

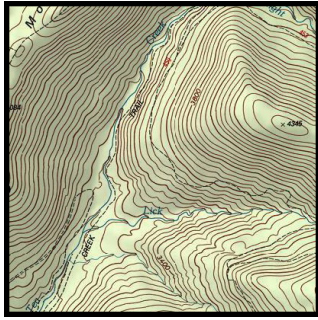
Series Number Nineteen

*China Portrait Maps
Photographs 1994 - Essay 2025*

Twenty-Three Photographs

Michael Nye

China Portrait Maps: November/December 1994



Contour lines on topographical maps do not cross each other, and form a “V” or a “U” when crossing a stream. Closely spaced lines represent steep slopes or mountains.

Photographs are more like maps than maps are like photographs. The inherent qualities of both maps and photographs are perspective and ambiguity. Both can be dazzling even as abstractions. Their weakness however, lies in their primary attention to surfaces. Stories and language and history and conflicts are embedded elsewhere.

The photographs in this series started with a map. One night I closed my eyes and placed my finger on the map of China. I found that my index finger randomly landed on a region near Baoshan, China in Yunnan province. I went there alone for five weeks in November, December 1994.

It would take three life times and even more time to understand the complexity of the geological and human history of Yunnan province, China. Early fossils date back over 1.5 million years. The name Yunnan means beautiful clouds in the south. The province is home to 25 of China's 56 recognized ethnic groups, each having a unique culture and language. The province is surrounded by Burma, Vietnam and Laos. On the north-west border is Tibet. The mountains and terraced hills and valleys are visually dramatic and lush. It rained 22 out of the 35 days I was there. It is believed that Yunnan China inspired James Hilton's description of Shangri-La in "Lost Horizon."



China & Yunnan Province



Yunnan Province 18th Century

Awareness breathes deep in the villages around Baoshan City. A cool breeze turns into insights. Light mist and fog grow into a skyscraper's dream. Odorous frogs wake up at night and roosters find their voice every early morning. Everyone is naive and childlike to cultures they don't understand.

I had help everywhere I went. An older man picked up my suitcase and carried it 10 blocks. He only smiled. A woman opened my beer bottle with her teeth and poured the beer into my glass with careful deliberation. A brother and sister followed me to many villages helping me work in exchange for English lessons. Towns-people at near-by tables helped me order food. Cooks invited me into their kitchens for a taste of soup. Almost without exception, I was invited into homes for meals and to share a cup of tea. Questions and kindness were on every dish.

Notes from journals:

The photographs were made in villages surrounding Baoshan City. In the last 10 days I traveled to Old Dali Town and Xiaguan and photographed villages in the mountain and lake regions. Those accompanying me, students, taxi drivers and volunteers gave the villages we visited English nicknames.

(Red Flower Village)

I accidentally knocked a pipe out of the mouth of one of the elders while I was adjusting my camera's aperture. Everyone laughed. Somehow the word got around in the village that I only wanted to photograph old women with bound feet. (Which was not true.) Within moments many women with bound feet came stumbling out of their homes to be photographed. Each woman walked with a self-assured limp. (Li Da Jing told me that the custom became popular during the Song Dynasty, however it is no longer permitted.) The woman seemed proud to show me their tiny embellished shoes and hidden small feet. From a young age, girls' feet were tightly wrapped and bound in cloth. It was considered to exemplify beauty and an advantage in marriage.

(Fishing Village)

I went to the shing village. It rained all day and night. We put plastic sheets around my camera and film. An old man and woman were arguing. I was told that they were born on the same day and one insisted that they should also die on the same day. I passed a woman carrying a bucket of hot coals to keep warm and a man was soaking his feet in a tub of steaming water.

(Coconut Horse Village)

Li Da Jing from Baoshan took me to his village in the Mountains. We had lunch with his mother, brother and grandmother. We drank fermented rice wine after our meal. One woman stood still in a downpour while waiting for her portrait. Another woman yelled to the children, "You forgot to eat your lunch – you are only watching the photographer." On the way home I saw a cart of skinny dogs being taken to Baoshan City market.

(River Village - Village by the Lake)

A taxi driver, Wang Xiu agreed to take me to his village far away in the mountains. We left at dark. Along the way, there was deep-throated low thunder and rain. We had tea in his parents' house. I was taken to an old schoolhouse full of small children. When the children saw me they started screaming and then laughing. An older child told the children to behave. He raised a red flag in the air and the children started chanting a school lesson. Repeating it over and over. over.

