

REVIEW: *THE COMPLETE WORKS OF ZHUANG XUEBEN*

Reviewed by Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa
(The University of Alabama)



Zhuang Xueben 庄学本, Li Mei 李媚, Wang Huangsheng 王璜生, and Zhuang Wenjun 庄文骏 (eds). 2009. *Zhuang xueben quan ji* 庄学本全集 [*The Complete Works of Zhuang Xueben*], Volumes I and II. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua Shuju 中华书局 [Zhonghua Book Company]. 767. Zhuang Xueben's Authored Works, Borderland Photographs List, Timeline, Epilogue. Soft cover. ISBN: 978-7-101-06859-7 (paperback, 688RMB).

Deeply patriotic, dedicated, and self-educated, Zhuang Xueben (1909-1984) typified his generation in many respects. He set out on a self-imposed mission to investigate the underexplored territory between Republican China and Central Tibet in 1934. His writings about his adventures and observations became popular in his native Shanghai and in other urban areas of China, where investigating and categorizing the borderlands were part of broader, nation-building methods during the Republican period. However, what set Zhuang apart from his contemporaries were the extraordinary photographs he took of his journey throughout Mgo log and surrounding areas in 1934. Images of vast landscapes featuring craggy gorges and bucolic villages inhabited by various ethnicities including the Qiang and the Rong were published in the major photographic periodicals of the day, and led to an increased interest in his work and new patronage opportunities from the Republican government that allowed Zhuang to continue his journeys. These extended into Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, and the short-lived experimental province of Xikang, as well as briefly into India. Between 1934 and the end of the 1950s, Zhuang took over 3,000 photographs of the people he met during his travels, and took thousands of pages of notes. He was an excellent example of the young, adventurous Chinese intellectuals of

his day who believed that they could contribute to the stabilization of the Chinese nation by creating studies of its different cultures and peoples.

Following the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, he continued this mission in various guises until his political links with the Nationalists eventually led to his marginalization. Though he was politically rehabilitated in the late 1970s, Zhuang's work has remained largely and unfortunately unknown in the history of Chinese photography and anthropology. *The Complete Works of Zhuang Xueben* is thus a long overdue work that brings together many of Zhuang's photographs and writings in two handsomely produced volumes. Edited by Li Mei, Wang Huangsheng, and Zhuang Wenjun, the work is chronologically arranged to provide a systematic and comprehensive overview of Zhuang's legacy.

The nature of that legacy, however, remains questioned. The little research that has been done regarding Zhuang's photographic and written corpus is divided with regards to his motives. The historian Mo Yajun skillfully outlined how Zhuang's work represents the 'objectifying gaze' of Han urbanites at the time, which sought to create an 'other' within hierarchies of Chinese ethnicities against which to contrast the national 'self' and thus consolidate national identity (Mo 2011). In contrast, art curator Zhu Qi has argued that Zhuang was unique for his period in seeking to gain 'spiritual sympathy' with his subjects through depicting them in dignified ways, and through gifting them with copies of their portraits (Zhu 2008: 42-43). Given these varying attitudes towards Zhuang's work, this collection is welcome in that it avoids commentary in favor of allowing Zhuang's own images and words to take precedence, and allows readers to consider the import of these images for themselves. Editorial input is present insofar as not all photographs have been included, since Zhuang was prolific in his photographic and written output, and compiling all this work into a publishable series would not have been feasible. In both volumes, the sizes of photographic reproductions vary, from full-page images to pages containing multiple images with captions. The photographs are interspersed with text, taken from Zhuang's travel diary, as well as extracts from

his books and periodical articles, and occasional photographic reproductions of his notes.

Volume One covers the first nine years of Zhuang's career, from 1928 to 1937. The first section includes images from Shanghai in the late 1920s (10-17), suggesting his development as an artist. With minimal education and no formal photographic training, Zhuang developed his own method through closely reading popular photographic periodicals of his time, including *Liangyou* and *Kodak*. Within a few years, his own work would appear in those journals, after his initial expedition to Mgo log in 1934. This expedition came about after Zhuang gave up working as a clerk to try to join the Nationalist expedition to Central Tibet following the thirteenth Dalai Lama's death in 1934. Due to his lack of contacts, Zhuang was not selected to participate in the delegation. He then set out on a mission through the Mgo log area, which was little known at the time to Chinese scholars. He also visited Rgyal rong, Rnga ba, and the Minjiang River Basin, often traveling on foot with only a single local guide. After his photographs of this journey (Part 1, 22-195) were exhibited in Nanjing, fascination with his representations of this mysterious borderland area grew. Audiences were intrigued by the images of his journey, including crossing rope bridges dangling over perilous rivers, and narrow, winding footpaths on the side of unstable gravel gorges.

