, ed. Sarah Greenough et al. (New York: Bulfinch, 1989). Another essential critique is Patrick Maynard, *The Engine of Visualization: Thinking through Photography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), with its conceptualization of photography as one among many technologies for the marking of surfaces.
 6. Jan Baetans, “Conceptual Limitations of Our Reflection on Photography: The Question of ‘Interdisciplinarity,’” in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (London: Routledge, 2007), 57. The entire book is not only an excellent discussion of the current state of photography theory but also an illuminating examination and equally illuminating instance of this impasse.
 7. See, e.g., the quite varied work of Joel Snyder, Patrick Maynard, Geoffrey Batchen, Blake Stimson, and Robin Kelsey.
 8. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, eds., *Photography’s Other Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
 9. On the notion of images as spatial—as demarcated spaces whose markings create virtual (represented) spaces even as they are always situated in the context of real, social spaces—see David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003).
 10. I derive this terminology from Jan Baetans’s notion of an “anthropology of photography” in the discussion in Elkins, *Photography Theory*, 182.
 11. For a preliminary discussion of contemporary practices of documentary photography in China, see William Schaefer, “Poor and Blank: History’s Marks and the Photographies of Displacement,” *Representations* 109 (2010): 1–34.
 12. Michael North, “Mechanical Recording and the Modern Arts,” introduction to *Camera*

- Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
13. Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay, 1988), 3–23.
 14. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins, eds., *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
 15. Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism" *Modernism/Modernity* 6 (April 1999): 59–77.
 16. See, however, Robin Kelsey, *Archive Style: Photographs and Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850–1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). On nonart images, see James Elkins, *The Domain of Images* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).