(Village of Two Towers - Village with Prayer Candles)

I met Dwan Ye Fen and her younger brother Zhang Wei just outside my hotel. They both were historians and story-tellers. They wanted to travel with me to the villages in order to practice their English. Dwan Ye told me a story as we made our way up the mountains to a remote village they called, "Village of Two Towers". She spoke slowly as if she was telling me a secret.

"Three hundred years ago lived identical twin brothers. They were handsome and strong. Their last name was Menski. One day, the first brother was walking along a riverbank and saw a beautiful young woman on the other side. They smiled at each other. For many weeks the first brother would intentionally walk along the river to see the young woman. They fell in love. Months later, the second Menski brother was walking along the same riverbank and saw the young woman. She smiled at him thinking he was the first brother.. He also fell in love with her. The young woman did not know they were twins. In this village there was an evil snake that liked to eat young babies. The Menski brothers decided to fight the snake. The fight was intense. At the end of the struggle, the snake and both brothers died. The young woman rushed to the battle site and discovered that the young man she was in love with was not one man but two. She died soon afterwards from grief and heartache. The twin towers were built in honor of the Menski brothers' courage. One tower for each brother."

Dwan Ye said, "At night you can hear the wind moving from one tower to the other. It's a sound of longing, crying sounds. It's the sad voice of the young woman's spirit traveling back and forth between the towers visiting the two brothers. Dean Ye said, it's a true story and everyone in the village believes it to be true."

(Village with No Name - Bai-Muslim Village)

In the evening – in the Village With No Name, villagers would bring their birds in birdcages to an open park and hang them in trees. Once the covering hoods were removed from the birdcages, the birds would then speak to nearby birds.

At night time I arrived back in Baoshan City. Walking back to my hotel there were 100 campfires along the darkened streets. Families were cooking dinners and tiny outdoor restaurants were serving soups and roasted peanuts. Floating above the crowds was a fragrance of spice and smoke. I watched a man with no legs writing a message on the sidewalk with chalk. I saw headless chickens boiling in water and a donkey's head for sale on a simple blue table. Beside me, were streams of bicycles and rickshaws passing in swishing sounds. I paused, as I passed a small boy doing his homework by candlelight. He was writing with his right hand and with his left hand he cupped the candle so as to provide more light. There is an uncomfortable contrast between the old and new China worlds. Inside a modern restaurant young teenagers were singing loudly to a karaoke jukebox. Not far away in the park, older Chinese men and women were playing flutes and the huqin (like a violin) waving their hands high above their heads. The songs were so haunting, and so beautiful and sad.

China Portrait Maps Series – The photographs in the China Map Series were made in three visual representations.

Part One – Portraits: (Twelve Photographs)

All photographic portraits carry concealed maps. They are puzzles. The contours of a photographic print are the thin slice of space and a tiny blink of a moment. We carry maps on our hands and on our textured tongues. Our feet know the significance of crossing a border. It is surprising how brief encounters can burn deep silhouettes in our memories. There is a pleasurable slowness about using an 8x10 view camera. Camera resting on a tripod. There is backdrop, light meter - dark cloth, bellows and ground glass used to focus. There are mistakes. I reach for a film plate while readjusting the aperture and shutter lens. Always, always so many exchanges of words. The rhythm is the slowness – the unknowing - the pause – the pushing of the shutter cable release and the steady serious stare.