Even more evocative and engaging were images of people he met, including the Qiang and Rong inhabitants of the area. These images included full-length portraits that captured the exotic and unique clothing of subjects, and headshots depicting confident subjects staring down the barrel of the camera. These dignified portraits are markedly different from other early anthropological images from elsewhere in the world that often show reluctant, frightened, or in contrast, overly exoticized and sensualized subjects. The engaging manner of Zhuang's portraits is indicative of his unique circumstances as a lone traveler on the borderlands without official patronage or support. Headshot portraits continued to be a staple through the rest of his career, and remain perhaps his most engaging work.

Following the success of this series, Zhuang's fortunes changed when he received Nationalist patronage to continue his travels. Between December 1935 and November 1937, he traveled north, through Gansu and Qinghai (198-411) where he met Tibetan, Monguor (Tu), Mongol, and Salar peoples, and visited the great cultural institutions of the area, including Bla brang Monastery in Xiahe. Despite some critics' argument that Zhuang attempted to present his subjects as timeless, his work is very much a product of his times – for example, in 1937, he was present at the last journey of the ninth Panchen Lama to culturally Tibetan areas (282-289).

Zhuang's work thereafter gradually became more tied to local politics, as he spent the war in the short-lived experimental province of Xikang. Volume Two includes many of his images from this period along with writings on the diverse peoples who lived there, including the Yi (494-575) and the Mosuo (576-601). This diversity is a noteworthy aspect of his work, as many of the communities he photographed in the borderlands had long histories of cultural interaction. His photographs reflect this by including varying types of dress and eclectic material artifacts ranging from religious implements to gramophones and top hats. While photographs from this period have been interpreted as examples of propaganda intended to show development in Xikang, and were reprinted widely in different periodicals of the day, the pictures themselves and the writing that accompanies them are more complex. Though they do attempt to show local cultures in a staged way at times, other, spontaneous portraits and moments from the road also make these images valuable as historical artifacts beyond the politics of the time.

Zhuang was also caught up within the wider currents of contemporary events, as evidenced by his ongoing attempts to enter Central Tibet. In order to gain access to Central Tibet through the southern Himalayas, he joined an India-bound trading company in 1942. Despite this effort, he was unsuccessful in obtaining permission to enter Central Tibet, but the photographs that are included from India are valuable as moments of cultural contact, as Zhuang turned his camera to communities beyond China's frontiers (670-675).

Another sign of Zhuang's links with the politics of the time is the fractured nature of Part Four, which focuses on his work after

1949 (678-721). Although Zhuang continued photographing different ethnic groups for a number of years after the change in government, he was removed from his position as a photographer in 1965 due to his previous position with the Nationalists. He spent the next ten years being marginalized, though he attempted to return to his passions of photography and travel. In a moving section of the work, the editors have included one of the many letters he wrote to Premier Zhou Enlai requesting political rehabilitation (722-731). This appeal is an example of the struggle of a twentieth century Chinese artist to negotiate while remaining pragmatic in relation to changing state motivations. It also suggests Zhuang's continuing commitment to creating work that facilitated the circulation of knowledge about China's diversity within China and on its frontiers, even at political cost to himself. It is one of many elements of his legacy that complicates attempts to paint him as a propagandist while, at the same time, placing him within broader currents of socio-political change.

After Zhuang was politically rehabilitated in 1975, his work began to be recognized again for its contribution to scholarly and political understandings of the borderlands, as well as the national project of constructing national minorities in China in the twentieth century. The book concludes with a bibliography of his work (735), a list of his pictures from borderland areas (747), and a timeline of major events and publications (759). Along with the excerpts from his works included in the volumes, these resources make these volumes an invaluable resource for the study of Zhuang Xueben's life and work.

Zhuang's work was neglected by both scholarly and photographic communities after his death in 1984. However, following the discovery of many of Zhuang's photographs in his family's home and the subsequent mounting of several new exhibitions, as well as this book, the full extent of his importance as a photographer, scholar, and traveler in China's borderlands is coming to light. While the nature of his legacy remains complex, the availability of the sources compiled in these volumes allow for unprecedented access to his work, and for new conversations to develop about its place in twentieth century Chinese borderland

history. These volumes are valuable for scholars interested in twentieth century China, and the Republican position towards minority nationalities and border issues in particular. Importantly, Zhuang's work helps us better understand the processes of modernity and nation building beyond Shanghai and other urban areas at the time. These volumes also have much to offer scholars of Tibet, Northeast Asia, and the communities depicted in the volume, including the Yi, Mosuo, Monguor, Mongols, and other borderland Chinese communities, who will be intrigued by the historical representation of people, places, and material culture that these photographs capture. Similarly, those with an interest in the history of ethnographic photography will find the images striking and memorable. Hopefully, as editor Li Mei states in the epilogue, this will mark the beginning of studies about this important individual, while also serving as a valuable resource for those already interested in his subjects.

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