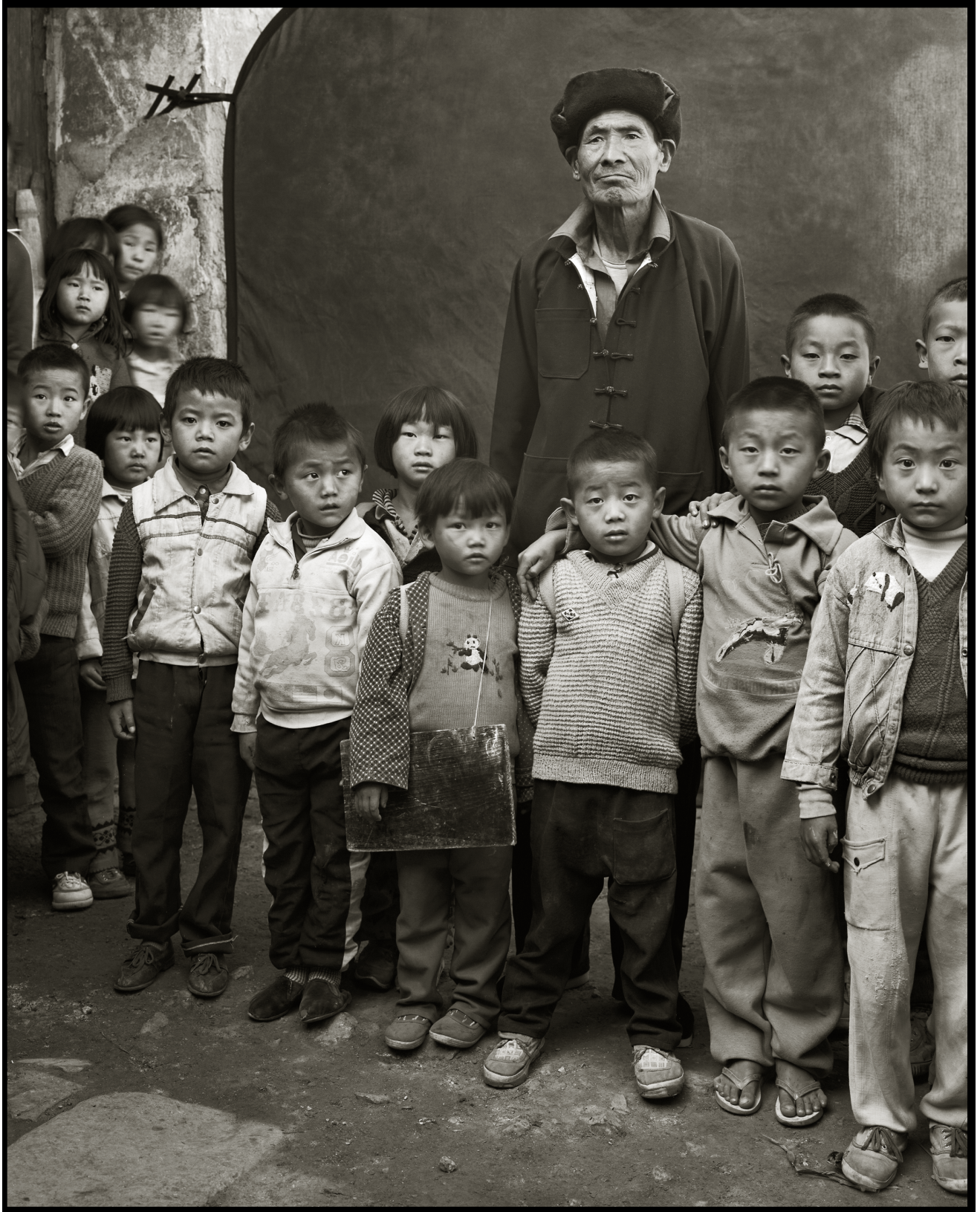
The portraits in PART I are conversations. Although I don't speak Mandarin, the portraits were a result of wanted to be there. Students followed me into villages, translating in exchange for English lessons. A fruit seller took me up a mountain pass in his horse and flatbed wagon. A taxi driver took me to his village to meet his grandmother. Almost without exception, I was invited into homes for meals and to share a cup of tea and to make portraits.



Portraits - One



Portraits - Two



Portraits - Three



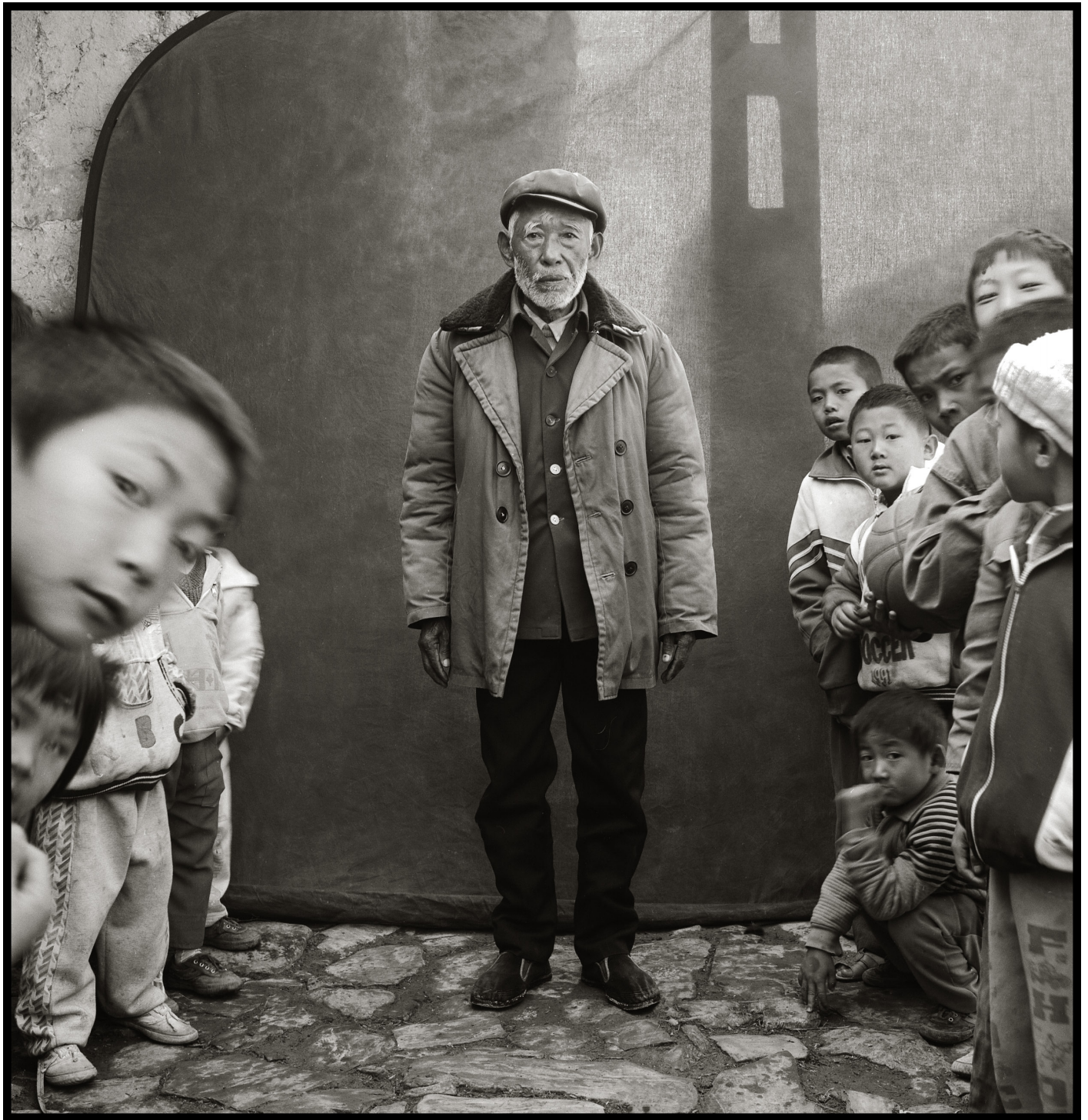
Portraits - Four



Portraits - Five



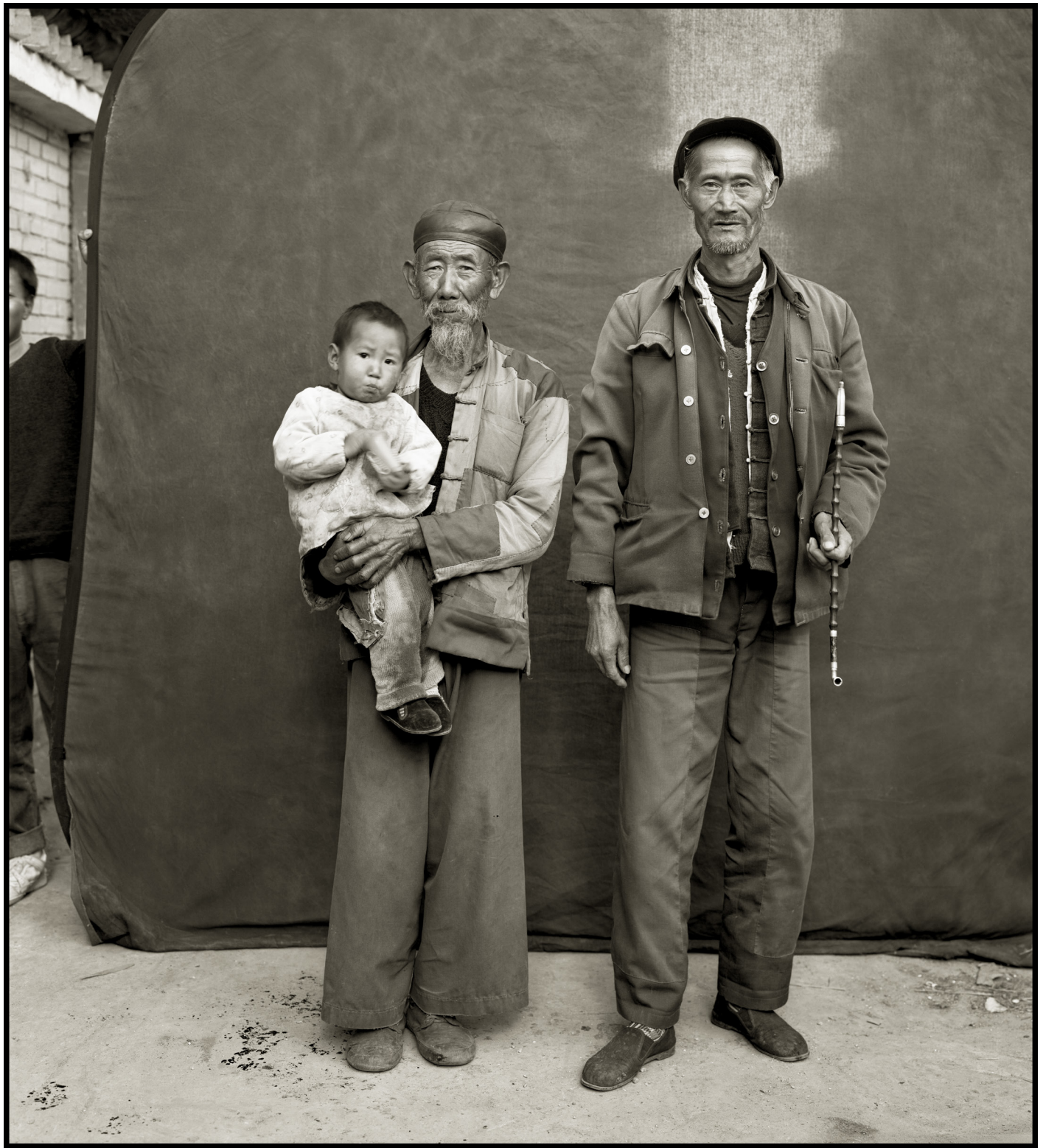
Portraits - Six



Portraits - Seven



Portraits - Eight



Portraits - Nine



Portraits - Ten



Portraits - Eleven



Portraits - Twelve

Part Two: Beyond the Backdrop - (Six photographs)

The photographs in PART TWO are looking in two directions at the same time. The first look is the backdrop and the person photographed. However, there are other important moments. The second look is the space living outside the backdrop. The backdrop might illuminate presence of the person photographed but it also eliminates connected spaces. These images are a glimpse into the rich active spaces and narratives living outside the rectangle shaped portrait and backdrop.



Beyond the Backdrop - One



Beyond the Backdrop - Two



Beyond the Backdrop - Three



Beyond the Backdrop - Four



Beyond the Backdrop - Five



Beyond the Backdrop - Six

Part Three: Random Second Look - (5 Photographs)

What happens after a photographic portrait is made? Still portraits are so misleading. They are not quiet nor still nor motionless. There is so much happening. Randomness is in control. These images are diptychs. (Two photographs side by side.) The first photograph is a portrait. The second image on the right is a random second look at the changing incidental moments after the portrait is made.



Random Second Look - One



Random Second Look - Two



Random Second Look - Three



Random Second Look - Four



Random Second Look - Five

Last Notes:

I regret not knowing more about the culture and languages in the villages I visited. I regret not knowing more of the history and contemporary political issues. I am aware of the past and present discrimination and injustices. I regret not being able to have conversations in deeper capacities. However, I was beyond fortunate to have randomly placed my finger on the map of China, and to discover that my wise finger fell on the Baoshan region in Yunnan Province.